Opportunity Knocks: An Examination of the Knoxville Transient Population

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OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE KNOXVILLE TRANSIENT BUREAU AND TRANSIENT POPULATION

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Abstract

The narrative of America's economic depression in the 1920s and 1930s is often accompanied by poignant images of male transients riding the railroads. Behind the classic narrative, however, the story of transients is far more complex and varied. Although Franklin Roosevelt's answer to the Depression -- the New Deal -- is well documented and debated, most historians have ignored the Federal Transient Service (FTS), one of many New Deal programs. Although the FTS lasted a brief two years, it served the needs of 211,056 transients at the height of its operations. With approximately 270 transient bureaus, the FTS sought to provide food and shelter, jobs, education, medical care, and much more. By closely analyzing a particular transient bureau, the Knoxville (TN) Transient Bureau, the story of Depression-era transients reveals itself more fully.

As a city of crossroads, Knoxville acted as an urban gateway for the surrounding rural areas. The economic depression struck Knoxville much like other cities, with the exception of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Thus, the hope of finding work with the TVA or other industries attracted hoards of people to Knoxville. The incoming tide of transients prompted the creation of the Knoxville Transient Bureau (KTB), and established a new form of aid, unlike any other. Although the KTB was one of many transient bureaus, the importance of the KTB as a singular institution should not be dismissed. Rather, the examination of one Transient Bureau provides historians with an in-depth assessment of the problems both transients and agencies faced.

The Knoxville Transient Bureau and its director, Frances Strong, faced numerous challenges and complications during the program's existence. Chapter Three deals with one of the primary problems for the KTB, finding appropriate facilities. Most communities viewed transients with disdain. Such hostility forced the KTB to carefully determine the location of each building, as well as the 'type' of transient or function for the building. Families were often provided private shelter, while single males stayed in communal housing. The fears of pollution, moral corruption, and mixing of gender/age groups is an important indicator of the widespread anxiety of the period. More importantly, the anxieties transient populations provoked are still relevant today.

The KTB's records reveal the unique complexities of transient youth and families, discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

These chapters also help to unravel the mythic image of the depression: the lone transient male. Although adult male transients were the largest percentage of the KTB's population, these men often had families waiting for them. The fictional notion of males with wanderlust is quickly dispelled by the stark realities of the period. Transients cannot be embodied solely by one particular type: the economic depression affected people of all ages and cut across the lines of gender and race. The problems unique to individual transients deserve examination, and the KTB's records provide historians with a rare glimpse into many transient's lives. The KTB's transients were individuals with aspirations and interests, not merely silent sufferers fallen to the wayside.

Chapter Six concerns the KTB's medical care program and the unwavering sympathy the bureau had towards not only physically ill transients, but also mentally ill transients. This stands in stark contrast to common attitudes of the period. This chapter further explores the notion that transients potentially "polluted" society by their presence. The KTB's records concerning medical care are surprising in their detail, providing an excellent opportunity to analyze the beginnings of Federal medical support. The lengthy reach of the KTB extended beyond medical care, providing jobs and education, as discussed in Chapter Seven. Although other transient bureaus also had these programs, few had the success of the KTB.

As discussed in Chapter Eight, the success of the KTB is strongly tied to the network of female leaders in the Tennessee Transient Bureau that promoted and sustained the state's bureaus. Frances Strong, director of the KTB, aligned herself with her fellow female directors on the state and national level. This network truly allowed the KTB to be a successful and positive program, however brief its existence. Despite the KTB's achievements and leadership, the Federal Transient Service fell prey to the second phase of the New Deal, discussed in the conclusion. For the FTS, the bureau's success contributed to its demise. With many transients aided and assimilated, the problem of the disenfranchised was once again relegated to private charities.

Nonetheless, the legacy of the KTB lies in the wealth of information in their records. For a brief moment in time, transients were no longer elusive or mythic, but well documented and supported. The relevance of the KTB in modern times is disturbingly clear. In the wake of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, the questions of responsibility and appropriate aid by the Federal government are still being
debated. By examining the impact of a transient bureau on a local level, one can see the tremendous impact of the KTB on transient families, youth, and adults. But the FTS was never intended as a long-term solution to transients, rather a brief measure to restore confidence. In a capitalist society, the ability to work is valued far more than the ability to aid. Those unable to sustain themselves are often considered without value, however ill advised that opinion may be. Thus, the stories of those aided by the KTB, as well as the staff, are not only an enduring example of the Depression, but also a lesson for modern society.

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Mentor Comments
Dr. Jeannie Whayne describes the combination of analytic skills, sharp intellect, and deep empathy that makes Caroline Peyton’s thesis worthy of inclusion in its entirety on-line.

Caroline Peyton is one of those rare students who combines natural inquisitiveness with creativity and intellectual ability. She was inspired to explore transient culture in Knoxville after reading Cormac McCarthy’s Suttree, a novel featuring a character living on a dilapidated houseboat near Knoxville in the 1930s. Peyton, a double major in History and English, brought to the project an especially creative perspective and drew on both literary and historical sources. Given that this was a thesis written for the History Department, however, she privileged historiography and primary documents in her exploration of the topic. Hititg a blank wall early in the documentary research on her thesis, she patiently and persistently stayed the course. Her close reading of the scant secondary literature -- and careful attention to footnotes -- revealed rarely used government records located in the National Archives. There she opened folios that likely had not been touched since deposited more the sixty years ago. The records of the New Deal’s Transient Bureau included the untapped files on the Knoxville branch which form the foundation sources for this excellent thesis.

Peyton’s use of the sources she uncovered is matched by the sharp analysis she brought to the writing phase of the project. Yet Peyton managed to convey a professional historian’s objectivity at the same time that she revealed a deep compassion for the homeless men, women, and children served by the Knoxville Transient Bureau (KTB). Her sympathetic but realistic assessment is demonstrated in one particularly perceptive passage involving Clarence Maples, an indigent man with a number of problems. Peyton carefully perused the sometimes conflicting accounts about Clarence and concluded that his family relations -- fractured by his psychological problems and complicated by his physical infirmities -- made it particularly difficult for the KTB to serve his needs. Here we see Peyton combining both a sharp critical analysis and a genuine sympathy for the individual.

The thesis consists of an introduction, eight chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter examines the common perceptions of transients as revealed in the popular media and in literature. It also reviews the formation of New Deal policy as the number of homeless individuals reached unprecedented levels. Chapter Two portrays Knoxville as not only a “City of Crossroads” but also a city at a crossroads of its own. With two railroads and three U.S. highways intersecting there, its indigent population increased dramatically as the Great Depression intensified. It was a natural place to locate a Transient Bureau, but it was a city in crisis and this chapter foreshadows the tensions that we see emerge in sharp relief in a later chapter. Chapter Three examines the “special demands” of the KTB and highlights the race, class, and gender concerns that arose. Chapter Four furthers this analysis by focusing on the issue of adolescent male transients, and Chapter Five deals with the treatment of homeless families. Chapters Six focuses on medical care and Chapter Seven examines work, education, and recreation and highlights an experiment in social change. Chapter Eight analyzes the experience of the female administrators of the KTB, particularly the indomitable Frances Strong. The conclusion examines the liquidation of the bureau, analyzes its contribution to the problem of caring for the homeless then, and makes some keen observations about its relevance in twenty-first century America.
Opportunity Knocks: An Examination of the Knoxville Transient Bureau and Transient Population

Caroline Peyton

Acknowledgements

Like those aided by the Knoxville Transient Bureau, I have truly benefited from the unwavering support and aid of many people. First, I owe special thanks to Prof. Jeannie Whayne. Prof. Whayne has helped me transform from a clueless student into a hopeful historian. Without Prof. Whayne, my trip to the National Archives would have never occurred, and the KTB’s story may have never been told. Additionally, I owe thanks to the Dr. Suzanne McCray, Terry Garrity, and Jane Rone for making my trip to the National Archives possible.

I must also extend thanks to the professors who have deeply impacted my academic pursuits. I am especially grateful for the constant support from Prof. Debra Rae Cohen. I also owe special thanks to Prof. Robert Brinkmeyer for inspiring me to pursue my ideas. I must also extend thanks to Prof. Lynda Coon for altering the way I look at space and history.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee: Prof. Brinkmeyer, Prof. Whayne, Prof. Elliot West, and Prof. Goodman-Strauss.

Finally, I owe thanks beyond words to my family and friends. Most importantly, I am incredibly grateful to my family. My parents have helped enormously with this project and my academic pursuits.

Introduction

On February 8th, 1934, the Knoxville Transient Bureau received a letter from an unnamed writer. Addressed to Miss Howerton, a social worker, the writer expressed his gratitude to her, “I arrived home ok…I got tired of riding [sic] I don’t know how to thank you…you are the cleverest lady I ever met I got me a job an a pretty girl to dont [sic] forget to answer.”1 The writer, Miss Howerton, and the Knoxville Transient Bureau were each part of the collective struggle during the economic depression of the 1930s. Far too often though, seemingly minor figures and places like these are overlooked for the classic narratives of the Depression era. Hoover’s reluctance, Roosevelt’s triumphs, and The Grapes of Wrath are used to illustrate the period in its entirety. Beneath the surface, this challenging period reveals itself as one that cannot be defined singularly. Moreover, the stories of those who struggled, along with those who aided, are significant beyond merely the description of suffering.

In particular, the issue of transients during the depression is often relegated to the mythic. The image of a “bum” riding the railroads is all that is needed to explain their existence. Although some modern historians and sociologist have dealt with the topic, there are many more stories waiting to be told about transients. More importantly, the Depression provides us with some of the best accounts of transients in any era. As a population often pushed to the fringes of society, transients were perhaps best documented through the New Deal’s response to the homeless, the Federal Transient Service. Furthermore, the documentation provides historians with an opportunity to examine transients and the manner in which they were dealt with at the local level. The federal, state, and local records and correspondence allow us to develop a greater understanding of the complexities of the Federal Transient Service (FTS), and the many issues that surrounded transients. Although the FTS had over 270 transient bureaus and camps, the examination of one city’s transient bureau informs us a great deal. Easily overlooked and seemingly insignificant, the Knoxville Transient Bureau’s story is worthy of closer analysis.

With the helpful context of transients, relief, and Knoxville historically, a close examination of the Knoxville Transient Bureau (KTB) reveals a number of significant developments and concerns during the period. In addition, an examination of the KTB demonstrates the successes, failures, and anxieties of the organization, as well as the transients themselves. The first chapter in this paper is primarily concerned with transients and their place in American society, particularly the rise of the transient from

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1 Unnamed writer to Miss Howerton, February 8, 1934. Records of the WPA, Transient Division 1933-36, Narrative Reports and Correspondence, series 48, box 32, TN folder. National Archives, College Park.
the mid-19th century through the Depression. This chapter also helps outline the changes in relief before, during, and after the 1930s. The second chapter discusses Knoxville’s identity as city, and how transients were dealt with in Knoxville, with special consideration to changes in relief and perception. Subsequent chapters focus on different aspects of the Knoxville Transient Bureau: housing, transient families, adolescent male transients, medical care, work relief, education, recreation, and the female staff.

Through each discussion, the KTB’s efforts to exceed the initial federal vision become clearer. The FTS may have been a reluctant answer to the transient problem, but the KTB wholeheartedly established a community for transients. Frances Strong, the director of the KTB, best described the dedication of the staff, and the importance of aiding transients, “It is never necessary to remind our own staff that they have the grave responsibility of assisting in the future of these people- we are too close to them to forget it.” Ultimately, the KTB was not only a product of the staff, but also a product of the transients there. The transients of the KTB helped build the community by their eager participation and willingness to try the program. Moreover, the KTB was also a product of the troubles that plagued the transient population; this shaped the program significantly. Thus, the examination of the KTB is about the staff, the city, and the transients. Through these lenses, an easily ignored part of the New Deal is revealed as a valuable resource.

Chapter One

Transients: Policy and Perception

By the mid-19th century, a new form of vagrant began to occupy the fringes of American society. Although the rise of rail and industry is well documented, few have acknowledged the rise of the tramp during these changes. Whether it was a reaction to urban life or desire for adventure, railroads allowed quick and cheap migration. Wherever the railroads led, a wayward spirit could sneak aboard and move onward. As the numbers increased, the “tramp” became a part of the changing tide. Vagrancy in itself was not new, but this form of life was directly connected the railroad. Even as automobiles became prevalent, the railroad occupied an important place in the mythology of life on the road. The tramp ultimately had numerous incarnations, ranging from an adventurous pioneer, migratory laborer, hobo, and finally reaching its most notorious identity during the Great Depression. While the tramp evolved into the “transient,” policies to either aid or control their populations also changed. From these changes, the Federal Transient Service developed, a brief attempt to solve the “transient problem.”

Transients were drawn to life on the road for many reasons. As urban areas became industrialized in the late 19th century, seasonal laborers and other unskilled workers were attracted to the transient lifestyle as an alternative to factory life. Poverty also motivated some to become transients. Although typically comprised of white males, African-Americans also made up a portion of the transient population, motivated by such events as Reconstruction and the Great Migration north. Notably, female transients were far less visible until the 1930s. A transient’s life often contained both solitary and companion filled travels. Furthermore, tramp communities, “jungles,” were important to the transient identity; the makeshift shelters were perhaps the antithesis of American aspirations. The jungles represented the separate culture of transients. Living on the outskirts or inhospitable parts of cities, transients attempted to detach themselves from their previous lives. For one, transients often replaced their legal names with monikers, and had their own slang terms. Moreover, transients operated outside of the legal system, and lived by their own rules. The most infamous activity transients engaged in, especially before the rise of the automobile, was stealing rides from railroads. Transients could ride in boxcars, or small compartments, or even more dangerous “ride the rods.” Riding the rods occurred when transients placed a wooden board on the metal rails below the freight cars.

One Tennessee transient, B.E. Cokes reported a companion falling asleep while riding the rods. Cokes recounted that the train had split "my pal on it in two parts. He’d gone to sleep and fell off his board and the wheels had cut him half in two. I
couldn’t keep from crying, for I was alone now.” Whether or not the transient’s story is credible, the story echoes the popular mythology of transient life. Significantly, transients occupied a duality in American society: both real and mythic.

At the turn of the century, the image of the “tramp” in American culture began a transformation from simple vagrant to a “heroic” or “comic” figure. The tramp became part of popular culture, with the image widely seen in literature, music, film, and comics. Until the Depression occurred, images of Charlie Chaplin and comic tramps, such as “Jo-Jo” in the Knoxville News Sentinel (Appendix Two), portrayed the transient as an amusement rather than reality. Although transients inevitably faced hostility from locals, fictional accounts of transients were also quite popular. Books like Boxcar Bertha, Sister Carrie, and Tramping with the Tramps, benefited from the public’s interest in “life on the road.” Tramp life was perhaps given its most notable inclusion in blues music. Heavily influenced by the Great Migration from the rural South to urban North, railroads were highly symbolic devices. Leaving behind one’s former way of life, the songs contained both optimism and sorrow. Regardless of the romanticization of the transient, the traditional view still dominated society. A questionable element, transients did not meld with the expectations of an American citizen. Of course, many people’s hostility was understandable. To most, the line of thought was, “Why should I provide for those unwilling to work?” The belief was often mistaken as many transients were not unwilling to work, but were unable or temporarily unemployed.

Before the New Deal, relief was relegated to private, local charities. The Salvation Army, Red Cross, and other local agencies gave transients temporary shelter and meals. Other agencies, such as the Traveler’s Aid Society, wanted to “protect” women, girls, and young boys from the dangerous influences of the road. Orin C. Baker asserted that the Traveler’s Aid Society’s goals were investigation, protection, assistance, and assimilation. Local charities relied upon the donations of citizens to continue care. In urban areas, the system seemed relatively sufficient until the economic depression hit. The Great Depression completely altered the landscape of social work and relief, but transitioning from private to federal care did not occur quickly. Herbert Hoover and his administration were reluctant to use federal funds to aid the public directly. Hoover’s reluctance has often been cast in opposition to Roosevelt’s New Deal. Nonetheless, Hoover did attempt to develop programs to aid some, but he was ultimately limited by his fears of the “dole.” Likewise, Roosevelt shared such fears, and ultimately preferred work relief over direct aid. As the economic depression ravaged the nation, local charities could no longer sustain their communities alone. Furthermore, local charities were often torn between providing for impoverished residents or non-residents. One observer astutely noticed the problem of using private funds to relieve the suffering of the Depression, “Trying to turn back the tide of distress through private philanthropic contributions is about as useless as trying to put out a forest fire with a garden hose.” Additionally, private agencies were quickly disappearing due to lack of funds. Between 1929 and 1932, one-third of private agencies went under. From October 1931 to October 1932, 693 agencies providing general relief increased spending by 117.3%.

Despite the apparent poverty and suffering across the nation, Jeffrey Cole observed that the urban South was hit particularly hard. Urban areas in the South already had difficulty caring for their own, and the “proverbial southern hospitality” generally did not apply to transients. Cities close to major railroad junctions or highways, such as Knoxville, often received their fair share of transients, despite the hostility. Thus, the need for federal aid prompted social workers and political figures to participate in Congressional hearings. Although some argued against federal aid, those supporting federal relief argued passionately for a change. Professor Sumner H. Slichter of Harvard Business School testified, “The need for national assistance, by this time, has become so self-evident that it would seem to me to be a waste of your time for me to offer anything along that line.”

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9 Kusmer, 180-188.
10 “Jo-Jo” cartoon, Knoxville News Sentinel, March 1, 1929, sec. A.
11 Kusmer
14 Baker, 35-36.
16 “Report of Committee on Provision for transients and nonresidents,” Relief for Unemployed Transients: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the Manufacturers, United States Senate, S. 5121, January 3-17, 1933, page 33. [referred to as S.5121]
17 Trattner, 273.
18 S. 5125, 46.
20 S. 5125, 124.
Hoping to find work, the widespread unemployment motivated people to migrate. Arthur Schlesinger estimated that more than a million people left their homes in search of better opportunities. The increase in transients was not a major concern for either Hoover or Roosevelt’s administration, but the vocal outcry from social workers presumably led to the consideration of aid for non-residents. According to the Subcommittee of the Committee on Manufactures, the transient lifestyle led to numerous consequences: physical hazards, demoralization and disintegration of morals and morale, shifting burden of care to new communities, and panhandling costs. The report also observed that most transients were met with a “passing-on policy” rather than extended relief. Generally, transients received a few days care at the most. Due to the increase in transient families and adolescents, the problem is even more troubling. Thus, residents and non-residents alike were suffering, and the New Deal attempted to alleviate the problems of the Depression, albeit temporarily.

Roosevelt’s New Deal dealt with the economic downturn through a wide variety of measures. Programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Public Works Administration provided employment for countless numbers of people. For transient populations, relief came through the Federal Relief Emergency Act. Enacted in May 1933, the F.E.R.A granted $500 million dollars to states. In actuality, $250 million was granted directly on the basis of need, while the remaining $250 million dollars was distributed by one federal dollar for every three state dollars. Roosevelt named Harry Hopkins director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (F.E.R.A.), and the F.E.R.A quickly went to work creating programs, such as the Federal Transient Service. Helen Hawkins noted that Harry Hopkins was not especially concerned about relief to non-residents, and intended the transient relief as only a temporary part of the New Deal. Despite this, the development of the Federal Transient Service (FTS) was a radical footnote in the history of American welfare. For the first time, the federal government was providing for a group without the benefit of residency.

Headed initially by Morris Lewis, the Federal Transient Service began to set up urban shelters and rural camps. The FTS temporarily became part of the Civil Works Administration (CWA), and was then forced to reorganize after the CWA collapsed. After the reorganization, Morris Lewis was fired, and Aubrey Williams took the director position. Eventually, Williams would be replaced with William Plunkert, who was also fired by the end of 1934. Discussed in further detail later, Elizabeth Wickenden acted as assistant director throughout the FTS, and was the crucial backbone to the organization. Although the FTS was a federal program, the emphasis was placed on local and state administration. FTS shelters were to provide necessities, as well as opportunities for work and possible assimilation. In order to qualify officially, a person needed to be within the state borders for less than twelve months. However, there is evidence that bureaus did accept transients who had resided for longer than twelve months within the state borders.

At the height of its operation, the FTS had 211,056 transients under its care. The program’s success at decreasing the transient population also prompted its end. Disregarding strong protests nation wide, the transition from direct relief to work relief meant that the FTS would begin liquidation in September 1935. Intake of new transients was halted on September 20, 1935, and total liquidation was set for November 1935. Hence, the transients that remained were forced back to the old system. The demise of the FTS now appears predictable because the Roosevelt administration had never totally abandoned their traditional views of relief. Harry Hopkins had stated, “Give man a dole and you save his body and destroy his spirit; give him a job and pay him an assured wage, and you save both his body and the spirit.” Nonetheless, the FTS affected many lives, and perhaps provided guidance to those without direction. By examining the FTS at the local level, through the Knoxville Transient Bureau, the problems and triumphs of this radically different social program are better illuminated.

22 S. 5125, 32.
23 S. 5125, 33.
24 Ibid., 34.
25 Trattner, 282
28 Hawkins, 193.
30 Reed, 16.
31 Badger, 201.
Chapter Two

Knoxville: City of Crossroads

In 1946, John Gunther described Knoxville as the “ugliest city I ever saw in America.” For Knoxville, the description is a product of a gradual process of degradation. Industrialization contributed to the city’s “distinctly grimy, sooty appearance,” not recent developments. As Knoxville evolved, the city became a crossroad between the urban, Appalachian, and Southern. The unstable relationships between different types of citizens led to conflicts and segregation throughout the 1920s. Furthermore, Knoxville’s residential structures were in need of repairs, and the Depression only furthered the degradation of the city’s downtown. Despite the deterioration, Knoxville still beckoned the rural poor searching for employment. Knoxville’s location seemingly attracted migration from outer areas:

Located at the juncture of two major railroads, three U.S highways, and various state highways and turnpikes, and situated on the Tennessee River, Knoxville served as the primary manufacturing and trading center for central and East Tennessee, as well as parts of southeastern Kentucky, western North Carolina and southwestern Virginia. Its streets and sidewalks teemed daily with blacks and whites, city-dwellers and farmers, white-collar clerks and blue-collar laborers, college students and businessmen. The incoming populations also prompted the exodus of Knoxville’s wealthy citizens who migrated from downtown residences to outer wards. As the wealthy migrated, poor whites and African-Americans moved into the downtown areas, fostering racial tensions and property degradation between the two groups. Forced into close proximity with African-Americans, rural whites coming from Appalachian backcountry into Knoxville had a difficult time adjusting to urban life. The migration and fragmentation of the city laid the groundwork for the establishment of the Knoxville Transient Bureau in 1933, as did the many challenges the KTB confronted throughout its existence. In order to understand the KTB, several facets of Knoxville must first be discussed: racial and class tensions, the evolution of relief, and the attitudes towards transients.

An understanding of the racial and class tensions of Knoxville is crucial to the analysis of the KTB because they impacted numerous aspects of the organization. Once a city of peaceful race relations, the changing spatial and economic divisions between races helped spur the bloody riot of 1919. Interestingly, Knoxville leaders believed the city was free from many of the racial problems that plagued Southern cities. African-Americans in Knoxville received far better treatment than in other Southern cities; they could vote and hold public office. Furthermore, the African-American college, Knoxville College, as well as the East Tennessee News, an African-American newspaper, were based in Knoxville. The race riots of 1919 exposed Knoxville’s hostilities and tensions; which did not disappear quickly.

On August 29, 1919, Bertie Lindsey claimed an armed African-American threatened her. Two Knoxville policemen, Jim Smith and Andy White, quickly decided that Maurice Mays had committed the crime. Possibly the son of Mayor John E. McMillan, Mays was the debonair, light-skinned owner of a popular dance hall. McMillan relied on Mays for African-American votes and helped sustain Mays’ business. Before the incident, Patrolmen White and Mays were engaged in a bitter feud, and White had developed a vendetta concerning Mays. Thus White’s violent feelings harbored clearly wrongful accusation, leading to Mays’ arrest. Following the arrest, tensions became all consuming, as a white mob stormed the City Jail. Over the course of two days, mobs of both races exchanged gunfire, looted buildings, and gathered weapons. Although the National Guard was called in, many witnessed them standing idly or joining white mobs.

Despite overwhelming evidence of Mays’ innocence, the unfortunate corruption of the courts succeeded in convicting Mays of the crime. The pleas of the Knoxville Sheriff, John E. McMillan, three justices on Tennessee’s Supreme Court, and the governor’s son went unheeded., Mays died in the electric chair on March 15th, 1922. His last words proclaimed his innocence, “I am as innocent as the sun that shines.” Tragedy struck again when his father, John McMillan, committed suicide in 1926. The race riots continued to affect Knoxville. A black hobo was arrested for the rape and assault of a white woman in 1921, but was later proven innocent. The targeting of Maurice Mays was not only racially charged, but economically as well. Mays was a...

33 Ibid, 24.
34 City of Knoxville, Knoxville Housing Authority, Real Property Inventory and Low Income Housing Area Survey of Knoxville, Tennessee (1939).
36 McDonald and Wheeler, 57.
37 Ibid, 38.
38 Lakin, 1.
39 Ibid., 2.
40 Lakin, 28.
financially equipped African-American; and therefore, could not escape the wrath of Andy White. These racial and class anxieties are entirely relevant to the discussion of the KTB, as they repeatedly occurred.

Equally important to our discussion of the KTB is Knoxville’s attitude toward transients and the evolution of relief. Like the rest of the nation, transients had a dual nature. Real transients were simply ignored, sent to private agencies, or put in jail. The other representation of transients served entertainment purposes. Knoxville was no exception to either. Transients were dealt with in a number of ways. The Traveler’s Aid Society, near the train station, helped them for temporary stays or provisions to get back home. Additionally, Knoxville passed an ordinance requiring beggars to file permits. Finally, charities, such as the Salvation Army, housed transients in need of shelter.

Before the Depression, these solutions worked reasonably well at containing transients. Easily pushed to the fringes, transients were more comical than troubling. Knoxville’s papers regularly featured cartoons of tramps (Appendix Two). The Knoxville News Sentinel contained “Jo-Jo” the tramp, while the Knoxville Journal included a cartoon with an unnamed tramp. In March of 1929, the News Sentinel ran a contest for the best title of a cartoon containing a tramp sleeping on a railroad as a train approaches. Replies ranged from sympathetic to hostile. One contestant, Mrs. N. H. Gass suggested “The End of a Weary Knight,” while another contestant suggested, “Receiving a death sentence for trespassing” for a title. The cartoons are significant in their appropriate display of the public’s reception of hoboes. Tramping was a separate lifestyle all together, prompting its inclusion in cartoons, films, and music. The fascination quickly ended when transients could no longer be ignored, and the previous solutions were no longer viable options.

Before New Deal developments, particularly the TVA and other relief operations, Knoxville relied on private, local funds for relieving poverty and aiding transients. The philosophy that relief should be local and not federal can be seen widely in Knoxville during the early years of the Depression. When Knoxville’s banks failed, lines began to form outside of local soup kitchens. Knoxville’s agencies were entirely strained by the effects of the Depression. Comparing two nine month periods between 1931 and 1932, Knoxville agencies experienced an increase of 128.3% in relief expenditures. As the effects of the Depression ravaged the community, local charities and citizens banded together to help the needy. The relief was probably directed at residents; but unlike later federal relief, private charities presumably did not follow settlement laws as closely.

As many historians have noted, local charities simply could not provide the relief that was needed. On March 10th, 1932, the Knoxville News Sentinel reported that the “Associated Charities has a hard time on its hands these days trying to protect the poor from below freezing temperatures.” The Associated Charities’ spokesperson, Miss Louise Bignall, declared that monetary donations were extremely limited. Repeatedly, articles reported that funding was nearly exhausted for a variety of institutions. Thus, locals organized charity benefits, clothing, canning, and toy drives. Girl Scouts helped the unemployed, and the city government set up programs for selling apples and street repair. The enthusiasm was simply not enough, and the New Sentinel frequently included articles about the fight to gain federal aid, through farm relief and the La Follette-Costigan bill.

The first form of federal aid came from Hoover’s Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932, which proved “wholly inadequate.” As Virginia Ashcroft observed, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation was hampered by the lack of “centralized authority or system by which investigations of applicants could be made.” The second wave of federal aid to Knoxville was part of the Federal Emergency Relief Act in 1933, which created the Tennessee State Relief Association (T.E. R. A.). Initially, the program distributed both direct and work relief. The work relief program was briefly reorganized into the Civil Works Administration, until the T.E. R. A.) replaced both direct and work programs. By 1935, the T.E.R.A evolved into its final reincarnation, the Works Projects Administration, which provided work relief.

From these various responses to the Depression, the transient problem was relegated to the Tennessee Transient Bureau. Although temporarily part of the Civil Works Administration, the Tennessee Transient Bureau was primarily part of the T.E.R.A. The state had four transient bureaus: Chattanooga, Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville. As a major city in Tennessee, the

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41 Knoxville News Sentinel, April 25th, 1929, 17.
42 Knoxville News Sentinel, April 24, 1929, 13.
43 Knoxville News Sentinel, April 25th, 1929, 17.
44 McDonald and Wheeler, 61-62.
45 Glenn Steele, Temporary Shelter For Homeless Or Transient Persons and Travelers Aid, United States Department of Labor, Children’s Bureau (Washington, DC: GPO, 1932), 20.27.
46 Knoxville News Sentinel, “Poor Hit By Cold Wave,” March 10, 1932.
48 KNS, “Stage is Set for Benefit Friday Night,” December 18, 1930.
49 KNS, “Girl Giving Aid in Many Ways,” January 4, 1931.
50 KNS, “Unemployed Selling Apples with Associated Charities,” November 22, 1930.
53 Ibid., 75.
The establishment of a transient bureau in Knoxville was greatly needed. Furthermore, Knoxville had already acted as a crossroad between the urban, Southern, and Appalachian, attracting those in search of opportunities. With the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the influx of outsiders also demanded a suitable center of aid. Hence, Knoxville, a city deeply fragmented by racial and economic differences, a crossroad of culture, and a beacon for opportunity, acquired the Knoxville Transient Bureau. With its creation in 1933, the growing number of people considered “transients” finally had somewhere radically different from previous institutions to receive relief. The Knoxville Transient Bureau became a crucial part of the Depression-era landscape, a visible reminder of poverty and the process of rehabilitation. The problems and successes of the KTB give us insight into transient populations migrating into Knoxville, as well as the challenges the economic depression created for administration of relief. Although the KTB was one of many transient bureaus, its story is worthy of closer analysis. Ultimately, the KTB informs us about the “forgotten” and the people who aided them.
In October of 1933, the Knoxville Bureau of the Federal Transient Service opened. Initially, the Knoxville Transient Bureau hardly appeared capable of handling the large number of transients in need. According to Frances K. Strong, the Director of the KTB, the office contained a desk and two inexperienced men. Without housing facilities, the staff had no choice but to rely upon the Salvation Army. To make matters worse, the Salvation Army had little to offer with, “twenty double decked beds, one shower, and air space best calculated in cubic inches.” Ill equipped to deal with incoming population; the KTB’s first task was simply to secure appropriate facilities. With this first step, the KTB was beset with many obstacles. The buildings would have to handle large populations with various types of transients, as well as fit within the KTB’s financial constraints. Even more importantly, the spatial settings were greatly influenced by the anxieties of different types of transients sharing space. Throughout the KTB’s existence, the spatial arrangements acted as a crucial part of the organization’s success.

In order to further analyze the spatial demands, the demographics of the KTB’s transients must be closely examined. On a daily basis, new transients streamed into the KTB, presented their own unique problems and needs. During June of 1934, the KTB gained 1485 new cases of unattached men and women. In addition, 94 families (273 individuals) arrived in June 1934. Of these transients, the majority of cases would be closed by the end of the month. Thus, the KTB acted as a revolving door for transients, only 40% stayed beyond the third day.

In addition, transients varied in ethnicity, gender, age, and group size. The majority of cases were white unattached males, but other types of transients also contributed to the KTB’s caseload. Over several months, 390 African-American males visited the KTB, as well as countless numbers of females and children. There were fewer unattached females than males, but this does not discount their existence. Rather, young female transients may have been sent to the local Traveler’s Aid by the KTB before registration. This transfer would have inevitably affected statistical reports, so the actual number of females arriving at the KTB is unclear. According to the Memphis Traveler’s Aid, girls and women were often sent to the Traveler’s Aid, while males were sent to Federal operations. The Memphis Traveler’s Aid reported an average of 13.16 girls per day in 1935. The ages in both unattached and family groups were evenly dispersed, with the exception of the absolute youngest and oldest transients. Even within one gender, age, and race, the problems presented by each individual were different, challenging the caseworkers to devise solutions quickly and effectively. The demands were such that a case worker’s day included three hours of interviews, two hours with old cases, one hour dictation, and an hour for miscellaneous work. In addition, one case worker stayed from 10 p.m. until 6 a.m. for transients arriving late at night, while four case workers stayed until 10:30 p.m. From the sheer number of transients, the process of finding shelter for each transient would have been daunting.

After the initial interview, the KTB offered the transient individual or family a “plan” Essentially, the KTB offered the transients aid, often in exchange for some type of work. Although many unattached individuals refused the plan, families seemed more willing to work with KTB’s offer. The pressures of providing for a family, especially children, explains families’

55 Ibid.
56 Refer to Page 83-84 for an illustration of the population.
58 Ibid.
62 Helen Mawer, “Report of Tennessee Transient Division.”
65 In April of 1934, 95% of closed unattached male cases refused the KTB’s plan, whereas 68% of closed family cases refused the plan.
willingness to work with the KTB. Potential workers, usually males, had to pass a physical examination and were then placed into a position based on their skills.66

Beyond decisions of work, caseworkers were then faced with the task of providing shelter for the transients. Like many other transient bureaus, securing housing facilities presented an assortment of issues. First, locals were hostile to the idea of congregate shelters of dispossessed men.67 Second, landlords reluctantly accepted the low rent Transient Bureaus could offer them. For the KTB, the second scenario was complicated by the demands of the TVA on the rental market. After the appearance of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the hope of work attracted countless workers.68 As stated previously, the Knoxville Bureau initially had been unsuccessful in acquiring its own shelter. The obstacles that the transient bureau faced troubled not only Frances Strong, the local director of the KTB, but also state and national directors. On November 28\textsuperscript{th}, 1933, Morris Lewis, acting national director, observed that while congregate shelters in urban areas were not preferable, “it is more important to face the realities imposed by the needs of hungry and homeless people”.69 Although Frances Strong noted that a building was secured by the beginning of November, it was apparent to both her and state director Elizabeth Scheiblich that the building would not be suitable for long.70 As Scheiblich stated, the Knoxville Bureau was, “using all sorts of undesirable places for which they are paying too much.”71 Fortunately for the Knoxville Bureau, Frances Strong’s connections to a local businessman were pivotal for securing two properties “on opposite sides of the street…located in an up-town district and…considered very good property.”72 From the buildings the KTB utilized, the anxieties and problems of transient populations are aptly illustrated.

For a better understanding of the KTB’s spatial issues, the purpose and conditions of the properties must also be established.73 First, all of the KTB’s properties were centrally located and relatively close together.74 The administration building, located at 41\textsuperscript{1} West Main, included registration, case department, administration offices, as well as both clothing and grocery commoditities. The building, a former automobile showroom, appeared in excellent condition.75 Interestingly, Ellery Reed praised the Memphis Bureau for utilizing a former showroom, noting its exceptional status above other centers. Although Reed did not survey Knoxville’s Bureau, perhaps their building would have garnered similar praise. While the KTB’s other buildings were described as in fair or good condition, the excellent condition of the administration building was perhaps used to lend credibility to the agency. As the transients arrived, a building in poor condition would have understandably hampered their first impression of the KTB. From the administrative building, a transient could easily travel to other properties. The clinic, infirmary, work department offices, barbershop, shoe shop, and laundry were located at 202 W. Church.76 Although “old” and in “fair” condition, the KTB seemed to have made good use out of the building.77 This building also contained a dining area for 84 people, as well as thirty beds in the infirmary.78

Across the street, at 201 W. Church, the KTB set up a shelter in a former apartment building. The building was in good condition and held 190 beds, although only 115 were occupied at the time of the survey. One block from the shelter, the KTB rented another building. Located at 120 W. Cumberland, the building was in good condition and contained a nursery school, classroom, area for cooking, intake shelter, and sleeping area. At the time of the survey, 62 of the 70 beds were occupied. The final two buildings the KTB occupied included another shelter with 70 beds, and a building for recreation, education, and workshops. The number and variety of buildings indicates the strong presence the KTB maintained in downtown Knoxville.

Furthermore, the buildings were relatively close together, but not entirely inclusive. Thus transients were walking from one location to another, participating in Knoxville’s urban landscape. The variety of uses also illustrates the desire to give the transients a community within Knoxville. While walking amongst Knoxvillians, transients had their own exclusive space for clothing, groceries, medical needs, education, recreation, and other necessities. Even before the main shelters opened, transients

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67 Reed, 53.
68 Helen C. Mawer to Mr. William Plunkert, September 26, 1934. Records of the WPA, Transient Division 1933-36, Narrative Reports and Correspondence, series 69, box 32, TN folder. National Archives, College Park.
72 Ibid.
73 Map depicting KTB’s buildings on page 85.
75 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
were employed to renovate the buildings, “creating their own home.” The inclusion of a nursery school suggests that women were seeking work as well, thus the need for a “day-care” program. Finally, the 1935 survey demonstrates how much the KTB expanded over a short period of time. Barely noticeable in 1933, the KTB had grown to multiple mixed-use facilities during its brief life. These facilities both separated and included the transients at the KTB in Knoxville. In her narrative report, Frances Strong acknowledged the spatial duality as a “self-sufficient community within and apart from the city surrounding it.”

Despite the notions of community, concern about divisions occurred before the leases were official. Elizabeth Scheiblich and Frances Strong thought one building, the former Whitfield Apartments, would house unattached males. With three floors and 45 rooms, Scheiblich asserted that three or four beds would fit in each room. On the other side of West Church Avenue, families and women would be housed. Scheiblich reasoned that the second property contained a large kitchen, thus “suitable for families and lone women and girls.” Such divisions exhibited the perceived necessity of segregation. In addition, the threat of corruption by older men prompted separation between male age groups. The expansion of the KTB into multiple buildings was perhaps motivated by such anxieties. Frances Strong asserted that:

Instead of one large dormitory housing all types and classes of men, they offer an opportunity to segregate the many types, offering them at least the privacy of sharing their rooms with not more than four other men. The separate buildings also give us an opportunity to completely separate the younger men from those more experienced.

The dangers of dormitory living further prompted the KTB to place families in small apartments. Despite the measures, anxieties manifested themselves within the same gender, family groups, and age groups.

Already categorized by several measures, transients were also dealt with according to socioeconomic class. Anxieties about class division were not unique to KTB, as national attention to the issue is evident from Ellery Reed’s survey of 257 transient centers. Ellery Reed observed that, “Certain groups of transients, particularly the white collar, educated, and professional group, should receive individual housing.” According to Helen Mawer’s 1934 report on the KTB, fifty “reliable” men stayed in a private boarding house for $5.00 a week. Frances Strong had “carefully selected” the men who had stayed for one month and were on a “self-government basis.” Although Strong believed the program was successful, the cost of the program was simply too high to justify its continuation. This spatial division alone would have cost the KTB one thousand dollars a month, or nearly $15,600 dollars in 2008. Once again, Helen Mawer’s response to the program’s cessation embodied the concern. Mawer noted that hopefully, “this will not be necessary.”

Concerns about class continually occurred during the KTB’s operation. The case of Professor A.L. Murat and his family illustrates many of these class anxieties. According to a letter from Frances Strong to Georgia Ball, State Director, the Murats came from families of “excellent reputation and aristocratic connections in Florida.” During the Murats’ stay in Knoxville, an incident occurred at one of the outside shelters (perhaps a boarding house) the KTB had assigned to the family. The Murat family occupied the housekeeping room in the building, and complained about one of the occupants, a local woman with a police record. The caseworker instructed the family to leave, but the local woman’s departure prompted Prof. Murat’s family to remain. The incident itself demonstrates a number of issues. First, the conflict was between a local and outsiders. Outside of the KTB shelters, the private apartment houses would have inevitably mixed locals and transients, prompting feuds. Secondly, the Murat’s roots did not seem to contribute to any sort of economic stability. The occupation of a housekeeping room demonstrates the desperate situation the Murats and many other families faced.

Nonetheless, Mr. Murat’s concerns with class took precedence over the family’s meager economic provisions. Mr. Murat’s own words demonstrate the skewed perceptions of class and the necessity of spatial divisions. In his letter to Congressman Hardin Peter of Florida, he asserted that the newspapers were:

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79 Frances Strong, “Narrative Report.”
80 Frances Strong, “Narrative Report.”
81 Illustration of Whitfield Lodge on page 88.
82 Elizabeth Scheiblich to Morris Lewis, November 25, 1933.
83 Helen Mawer, “Report of Tennessee Transient Division.”
84 Frances Strong, “Narrative Report.”
85 Reed, Introduction.
86 Reed, 62.
87 Helen Mawer, “Report of Tennessee Transient Division.”
88 Dept. of Labor, “Inflation Calculator.”
89 Helen Mawer, “Report of Tennessee Transient Division.”
90 The Murat family is a superb example of many later discussed issues.
full of the actions of low class people who are in the transient bureau…this together with the thieving, drunkenness, immortality, and insulting treatment is a little too much for decent folks…These relief officials are used to doing business with people who haven’t the brains to appeal higher up so they feel safe in giving everyone sort of (sic) treatment.92

The letter explicitly illustrates the class anxieties amongst transients. Murat’s desire to dissociate himself from the other transients is repeatedly shown through his descriptions of the low class as illiterate, intellectually inferior people at the KTB.93 Murat’s dismissal of these other transients is not merely a product of his own sense of superiority. It reflected the attitudes of KTB officials themselves. Despite attempts to keep them separated, different classes and types of transients inevitably would have come into contact at the multi-use buildings. These buildings would have been centers of gender, class, and racial anxiety.

Racial anxieties are not nearly as apparent as concerns of gender, class, and age. Nonetheless, one cannot dismiss the existence of racial prejudice and spatial separation. In his national survey, Ellery Reed noted, “Except in the South, Negroes and white men were indiscriminately forced into close association.”94 Despite Reed’s observation, the KTB registered a steady number of African-American males each month and even the occasional family.95 Notably, very few African-American unattached women registered at the KTB. From December 1933 to June 1934, 391 unattached African-Americans were registered as new cases with the KTB. Compared to white cases, the number is considerably lower, but not any less relevant to the discussion. In consideration of the race riot of 1919, the KTB appeared to demonstrate sensitivity towards African-American populations. Whether or not spatial segregation occurred, the KTB did not solely cater to whites. Inevitably though, African-Americans would have experienced discrimination, possibly from locals or transients themselves.

Despite the lack of evidence for spatial segregation, signs of racial anxieties did appear. On December 22, 1933, Frances Strong wrote to Elizabeth Scheiblich about a situation concerning transients in Corbin, Kentucky, about 85 miles from Knoxville. African-American transients had been riding freights into Knoxville, as the racial tensions in Corbin were becoming violent. The increasing violence prompted the Kentucky Transient Bureau to request a transfer of African-Americans to the KTB. Interestingly, Strong does not indicate the transient’s race in the letter, but later letters between Scheiblich and the Federal Transient Service specify that the men in question were African-American. Strong’s letter reported the “ill treatment” of transients in Corbin, Kentucky.96 Apparently, gangs of young men were boarding freight trains and assaulting transient men. Despite reports to the local deputy, Walter Shumate, nothing was done about the crimes. Furthermore, Strong noted that crimes had occurred previously on trains going from Kentucky and into Knoxville. In one case, a man was taken off the train in Knoxville dead; an unknown assailant shot another in the back.97 Strong’s concern was pronounced, “While the free riders on the freight trains may not be particularly desirable citizens, still it would seem that the gangs who attacked them did so with an idea of stealing anything of value.”98

Unfortunately, the assaults were only the beginning of crimes against African-American transients in Corbin, prompting the Kentucky Bureau to transfer their African-American population to Knoxville. The Corbin, Kentucky citizens displayed their disdain for African-American transients in a rather blatant fashion: a bus to Lexington. Elizabeth Scheiblich, Tennessee state director, perhaps felt that the situation was Kentucky’s predicament to solve, which is her first reason for refusing the transfer. Scheiblich’s second reason for refusal clarifies her stance on the problems of race much clearer. Scheiblich asserted that she was: “unfortunately, not enthusiastic about accumulating in Knoxville a group of negro intra-state transients who would not normally come to our attention…I am sure that you will agree that it is not wise to refer a large number of negro transients to a city the size of Knoxville, where we already have a sizeable problem.”99

Apparent concerns about accepting a number of African-American transients into the KTB may have been a product of financial and spatial concerns. However pressing these issues were though, Scheiblich’s letter specifically stated that the KTB could not handle a large number of African American transients. The anxieties about the amount of strain handling this “type” of

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93 A.L. Murat to Hon. Hardin Peter, April 3, 1935.

94 Reed, 56.


97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

transient indicate that African-American transients probably experienced a great deal of difficulty with transient bureaus wherever the location. However, the KTB registered many African-American transients, so perhaps the KTB handled such cases with more sensitivity than other bureaus. This sensitivity might have been a product of previous race riots or a desire to avoid negative publicity. The hostility many transients faced, regardless of race, may have discouraged some from even seeking assistance. For those transients, the questions remains: “Where did they go?”

A spatial analysis of the KTB is not complete without a discussion of the alternatives in Knoxville for transients, especially those who refused the KTB’s plan. Local transients were not eligible for the KTB, but evidence suggests that makeshift homes were established in downtown Knoxville. Transients coming to Knoxville may have made their first stop in the shantytowns before moving on the KTB. Either way, transients had created their own designated spatial areas, a place of their own. Like the KTB shelters, the shantytowns were both within and apart from Knoxville’s downtown. Moreover, anxieties and disdain for transients would have created a virtual border between the shantytown and ordinary citizens. Most importantly, the descriptions of the shantytown give us a clearer notion of where transients possibly went after refusing the plan.

For transients in Knoxville, shantytowns along river and rail provided the traditional “hobo jungle” form of shelter. Ramshackle shelters along Knoxville’s edges welcomed those without stability. In the Federal Writer’s project interview, “Till the River Rises,” Fran Flannigan, described her life in Knoxville’s shantytown. The description of a Knoxville shantytown provides us with a better idea of how transients operated outside of the KTB. Fran and her mother had lived in Shanty Town, which occupied the banks of the Tennessee River, since 1932. Thus they were not cross-country migrants, but migrants within Knoxville. When the river flooded the Shanty Town, Fran explained that the community would move to the railroad tracks and camp. Inside Shanty Town, the makeshift houses were created from the trash dump and river wood. The materials provided enough shelter, but were relatively disposable in case the river rose. Thirteen stilts set shanties “straggled along the banks of the Tennessee River between the approaches of two of Knoxville’s bridges. Most of them faced the railroad tracks where strings of coal cars and empty boxes stood. Beyond the tracks was a highly eroded embankment criss-crossed by foot paths and littered with rusty cans, bottles, and rubbish.”

From the description, the transients of Shanty Town made a community in an area of relative desertion. The litter, erosion, and empty rail boxes are not typically welcoming areas of inhabitation, but Fran’s interview illustrated otherwise. For instance, she noted that each shanty had a spot for a garden, although some were too “trifling” to grow anything. Her garden grew corn, potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, and flowers. Surrounded by industrial debris, Fran’s tiny area created something of relative worth, particularly in the Depression years. Significantly, she stated that the garden’s bounty was shared with those who were “down on their luck.” Despite her precarious situation, she may have been willing to help outsider transients with food or temporary shelter. Since many refused the KTB’s plan, transients would have greatly benefited from such a garden. More significantly, non-KTB transients were spatially forced into the least inhabitable realms of Knoxville. Thus, the city had multiple communities operating within one larger space.

In conclusion, the KTB and areas like Shanty Town indicate that transients were part of Knoxville’s landscape. Whether transitioning into a more secure spatial setting, such as a shelter or apartment house, or creating temporary shelters in Shanty Town, transients carved out their own community within the larger spatial setting of Knoxville’s downtown. Even after the KTB disappeared, the transients living in shanties did not. They may have inspired similar accounts in Cormac McCarthy’s Suttree years later. As Suttree floats amongst the makeshift homes, he described the area as:

A darker town, past lamp stoned blind, past smoking oblique stacks and china dogs and painted tires where dirty flowers grow. Down pavings rent with ruin, the slow cataclysm of neglect…Encampment of the damned.101

Like Suttree’s home amongst degradation, the KTB’s presence in downtown Knoxville acted as a visible reminder of the Depression, as well as the hope many clinged to during such strained times. A mixed symbol, the KTB’s spatial presence represented renewal, hardship, division, and integration. Prompted by anxieties related to pollution and corruption, the KTB created a network of spatial divisions to avoid mingling one group with another. Despite this precaution, different types of transients would have inevitably come in contact, whether at the grocery commissary or the F.E.R.A school. Additionally, transients outside of the KTB’s operation would have created their own divisions and integration, as seen through in Fran Flannigan’s Shanty Town. In both cases though, the areas still mirrored the anxieties of American society; transients were not free from such aspects of division. Nonetheless, different types of transients did in fact encounter problems unique to their “type,” demonstrated through the KTB’s transient families and young boys.

100 Fran Flannigan, interview by Jenette Edwards and Nellie Gray Toller, 1939, “Till the River Rises,” Federal Writers Project, microfilm, Southern Historical Collection, series 12881-12891, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Chapter Four

Problem Boys: Adolescent Male Transients

Of all the transient population, transient boys often received the most attention. According to Kenneth Kusmer, “About 40 percent of unattached transients in 1934 were under the age 25, with 20 percent 19 years old or younger.” 102 Both transient boys and girls were immortalized in Thomas Minehan’s Boy and Girl Tramps of America (1934), which described the vagabond life in great detail. Minehan disguised himself as a transient, and recorded the various aspects and customs of adolescents on the road. The study, conducted during 1932, would have been completed before the Federal Transient Service started. Nonetheless, Minehan’s work helps illuminate the lives of the troubled boys dealt with by the KTB. Youth transients were simply, “flesh and blood youngsters who should be in high schools and homes and were in box cars and jungles.”103 Economic and social change, disrupting families and employment, forced adolescents onto the road like many others. 104 One boy tramp, “BooPeep”, left home because he, “couldn’t go back to high school in these pants, What the hell, I’d rather take to the road. The old man? I don’t know where he is. I’ve had four of them. Every one worse than the other. Then, Ma died a year and half a ago.”

BooPeep’s story was like many others in Minehan’s work. Broken homes and economic stress left adolescents in a precarious situation. Not entirely children; and not yet adults, the popularity of youth transients in the media is understandable. Left on their own, the next generation was threatened with degeneration on the road (in accordance with the negative views of transients). Minehan asserted that youth transients hit the road because of hard times, as well as the emotional tides of adolescence, which were temporarily satiated with the adventure of the open road. 106 The life of a youth transient naturally varied in time and distance, but Minehan noted that many returned home every so often.107 Essentially, though, youth transients suffered similar problems as older transients: sleep, shelter, food, and clothing.

One problem unique to youth transients was sexual exploitation. Although girls often fell into prostitution, Minehan and other writers focused far more on the issue of young boys and sexual “perversion.” One boy tramp reported “whenever you see a trainload of transients, there is always a wolf on the tender and a fruiter on the green light.”108 Nels Anderson, as well as Minehan, attributed homosexual relationships amongst boys and men to a lack of other sexual outlets and a desire for compensation.109 Furthermore, Anderson’s suggested that transients believed the chance of contracting venereal disease from homosexual practices was less than a heterosexual one.110 Significantly though, Anderson noted that treatment was usually given to men who could trace their infection to a female.111 The perceived sexual perversion and predatorial nature of the actions explains the anxieties of segregation in the transient bureaus. The KTB, in an effort to avoid negative publicity, surely wanted to avoid a reputation as an area of sexual perversion and exploitation. Thus, the fears of corruption and degeneration amongst a generation of youth prompted nationwide anxiety, as seen through the KTB’s troubled boys.

At the KTB, unattached males under the age of 21 accounted for a significant part of the population. During May of 1934, 388 unattached males under 21 registered, compared to 365 males from ages 25-34. Overall, the population of males under the age of 24 during December 1933 to June 1934 made up the majority of the KTB’s population. Noticeably, very few boys under the age of 16 registered at the KTB, particularly in comparison with the 16-24 populations. 112 It is important to note that the KTB’s age divisions differed vastly in time span. The age category of “25-34” covers a much larger segment than the 16-20 and 21-24 group. Thus, the KTB’s categories are not an accurate view of the age dispersal. Unfortunately, the records do not inform us further. By combining the 16-20 and 21-24 age groups, the dominant transient is younger rather than older. Hence, the population of young male transients presented themselves to the KTB in large numbers on daily basis, as illustrated by the chart below:

102 Kusmer, 204
103 Thomas Minehan, Boy and Girl Tramps of America (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934), 16.
104 Ibid.
105 Minehan, 41.
106 Minehan, 41.
107 Ibid., 56.
108 Ibid., 142.
111 Ibid., 115.
According to Frances Strong, the KTB confronted the problem of adolescent transients early on. By the end of the first quarter, the KTB had 60 youths of twenty or younger at their shelters. It is likely that many others appeared, but refused the KTB’s offer of work or returning home. As the KTB’s statistics demonstrate, the number of male youth grew noticeably over the first nine months. In response to the growing population of adolescents, Elizabeth Scheiblich notified the acting national director, William Plunkert, that Knoxville had an overwhelming number of “boys and young men for whom no home adjustment possible.” Scheiblich suggested that a camp featuring an education program would help the Bureau care for the adolescents. Moreover, Scheiblich believed that it would be “much more satisfactory” to have the group of boys outside the city.

Scheiblich’s concern is perhaps a reflection of anxieties about interaction between younger and older men, especially concerning sexual relationships. By spatially separating the boys, the KTB perhaps hoped that the adolescents would escape the cycle of transient life. Strong noted that a dozen boys were waiting to hear from relatives, while the rest were “actually homeless or their home environment offered so little more than simply a point of departure…that we faced the problem of adjusting these badly handled boys ourselves.” Troublesome youth were usually relegated to Mrs. Howerton, one of the social workers at the KTB. As Frances Strong stated, Mrs. Howerton dedicated herself to helping the “difficult, combative” youths who were not only going through the problems of adolescence, but life on the road. Like Minehan, the KTB recognized that adolescence itself was challenging, and economically hard times only further complicated the life of a youth transient. More importantly, Strong declared that the young transients possessed various talents and “absurd ambitions that would fill many pages.” Despite instability in place, the young transients perhaps still aspired to more than riding the rails. Instead of hopeless and despondent, Strong’s narrative suggested that the young were merely misguided and without a positive home life.

Of course, many youths were drawn to the road by both economic distress and desire for adventure, as demonstrated by a particularly well-planned boy transient at the KTB. In response to the boy’s map, which specifically traced a route to each transient bureau in the region, Elizabeth Scheiblich noted the difficulties in deciding which youths were traveling for adventure and which youths needed help. She stated that the problem of young boys traveling during the summer had been observed by many states, and the situation did not have a clear solution. The bureaus would simply have to investigate cases more carefully, if the case seemed suspicious. Scheiblich concluded that a young man found to be “simply seeing the country during his vacation period and has a good home to which he could be returned…should be denied and he should be returned home.”

In fact, transient boys were not unwanted members of families; in many cases the families tried to find runaway youths. A Knoxville family wrote to the Transient Bureau in hopes of locating their son, Jean Card. The letter gave a brief description of Jean: age 16, 5’9, 105 lbs, and blind in one eye. In addition, the family would furnish his transportation home. Although it is uncertain whether or not Jean came home, his family hoped for his return. Jean’s blindness is troubling because of

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113 Strong, “Narrative Report.”
114 Scheiblich to Plunkert, October 1, 1934. Records of the WPA, series 69, box 279, TN Folder. National Archives, College Park.
116 Strong, “Narrative Report.”
117 Strong, “Narrative Report.”
118 Ibid.
120 Letter and Photo about Jean Card. Records of the WPA, series 69, box 278, TN Folder, National Archives, College Park.
the dangers transients faced. Jean could have easily been injured riding freight cars or walking along the road. Unfortunately, the exploits of adolescent transients at the KTB are not as pervasive as accounts of males or families. Comparatively though, transient girls and lone women are virtually ignored by the KTB’s records. Nonetheless, the best detailed account of an unattached youth transient comes from the case of Norman Pierce, a nineteen year old “problem boy.”

Norman Pierce first registered with the KTB on April 2nd, 1934. Following standard protocol, the KTB interviewed him concerning his background and family history. Shortly thereafter, Miss Maggie Guinn, local boarding house operator, more accurately informed the KTB of Norman’s history. In the spring of 1933, Norman’s mother, Mrs. Clyde Weaver, and her husband went to Chattanooga and left Norman with his uncle in Morristown, TN. Five months later, Norman returned to Knoxville after visiting his mother. Like Thomas Minehan’s youth transients, Norman appeared displaced by his family, and thus left to take care of himself. Regardless of which side instigated the departure, Norman’s lone status thrust him into the transient lifestyle, perhaps with negative consequences.

While in Knoxville, Norman’s behavior had not only brought attention from the police, but also the local newspaper. More importantly, the article concerning Norman had triggered a telegram to the national headquarters of the FTS. On August 13th, 1934, an anonymous writer issued a simple message: “The Transient here should be investigated.” Despite the positive efforts of the KTB, any misstep threatened the agency. The article did little to alleviate the suspicions of the community. In the article, Detective Bruce Clinton stated that not only did he know Norman Pierce, but Norman was also living “off the bureau” instead of working.

The suspicions that transients were gaining relief without proper compensation were all too common. Unfortunately, the grim employment options in Knoxville, as well as with the KTB, did not allow even eager workers guaranteed employment. Nonetheless, the article concerned Elizabeth Wickenden, unofficial national director, who promptly requested a detailed report about Norman Pierce from Elizabeth Scheiblich, state director. Even the slightest negative publicity, inspired quick action from all levels of the Transient Bureau. In the report, Mrs. Elizabeth Seale asserted that, “he seemed to be adjusting well in the bureau for about three months, but has been drinking on several occasions recently and is now serving time in the Knox County work house on charges of loitering.”

Interestingly, Norman accepted the KTB’s plan, and stuck with the program for three months. For a lone adolescent, the attempt at stability remains impressive. Despite this, the confines of the KTB could not contain the wiles of adolescence. In Norman’s case, his transient status was enough to secure a place in the workhouse. The “loitering” charges embodied the anxieties about transients. Although the caseworker does not voice suspicions of injustice, the police and the KTB probably clashed over charges of loitering with transients. To begin with, loitering is not an entirely serious crime. Furthermore, the harsh punishment Norman accrued seem overzealous on the part of the Knox County Justice system. In the workhouse, Norman would have encountered more experienced criminals and gained the stigma of being a criminal. It is reasonable to suggest that Norman would have been far better off within the confines of the KTB.

Norman’s case tells us numerous things about the KTB and adolescent transients. First, the KTB did cater to local transients, although they may have been more willing to work with adolescent transients (who were there by no fault of their own). Secondly, Norman’s attempts at stability suggest that younger transients may have perceived the KTB as a quasi-home/family atmosphere. Moreover, Norman’s criminal charges and work house sentence suggests that the police were not entirely sympathetic to transients, and would perhaps prefer transients cloistered in a jail setting. Furthermore, Norman’s problems are similar to many youth transients of the period. Broken families, lack of employment, and a youthful attraction to trouble caused many adolescents to join the lifestyle. Like youth transients, families encountered a variety of issues, but the documentation about families is much more extensive than that available for any other group besides unattached males.

121 Scheiblich to Mrs. Elizabeth K. Seale, August 21, 1934. Records of the WPA, series 69, box 278, TN Folder, National Archives, College Park.
122 Ibid.
123 Telegram, August 13, 1934. Records of the WPA, series 69, box 278, TN Folder, National Archives, College Park.
124 Ibid.
125 Wickenden to Scheiblich, August 14th, 1934. Records of the WPA, series 69, box 278, TN Folder, National Archives, College Park.
126 Elizabeth Seale to Scheiblich, August 21, 1934. Records of the WPA, series 69, box 278, TN Folder, National Archives, College Park.
Chapter Five

Restoring the Unit: Transient Families

Like youth transients, transient families posed an entirely unique set of problems and predicaments. Unlike unattached transients, families represented not only a solid unit, but also individuals. Predictably, the stress of transient life upon both parents was high. Depending on the government for an entire family’s livelihood, families presumably arrived at the KTB in desperation. Frances Strong characterized the arrival of families as a “limp.” Strong believed that families arrived at the KTB and “heaved a sigh of relief that at last the responsibility was firmly placed on the broad shoulders of a Federal agency.” Between December 1933 and June 1934, approximately 14% of all new cases were individuals in families.

The transient families of the KTB represented a wide spectrum of social class, education, age, and place of origin. Hence, each transient family presented a new set of issues. No single set of policy and course of action could apply to all the families. Social workers orchestrated jobs, shelter, school, nurseries, as well as the endless additional needs of each family. The KTB employed two caseworkers solely for family problems. Groceries and clothing were provided at the KTB’s Commissaries. Also, the typical budget allotted for a family of five was about $6.00 a week, or as much as $32.00 a month. In accordance with inflation, a family’s allowance amounts to about $94.00 a week. Thus, the KTB attempted to provide families with adequate assistance and enable their futures. Fortunately, Frances Strong detailed three families registered at the KTB, showing the struggles and successes of each family.

In the case of Mr. and Mrs. R, the couple and twelve year old child (name, sex unknown) migrated to the region in hope of finding work with TVA. Not only did the family migrate to Tennessee for work, but they had also expended their savings doing so. Unlike many others, however, Mr. R eventually secured work with the TVA. The KTB provided for the family until they were self-sustaining. According to the report, Mr. R was a “highly skilled man,” and worked as an assistant bookkeeper in the KTB. More importantly, the relationship between the KTB and the family appeared mutually beneficial rather than mere charity. While Mr. R worked for the KTB, Mrs. R helped establish a sample food budget and menu for families. Strong stated that Mrs. R “showed a most intelligent interest in working out [sic] food budget for her family with her case worker.” The food allowance did not allow for lavish meals, but Mrs. R demonstrated a clear interest in creating a reasonable menu for her family under the conditions. Mrs. R concluded that her weekly grocery bill would be about $3.26, nearly half of the family’s allowance. The sample menu also gives us a better idea of what families on relief were eating.

| Breakfast: | Oats, Toast, Milk, Coffee |
| Lunch: | Whole Wheat Bread & Butter, Peanut Butter Sandwiches, Stewed Tomatoes, Bread, Butter, and Tea |
| Dinner: | Macaroni & Cheese, Tomatoes, Bread, Butter, Coffee |
| Sunday (Noon) Breakfast: | Oats, Toast, Milk, Coffee |
| Lunch: | Scrambled Eggs, Mashed Potatoes, Cabbage Salad, Creamed Corn, Bread, Butter, Milk, and Coffee |
| Sunday Evening Lunch: | Bread, Peanut Butter, Tea |

Despite their transient status, Mrs. R wanted to maintain some semblance of life before the Depression. In particular, the inclusion of a Sunday brunch demonstrates this desire. During strained times, even a simple meal could help keep a family intact. Thus, the KTB gave families an opportunity not only to survive, but also sustain elements of life before financial and employment disaster. The efforts of the KTB were not always enough; the families (especially the parents) had to be willing to work with the KTB’s plan. With respect to Mr. and Mrs. , Frances Strong concluded that, “both this man and his wife made a definite contribution to the agency while being most appreciative of an opportunity to stay in Knoxville till the promised job with the T.V.A. developed.” The positive effects that the KTB had for the “R” family applied to others as well. For some families, the KTB provided them with better opportunities than before the Depression.

In her narrative report, France Strong described a very different type of transient family than Mr. and Mrs. R. According

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127 Strong, “Narrative Report.”
128 Ibid.
129 “Knoxville Transient Bureau Statistics.”
130 Helen Mawer, “Report of Tennessee Transient Division.”
131 Frances Strong, “Narrative Report.”
132 Ibid.
133 Strong, “Narrative Report.”

http://scholarworks.uark.edu/inquiry/vol8/iss1/14
to Strong, a transient couple, Sam and “his wife,” came from a rural area, “dirty, unskilled, and both entirely illiterate.”

The couple are an excellent example of how the KTB could assist the rural poor, giving them a better foundation for future opportunities. The KTB placed Sam on a work project, and his hard work earned a promotion to sub-foreman on the labor crew. The promotion gave Sam a newfound sense of authority, so much so that he “nearly worked his men into mutiny.”

In addition to Sam’s success on the labor crew, the couple attended classes twice a week for illiterates. With their diligent regular attendance, Sam and his wife showed “truly remarkable progress.” Sam had initially attended school in his work overalls, but the KTB decided to furnish him with a cheap suit. Strong noted that Sam’s “pride and self respect were out of all proportion to the clothing and we found that it was the only suit of clothes he had ever owned in his life.” Hence, the KTB gave the couple considerable opportunities, especially educational ones. The importance of providing education included both Sam and his wife, suggesting the KTB’s program encouraged female education. Also, the provision of clothing redeemed a presumably broken spirit.

At the time of the report, Sam and his wife were still with the KTB, for the “long, slow pull ahead.” The KTB may have acted as a beacon for the rural poor, who migrated to Knoxville in hope of aid and work.

The third and final description in Frances Strong’s narrative report is the “S’S” family. When the “S’S” family registered at the KTB, the unnamed couple and four month old baby had little “but their devotion to each other.”

Living together unmarried for two years, none of the couple’s relatives would assist the couple because of their cohabitation. Additionally, the couple had been denied government relief because of their unmarried status. Despite the previous disappointments of the “S’S” family, Strong noted that “much time and effort was expended on this family.” Besides the legal complications of unmarried status, the woman had developed “trench mouth,” a bacterial gum infection, and was hospitalized. The hospitalization left the mother unable to care for her infant, and the KTB temporarily placed the infant in a children’s home.

Finally, the man was “introduced to hard work for the first time in his life.”

From the circumstances, the forces that often tore families apart are apparent. Sickness, work, and child-care briefly separated the family as unit, but the KTB’s assistance perhaps allowed their situation to improve. Strong stated that the KTB helped pay for a marriage license, and aided the family’s return for the “continued long-time supervision and case work that such families need.”

Although the KTB faced accusations of giving “free rides,” the program gave much needed help to families in trouble. Without the KTB’s aid, the mother could have faced serious infection and possible death, and the child may have suffered a similar fate. The program did not ignore the plight of the destitute, but served as a sphere of rehabilitation and progress.

The KTB’s ability to aid those in need extended even to families facing unspeakable grief. After a transient family’s child died, Frances Strong procured a donation from a private cemetery, as well as a casket. The KTB secured funds for the cost of embalming and preparation of the grave, which amounted to $23.00 (about 362 dollars in 2008). Although Elizabeth Scheiblich did not know whether or not transient bureaus were allowed to pay for burials, Frances Strong forged ahead without the constraints of bureaucracy. The sympathy and proactive attitude of Frances Strong reveals itself consistently through such events. Most importantly, the efforts made by the KTB staff to give families a sense of hope or even empowerment cannot be dismissed as merely a “job.” From both transient boys and families, one can see the problems transients encountered as well as the way in which the KTB navigated delicate situations with dexterity. The vast needs of transients can also be understood by examining through the expansiveness of programs within the KTB, ranging from medical, work, education, or recreation.

Chapter Six
Containment and Prevention: Medical Care

Despite the tight budget, the transient shelters allotted money and time to provide inhabitants with medical care. Ellery Reed’s national report demonstrates medical care varied from one shelter to another. In general, transient bureaus had a working relationship with a local doctor and administered medical examinations within 24 hours of admission. For a brief period of time,

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134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
136 Strong, “Narrative Report.”
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
141 Strong, “Narrative Report.”
142 Ibid.
145 Reed, 70.
the bureau’s weekly report listed the number of new cases of communicable and non-communicable diseases. The weekly reports also included the number of immunizations given to transients. Bureau officials believed that providing medical care was pivotal for it guaranteed healthy workers for the future. According to Dr. Ellery Reed’s survey, crude infirmaries were often created at shelters. Medical consultation, usually by volunteer doctors, provided transients with further health care. However, transient bureaus were greatly hampered by the lack of funding for hospital visits. Reed noted that, although the local hospitals he surveyed would take care of urgent and emergency cases, they “felt that it was not a fair responsibility.” He added that hospitals sometimes received compensation for their services, but non-emergency medical cases (such as mental health) were harder to secure. He concluded that the medical community was particularly generous, despite little payment. Transient bureaus overcame difficulties by maintaining a solid relationship with the local medical community. Nationally, Dr. Reed concluded that the FTS offered “remarkably good” medical care given the funding the program received. Even so, the maintenance of the medical programs, as the Knoxville Bureau illustrates, was a constant struggle that required dedication.

The Knoxville Bureau’s medical care program demonstrated an exceptional amount of organization and attention. Although the KTB officially operated with one part-time doctor, a Dr. Platt, evidence suggests that many local doctors assisted. Further evidence suggests that Dr. Platt also had one medical aide at the shelter. Housed at 202 W. Church, the infirmary and medical clinic shared the space with a dining area, Work Department offices, barbershop, and laundry. The clinic and infirmary occupied the first floor, leaving the assortment of other services to the second floor. As previously mentioned, the building itself was in fair condition, but workable. Contrary to many surveyed transient bureaus, the KTB established an infirmary and clinic, exceeding the “crude” infirmary of other bureaus. On June 15th, 1935, the infirmary contained 30 beds, of which 13 were occupied. Thus, the infirmary was moderately filled with transient cases, but not overwhelmed. Interestingly, the infirmary may have been under the supervision of a transient who had attended medical school for two years. Strong only mentions the transient once, but perhaps he was a liaison between the KTB and the local doctors. When a transient’s medical needs surpassed the staff’s capabilities, the solid relationship with the City Hospital paid off. Through measures of minor compensation and charity, the City Hospital provided hospitalization for transients. For example, the City Hospital took emergency and obstetrical cases for one dollar per day. According to Helen Mawer, Regional Transient Supervisor, “a great many delivery cases are necessary.” Hence, the KTB utilized the limited resources to create a surprisingly adequate health care program. In fact, the KTB could not avoid the inevitable necessity of medical care and transients.

One of the primary sources of anxiety concerning the transient population stemmed from the fear of disease. In his evaluative survey, Dr. Reed observed the medical consequences of transient bureau housing, “The congregate shelters, where masses of men were herded closely together, were ideal breeding grounds for contagious and infectious diseases.” The bombardment of negative publicity concerning transients only enhanced fears of disease. To many, the transient population threatened localities, operating as potential sources of pollution. Naturally, Knoxville’s locals also harbored fears of contamination.

In an anonymous letter from Knoxville, the writer asserted such fears, even including two newspaper clippings about the threat transients posed. The clippings included neither the dates nor the newspaper in which they appeared. One of the clippings explicitly illustrates the anxieties surrounding transients and disease. Although the article concerned itself with the Memphis bureau, the origins of the letter accompanying the clippings suggests that the writer feared a similar situation in

146 Ibid., 70.
147 Ibid., 71.
148 Reed, 71.
149 Ibid., 70-72.
151 Frances Strong, “Narrative Report.”
152 “Reports on Shelters and Camps,” 1935.
153 Reed, 71.
155 Frances Strong, “Narrative Report.”
156 Helen Mawer, “Report of Tennessee Transient Division.”
157 Reed, 70.
160 Ibid.
Knoxville. The article included two sensational subheadings: “Wards With Communicable Ills Allowed to Roam Streets” and “Minister Who Visited Dying Man describes place as filthy and unfit for Human Habitation.”\textsuperscript{161} The subheadings, suggested that transients carried disease and roamed the streets, potentially exposing others to a variety of maladies. The accusation that homeless men roamed the street had other meanings as well. It further emphasized the transient’s role as a jobless, leech on the community. The reference to the minister in the subtitle added credibility to the newspaper’s sensationalism. More importantly, the minister essentially condemned the Memphis Bureau’s efforts to house sick men. The minister’s statements are meant to expose the supposed inadequacies of the Bureau: “There were 67 or 70 men in all stages of sickness in the room and only two transient orderlies to look after them. I took the man out of the place and sent him to another hospital. He died.”\textsuperscript{162} The article went on to discuss the supposed inadequacies of the Bureau and spread to others in Knoxville as well. Considering the apparent hostility to the FTS, an outbreak may have led to an earlier liquidation for the Knoxville Bureau. From Strong’s letter, one can sense the urgency and anxiety in preventing any sort of disaster.

Despite the suspected inadequacies of the bureaus, Knoxville’s problems with disease were actually fairly minor. According to weekly surveys, like other bureaus, venereal diseases such as gonorrhea and syphilis were typically the most common medical problems.\textsuperscript{164} Over nearly two months, 67 cases of gonorrhea and 42 cases of syphilis were reported. Nonetheless, the numbers are not entirely alarming compared to the number of individuals registered. In March 1935, the Knoxville Bureau reported a total population of 2,629 individuals.\textsuperscript{165} Likewise, from August 17, 1935 to September 7\textsuperscript{th}, 1935, the KTB recorded 69 combined cases of gonorrhea and syphilis. Assuming the population remained roughly the same from March to August, only two percent of the KTB transients harbored sexually transmitted diseases. In actuality, the threat of disease was quite small, but hostility did not merely stem from fear of disease. The question of local medical centers providing care to non-residents also encouraged hostility.\textsuperscript{166}

Nonetheless, the threat of disease combined with associated negative publicity forced the KTB to be particularly mindful, especially after an outbreak of meningitis. Contrary to Helen Hawk’s assertion that the transient program provided only a bare minimum of medical care, the Bureau’s response to the outbreak was well organized and effective.\textsuperscript{167} In a letter to Elizabeth Scheiblich, Frances Strong detailed how the Knoxville Bureau handled the meningitis outbreak.\textsuperscript{168} The first carrier of meningitis was Robert Gray, who had apparently traveled from west Tennessee. He was diagnosed with a non-infectious form. Despite the initial diagnosis, the Knoxville Bureau sent Gray to the isolation ward of the local hospital. The precautions were justified, as Gray was actually contagious. After Gray’s diagnosis, Dr. Platt, the Bureau’s doctor, quarantined the infirmary, the attendants, and the men who had shared a room with Gray. It is clear from the Bureau’s early over cautious response that the Bureau was well aware of how quickly the disease could spread, particularly in such close quarters. Furthermore, the dishes the quarantined men used for meals were boiled afterwards.

Unlike the situation described in article concerning the Memphis Bureau, the Knoxville Bureau appeared to have the situation under control. Additionally, the registration department “closely” questioned any man known to have traveled from Little Rock or Memphis (west Tennessee). Such men were only released into the regular shelter after receiving information that they were not exposed to the infected. Strong notes that only one man out of the 12-15 questioned had been exposed to meningitis. The letter suggests that the situation was handled aggressively. A serious outbreak of meningitis could have proven deadly for the men at the shelter and spread to others in Knoxville as well. Considering the apparent hostility to the FTS, an outbreak may have led to an earlier liquidation for the Knoxville Bureau. From Strong’s letter, one can sense the urgency and anxiety in preventing any sort of disaster.

According to Strong, the local newspapers discovered information about the first case within a week:

\begin{itemize}
\item About a week after the first case was discovered the newspapers finally secured the information that meningitis had developed, but the publicity was not unfavorable to the bureau and was no more than we might have expected. There have
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{162} Anonymous letter and newspaper clippings to FERA headquarters, March 20\textsuperscript{th} 1935. Records of the WPA, State Series, series 69, box 280. National Archives, College Park.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid

\textsuperscript{164} Kusmer, 213.

\textsuperscript{165} “Knoxville Transient Bureau Statistics,” Records of the WPA, series 69, box 16, General Series. National Archives, College Park.

\textsuperscript{166} Hawkins, 240.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.

been about one-half dozen cases of meningitis in the city and I think we were very fortunate to have gotten off so lightly…I feel that Dr. Platt has handled the situation very well and has been very thorough, and very faithful in his service to the bureau.\footnote{Strong to Scheiblich, February 11, 1935. Records of the WPA, State Series, series 69, box 279. National Archives, College Park.}

Thus, the Knoxville Bureau and the local medical community seem to have had a positive relationship, especially when one considers the financial and legal obstacles of providing medical care. In the case of meningitis, which often requires hospitalization, the KTB overcame the lack of funding to halt its spread. Furthermore, Frances Strong’s admiration for Dr. Platt showed not only her gratitude, but also perhaps how precarious the Bureau’s position was in Knoxville. Without appropriate resources, the KTS depended on the local medical community for its survival and appropriately noted their appreciation.

Although preventing the spread of contagion was the primary priority, the medical records of the Knoxville Bureau also indicated that vaccinations were administered. Medical records of this nature were not continuously kept; the records suggest that large numbers of transients received preventative care as well. Over a seven-week period in 1935, 981 typhoid fever immunizations were administered, and 102 smallpox immunizations were given.\footnote{“Weekly Disease Reports.” Records of the WPA, State Series, series 69, box 279, Communicable and Non-Communicable Diseases Folder. National Archives, College Park.} Although Reed notes that nationally the FTS was deficient “from the standpoint of preventive” treatment, the immunizations nonetheless indicate some sort of effort to give preventive treatment. Regardless of the time period, disease can devastate communities swiftly and painfully. The importance of prevention was a crucial step to avoid endangering not only transients, but also the outside community.

Moreover, the Knoxville Bureau closely worked with individual and non-contagious medical needs; the case of Clarence Maples illustrates this point. According to the 1920 Census, Clarence Maples would have been 44 years old when he registered at the Knoxville Bureau in May 28\textsuperscript{th}, 1934. Hailing from Sullivan County, Missouri, Clarence Maples and his family were displaced and lacking any stability. Although Clarence and wife Vera had three children; the family never appeared at the KTB as a solid group. Later on, the children and Vera appeared to have permanently left Clarence.\footnote{S.P Wilbur to Elizabeth Scheiblich, December 24, 1934. Records of the WPA, State Series, series 69, box 279. National Archives, College Park.} From the Maples’ family, one can see the effects of economic depression upon family life and how the Transient Bureau dealt with the wide range of problems transient families posed.

A close reading of the case files reveals that Clarence suffered a variety of mental and physical ailments, particularly epilepsy.. Clarence’s interviews with the KTB were often contradictory to his own previous assertions or his family’s denials. Also, Clarence reported that he had returned to his legal home, and doctors advised him “that another operation would prove fatal.”\footnote{S.P Wilbur to Elizabeth Scheiblich, December 24, 1934. Records of the WPA, State Series, series 69, box 279. National Archives, College Park.} Over the course of several months, Clarence would reappear periodically, until he finally settled into the KTB’s shelters. Clarence returned to the Knoxville Bureau on October 12\textsuperscript{th}, 1934. Complaining that he had been forced out of his home, he expressed a desire “to remain in this Bureau until he could be moved to a hospital.”\footnote{Strong to Scheiblich, February 11, 1935. Records of the WPA, State Series, series 69, box 279. National Archives, College Park.} Mr. Maples stated that the conditions with his family “had been so disagreeable to him that he left home on July 23\textsuperscript{rd} and had been living with strangers.” According to Mr. Maples, returning home was out of the question due to threats of divorce. Clarence’s own instability had broken apart his family, and invariably left him to rely on federal assistance.

Finally, Clarence’s medical issues complicated the matter even further. The Knoxville Bureau refused his request for transportation to Baptist Memorial Hospital in Memphis. Although Clarence believed he needed a second operation, the Knoxville Bureau would not approve funding until he was granted eligibility. S.P Wilbur, the caseworker, asserted in the letter, “We explained in great detail that the Government would not permit the expenditure of money unless we were sure that he would receive assistance upon his arrival.” Oddly enough, Clarence responded with a new explanation for his troubles. He argued that his objection to a married man’s attentions to his daughter Zeita caused his removal from the family household. Nonetheless, the Knoxville Bureau sent him to the staff physician, Dr. Platt, for examination. Although Clarence demonstrated mental instability and lack of credibility, the staff did not send him back to the streets. Instead, the Bureau took great care to investigate the matter, and to find a way to assist him. The Knoxville Bureau’s efforts suggest a hard-working, loyal staff, not an uncaring bureaucratic system.

Dr. Platt stated that Clarence could do light-duty at the shelter. The examination not only sought to observe his medical condition, but also to determine whether or not he could participate in work. Thus, the Bureau intended to provide transients with employment and give them a sense of self worth. Additionally, Dr. Platt determined that Clarence had not, as he believed, suffered a recent bout of epilepsy. Beyond the medical examination, the Knoxville Bureau contacted Sevierville’s Relief Administration to...
investigate the matter. The family responded with a highly unfavorable review of Clarence. The family claimed that he “would not work if given the chance and that when [he secured] a job of light work directing traffic on the new highway at 30¢ an hour, he used the money he received for liquor and in a short time quit the job.” According to the family, Clarence’s claims were false, and that Mrs. Vera Maples essentially supported the family. Teaching at the Pi Beta Pi Settlement School in Gatlinburg, Vera asserted herself as the main provider for the family. Furthermore, Vera did not believe more medical care would be beneficial, as “over twenty one” x-rays had been taken. Finally, the family stated, “absolutely that they will not accept Mr. Maples in their home.” While the rest of the family remained unified, Clarence had hit the road.

Despite the negative review from the Maples family, the Knoxville Bureau thoroughly researched Clarence’s case. Hospital records indicated that he had been admitted to Baptist Memorial in Memphis on May 24, 1932, curiously as a resident of Gatlinburg not Winnegan, and that Mr. Maples had a history of violent fits for the previous nine years. Attributed to a head injury received twenty years earlier, the doctors reported that an, “Old scar found in skull in region of right ventricular puncture. Spinal fluid did not come with any degree of pressure. Bloody fluid drawn off.” Diagnosed with epilepsy, the doctors discharged him on June 1, 1932.

Despite Clarence’s previous diagnosis, local doctors reexamined him and could find no evidence of epilepsy. Furthermore, Dr. Chumley and Dr. Abercrombie, both Knoxville doctors, believed that Clarence’s mental state was “unbalanced.” However unbalanced, the shelter decided to put him on light duty. Although the letter’s previous evidence suggests otherwise, S.P Wilbur stated that he had performed his work well. Clarence complained about the workload in the beginning, but seemed to make a transition to settle into the position. His adjustment at the shelter had prompted the staff to consider him for the Cookeville Camp, where only particular transient males were placed for work relief projects. Simultaneously, the shelter also considered institutionalizing Clarence in Winigan, Missouri. If not accepted in Winigan, Wilbur stated that he would be given treatment at the Cookeville Camp.

The final description of Clarence in Wilbur’s letter conveys additional strange characteristics. According to Wilbur, Clarence was a “religious fanatic,” addressed members of the shelter as brother or sister, read the Bible for hours, and reminded others of his abstinence from drink, tobacco, and other “bad habits.” Most importantly, Clarence did not suffer an epileptic attack, and had not been observed under the influence of liquor while at the KTB. Wilbur’s last observation contradicts the family’s reports of Clarence’s problems with alcohol, but the existence of the contradictions is worth noting. Significantly, The Knoxville Bureau worked through Clarence’s mysterious and complicated situation. The considerable attention paid to his case suggests that the Knoxville Bureau exceeded federal expectations. Instead of dismissing him, the shelter patiently worked to provide a degree of assimilation. Family protests, health problems, and disputable background did not prevent the Knoxville Bureau from providing him with assistance. Thorough investigation and careful consideration are evident throughout Wilbur’s letter. Also, the Knoxville Bureau anticipated giving Clarence mental health care, a rarity at the time. No matter where the Bureau placed, at the Cookeville camp or Winnegan, the staff intended to provide him with mental health care. The Knoxville Bureau demonstrated sensitivity beyond the norm, even by today’s standards. Clarence’s case suggests a substantial effort by the staff to provide proper health care, despite meager funding, as well as provisions for Clarence’s future. The Knoxville Bureau gave an ostracized and perhaps unbalanced man a better chance at improving his future.

The medical issues of the KTB ultimately tell us more than the number of diseased transients registered. Through the meningitis episode, the anonymous writer’s fears, and the Maples family story, the KTB’s resilience and insight are clarified. Although the KTB could not conceivably help every transient or stop the spread of disease, the versatility of an agency at odds with financial means and community criticism is evident. Moreover, the Maples family demonstrates not only a delicate medical problem, but also the complications of a transient family. Mr. Maples’ instability tore his family apart; and yet Mrs. Maples adapted and supported her family. While the rest of the family survived, the KTB helped Mr. Maples settle into a place at the Bureau, and tolerated his strange eccentricities. More importantly, the KTB provided medical care for a population that had largely been ignored. By protecting their health, the KTB perhaps contributed to longer lives, and prevented such fatal diseases as smallpox through immunizations.

175 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
Chapter Seven

The Total Package: Work, Education, and Recreation

Work Relief

Besides the provision of necessities for both attached and unattached transients, the KTB’s work relief, educational, and recreational programs illustrated the all-encompassing idea behind the Transient Service. The programs were not without complications, but each program gave transients something more than a “dole.” Contrary to the beliefs of many, the KTB was not a headquarters for criminals. Although the KTB provided for those needing a night’s stay, the philosophy appeared as one that catered to long-term benefits. After leaving the KTB, many transients would actually have improved his/her status. The depth and response the transients themselves had towards the programs was a testament to its success. Furthermore, the different programs allowed the KTB to elevate itself above the typical charitable organization or shelter. Within each service area, the KTB became more like a community and less like a Federal organization. Thomas Gibney, both transient and editor of the KTB’s newsletter, observed that the programs created an atmosphere of fellowship. In addition, Gibney stated that the fellowship, “that exists in this Bureau makes one forget that home is so far away, the work we do, the several forms of recreation divert our mind’s thinking of the things that used to be or the things that might have been.”

The Work Relief program operated in Knoxville and at the Cookeville Camp. The Cookeville Camp allowed a small group of transients to work on projects in the region. In Knoxville, the KTB created opportunities, particularly in public works, in order to provide jobs for transients. Not surprisingly, the KTB quickly arranged jobs for male transients. For many of the transients, employment could be found at the KTB itself. Ranging from janitorial to clerical positions, transients were an easily available source of labor. Moreover, those transients that accepted the plan were more than likely migrating because of unemployment not necessarily “wanderlust.” Frances Strong described the male group as seasonal laborers, “men out of work from the coal fields of Tennessee and Kentucky.” Drawn to Knoxville by the development of the T.V.A, Strong noted that many were hopeful for employment despite the large numbers of men that had already applied for work. As a source of labor, a considerable percentage of men had high school or college educations, as well as “excellent employment records.” Thus, the KTB was a relatively self-sustaining organization with the employment of transients.

Each man worked approximately a 30-hour workweek, and received a salary based on their job. Depending on the job, a man could receive salaries ranging from 90 cents, $1.80, to $2.70 a week. For transients with “white collar” backgrounds, positions were generally relegated to clerical, educational, and recreational departments of the KTB. Local hostility and suspicions about transients taking job opportunities made the KTB hesitant to place white-collar transients outside of the KTB. R.S McCann, a local resident, wrote to Elizabeth Scheiblich with such concerns. McCann asserted that “it is unfair to the resident who is attempting to maintain a home, school his children and pay taxes to be forced to compete with wards of the Bureau.” Such hostility prompted the KTB to tread carefully with their work relief program. Outside of employment sustaining the KTB, public work projects initiated by the KTB seemed like the safest bet to avoid local resentment. Frances Strong reported that the work projects benefited both transients and the city of Knoxville:

In a city that had given little attention to parks or playgrounds, the interest of the City Fathers was aroused to an extent where a definite program was undertaken in city beautification and the work placed entirely under the supervision of our Bureau…A permanent contribution in beauty stands as a monument to the transient in our midst.

As stated above, the KTB utilized an area that Knoxville’s own government had previously ignored or been unable to

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179 Strong, “Narrative Report.”
180 Ibid.
185 Strong, “Narrative Report.”

http://scholarworks.uark.edu/inquiry/vol9/iss1/14
invest in, and created opportunities to improve an important aspect of the city. At Chilhowee Park, still operating today, the men built a rock garden, with a series of six pools on different levels. Using rock from East Tennessee, several thousand cubic feet of rock were installed, as well as “two thousand shrubs, trees, and flowering plants.” In addition, the KTB organized the building of an arboretum and woodland walk at the News-Sentinel Park. At Lyon’s Field Park, the transients constructed a playground facility with a baseball and football field, as well as tennis courts. Lyon’s Field further benefited from the 3,500 trees planted by the KTB. W.B Wilkerson, a transient at the KTB, reported that the “boys at absolutely no cost to the city of Knoxville” had built a storm sewer. Wilkerson appeared eager to defuse potential hostility from locals in the KTB’s newsletter, Opportunity Knox. In the same issue, an unnamed writer reminded the readers that over 119,000 man-hours had been completed on public work projects in Knoxville with no cost to the city. According to the newsletter, some locals asked what “transients did any way,” to which the writer replied, “Why not provide them with car-fare to Lyon’s Field or Chilhowee Park and let him see for himself.” The writer’s concerns accurately reflect the hostilities between locals and transients, but also the pride transients felt about the work projects.

Even during the economically strained period, the work projects perhaps gave the transients a feeling of contribution. Interestingly, there is no evidence of women involved with work projects, although bureaus often used women for domestic tasks like cooking or sewing. In Helen Mawer’s report of the KTB, she noted that women’s projects were needed, and that four nursery schools were available for mothers. Despite the imbalance in opportunities, the work relief program seemed overwhelmingly positive in impact considering the constraints of local hostility and job availability. Also, the public work projects allowed transients to contribute to the city, perhaps even more than the average resident. Once again, transients were spatially taking charge, while defying the stereotypes of “lazy vagrants.” Fortunately, the KTB’s recreation and educational programs continued the success of the work program.

**Education: Newfound Opportunities**

In his national survey of transient bureaus, Ellery Reed observed that transient educational programs were “extremely meager.” For many bureaus, there had been no establishment of educational services. Contrary to other bureaus, the KTB organized a substantial program for both young and old. The KTB worked with the T.E.R.A school to provide high school and adult classes. Young children were presumably placed in local schools when possible. In Helen Mawer’s regional survey, she noted that the KTB had planned a “very good education program.” Both boys and girls between the ages of 14-18 attended the Vocational High School, which also offered an Adult Education Program at night for transients and locals. Mawer astutely stated that no educational programs for family groups, “especially women,” had been planned yet. However, there is evidence of women without children attending classes. Classes often mixed both transients and locals, with locals attending transient classes and vice versa. The intermingling of transients and locals suggests that hostility did not necessarily prevent interaction. Illiterate transients had the opportunity to learn how to read and write, and more advanced transient students could expand their education to other areas. Music classes were also offered, as well as taught by fellow transient Mr. Murat. The employment of Murat as musical instructor also demonstrates the KTB’s desire to utilize each transient’s previous background to improve the bureau. As Frances Strong described, the KTB, “endeavored to use any talent among our men …and Mr. Murat was unfit for any other type of work and seem much interested in the developments of this department.”

The educational program extended to the KTB’s newsletter, Opportunity Knox, as well as library access. In fact, Thomas Gibney wrote about the advantages of the library in the newsletter. According to Gibney, Knoxville “has a splendid library, free, to all, and the writer can think of no better place for a man to spend part of his spare time there.” Not only were transients going to the library, they were contributing pieces to the local newspaper, The Knoxville News-Sentinel. In the first issue of Opportunity Knox, Frances Strong noted that there, “must be a lot of budding literary talent fairly yearning for self-expression.”

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187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
190 Reed, 9.
191 Reed, 83.
192 Helen Mawer, “Report on Tennessee Transient Division.”
193 Ibid.
194 Helen Mawer, “Report on Tennessee Transient Division.”
195 Strong, “Narrative Report.”
amongst the transients. Thus, the program encompassed a wide range of educational backgrounds. For some, classes offered the chance to gain literacy, ultimately improving a transient’s chance of gaining employment and empowerment. Transients with high school or college education benefited with access to the library, musical programs, publications, and perhaps advanced education classes. Amidst the numerous options, transients also had extensive recreational opportunities, particularly the male transients.

Recreation: Transient Athletics

Like education, the recreational program contributed to the atmosphere of community within the KTB. Although distinctly gender oriented towards males, the inclusion of a recreational program is nonetheless significant. The KTB’s recreational program elevated it above typical shelters of the period. More importantly, the program gave transients a much needed distraction from the stresses of family, unemployment, and other troubles. Ellery Reed observed that shelters with successful recreation programs “made a great difference in the attitudes and entire atmosphere of the transient bureau, and was a constructive force in rehabilitation.” The importance of recreation amongst the transients was not only a distraction and social event, but perhaps paralleled the lives of transients themselves. In Opportunity Knox, the language used to described sports and transient life was very similar. Thus, sports mirrored the fight many transients faced in gaining employment and stability. The title page of Opportunity Knox presented a Walter Malone poem:

They do me wrong who say I come no more
When once I knock and fail to find you in;
For every day I stand outside your door,
And bid you wake, and rise to fight and win. The recreational program promoted a competitive attitude, potentially motivating the men to improve their current status. At the very least, the recreational program helped sustain the KTB community.

The KTB’s facilities had a recreation room for presumably indoor activities, and made arrangements for outdoor activities. One writer for Opportunity Knox noted that the “muscle bound, curly haired attendant in the recreation room” thought he could “lick the world.” Activities included baseball, swimming, boxing, and probably more. The KTB’s baseball team, The Transients, appeared to be the primary sport of choice amongst the men. The Transients baseball team certainly raised eyebrows amongst the locals. At one point, the KTB’s park privilege was revoked for baseball games because of “misconduct.” Despite the occasional mishap, the athletic endeavors illustrated an entertaining picture of the KTB’s men. The Transients had numerous stars, but Pretty Boy Burroughs appeared the most popular with female fans. According to the “Sport Flash” column, Burroughs made the “hit of the day. It was with the girls on the side-lines.” Although the piece is light-hearted, its relevance cannot be discount.

First, the story is meant for the KTB’s transients; it reads like a joke amongst companions. Thus, the KTB’s men felt like friends rather than mere recipients of aid. Moreover, whether or not Burroughs was popular with females, the fact that females attended a baseball game with the Transient team demonstrates the KTB’s truly public persona. Unified by their team identity, the Transients played against area teams, possibly suggesting definite interaction between locals and transients. The interaction may have been friendly at times, hostile during others. According to Opportunity Knox, an umpire who did “stellar” work one Sunday was “run off the field for rooting for the home boys Tuesday.” Additionally, the Transients’ stars did not confine themselves to baseball. Bernard Burns, star second baseman, wanted the KTB to sponsor an endurance swim. Although quite the athlete, Burn’s retained his transient status throughout his endeavors. Burns held records in Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, perhaps showing his migratory patterns. Finally, like any team, the Transients suffered the highs and lows of competition. Despite winning a double header against the Grocer Team and the River Rats, the Transients lost a “very hard fought game” to Boyd.

The sports articles are ultimately an indication of a community within the Bureau. Although temporary for most, the recreational program was an important part of the KTB’s vision. At the KTB, transients retained a full identity, as people interested in literature, art, and sports. The fullness of life at the KTB, at least for males, certainly exceeded the immediate needs of transients. The programs may have helped sustain struggling individuals until their situation improved, perhaps allowing some to escape the troubles of their past. Of course, these programs would not have succeeded without the support of the KTB’s staff and the network of women in the Federal Transient Service.

199 Ibid.
200 Reed, 91.
201 Walter Malone, Opportunity Knox, June 1934, title page.
202 Ibid, 7.
203 Helen Mawer, “Report on Tennessee Transient Division.”
204 “Sport Flash,” Opportunity Knox, June 1934, 11.
205 Ibid, 7.
Chapter Eight

The KTB and the Female Experience: Forging New Ground

The KTB, like many New Deal programs, had a positive impact not only the community, but also female job opportunities. Although females already dominated the realm of social service, New Deal programs fostered a change in employment practices. Females were not merely relegated to assistant positions, but rather hired for director positions. Women like Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor, became major players in the Roosevelt era. Susan Ware extensively discusses the powerful network of women in government during the New Deal in her book: Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal. Ware asserts that the “experimental, reformist atmosphere” of the New Deal allowed for the expansion of females in government. 206 More significantly, Frances Perkins believed that, although the positions were progressive, the actual problems of the period were the focus for the network of women. Perkins stated that she was, “deeply touched by the problems of poverty, the sorrows of the world, the neglected individuals, the neglected groups and the people who didn’t get on well in this great and good civilization.” Nonetheless, the enthusiasm and skill of the women remarkably helped the New Deal programs reach people. Without them, Susan Ware observed the New Deal could not have done as much as soon as it did.

The influence of females can be seen from the Federal Transient Service to the KTB. Like the network in Washington, a network of women was hard at work in transient bureaus across the country. In his national survey, Ellery Reed observed that women occupied prominent positions in the FTS at all levels (local, national, state). Moreover, Reed commented that two of the “best developed and most effective organizations observed in this study had been built from the first by women.”207 He continued to praise one of the female state directors as an outstanding example of the FTS, and that the atmosphere of bureaus had been positively changed by women. 208

Despite this, the Federal Transient Service hired three different men for the head director position over the course of two years, all eventually fired. Throughout the period, Elizabeth Wickenden held the assistant director position. After William Plunkert, the third director, was fired, Wickenden took over his duties as well. Despite never officially gaining the director position, Wickenden played an undeniably crucial role in the FTS despite being 24 years old. In fact, William Plunkert thought Wickenden was simply “brilliant.”209 Like many female employees, Wickenden faced hostility, particularly from Harry Hopkins, director of the FERA. Plunkert observed that Hopkins was “never particularly fond of Elizabeth and on more than one occasion simply had to get rid of her. But she made a real contribution and one that, while Hopkins was never aware of it, was one of very great and substantial character.”210 After the FTS, Wickenden continued to work in public service, a testament to her dedication and skill. Although Harry Hopkins had his misgivings, the praise from William Plunkert speaks volumes about Wickenden’s importance to the FTS.

The network of women extended into Tennessee, as seen through the numerous female directors and countless female social workers. Elizabeth Scheiblich and Georgia Ball acted as State Directors for the FTS, and Memphis and Knoxville both had female directors, Eva Sams and Frances Strong. Notably, Frances Strong was given a state director job after the KTB was liquidated. 211 Also, Helen C. Mawer acted as Regional Transient Supervisor, for an undisclosed amount of time. Like their Washington counterparts, both males and females respected the Tennessee network. After Elizabeth Scheiblich received a job offer in Baltimore, Col. Walter L. Simpson nearly begged William Plunkert to raise her salary, “Miss Scheiblich is much too valuable to us to have her leave us under any condition… This occasion brings very forcibly to my attention again that, since we are paying Miss Scheiblich less than some of the other Transient Directors, in spite of the fact that she is doing one of the best jobs in the states.”212 From the records concerning the KTB, it is rather apparent that frequent communication between Elizabeth Scheiblich, Georgia Ball, Frances Strong, and Elizabeth Wickenden occurred. These women were thoroughly concerned with the success of the KTB, and proved to be valuable assets for the program. More significantly, since most of the administrative work was actually done by Elizabeth Wickenden, she may have answered even letters formally addressed to male directors. Thus, a vital line of

207 Reed, 39.
208 Reed, 39.
209 Hawkins, 197.
210 Hawkins, 197.
communication and discussion can be traced from Knoxville, to the State headquarters, and Washington D.C.

Most important for our purposes is an examination of Frances Strong, director of the KTB, and eventual state director of Transient Activities. Like Wickenden, Strong’s official title was executive secretary, but she was technically the highest ranked official at the KTB. She was the leader/director, whether or not her title indicated her level of responsibility. Furthermore, letters address her as Mrs. Frances Strong, either indicating that she was widowed or married. If Frances Strong was married, her employment is even more significant. Many women had difficulty reconciling marriage and career, so Strong may have experienced this anxiety along with her work duties.213

Strong’s commitment to the KTB allowed the program to flourish under relatively unfruitful circumstances. Although her capability was certainly challenged, the evidence simply dismisses any opposing claims. She exceeded her duties, playing numerous roles. Furthermore, Strong had high hopes for the bureau, even urging the transients to make the KTB “the best bureau in the country.”222 Even more significantly, she understood the implications of her job. She recalled that “not once in a life does a social worker have an opportunity to create her own agency. It is an experience which, reckoned as to its effect on human lives, is rather humbling to one attempting it and very thrilling to live thru.”225 It is interesting that Strong described the KTB as “her own agency.” In other words, the KTB was not only a job, but also Strong’s vision of what an agency should be like.

One measure of Strong’s success can be found through the praise of others. Helen C. Mawer, Regional Transient Supervisor, visited the KTB in the fall of 1934 for an inspection. Although she presumably noted some of the KTB’s flaws, Mawer was well aware of Strong’s capabilities as director. In Mawer’s report to then national director William Plunkert, she asserted that Strong’s supervised all aspects of the KTB and kept them running smoothly.216 According to Mawer, Strong kept close track of casework standards, and she had “executive ability, and imagination.”217 Like Mawer, state director Elizabeth Scheiblich confirmed that Strong was doing a “very nice piece of work” at the KTB. Scheiblich also explained to Elizabeth Wickenden that, despite unfavorable publicity, Strong was “working so hard to interpret the transient program to the community.”218 Perhaps the praise from fellow women is not surprising, particularly if a strong network had been established. Nonetheless, Strong had the support of her colleagues, as well as those she aided.

Both former and current transients lauded Mrs. Strong and the KTB. Although not all transients were satisfied with the KTB, many transients had developed positive notions of the KTB. On February 8, 1934, Floyd Henderson, former transient, wrote to Frances Strong to express his gratitude to her for the “courteous treatment and pleasant surroundings.”223 Better yet, Floyd’s job with the New York Central Railroad had been reopened. Despite his job opening, Floyd professed that he would remain at the KTB until Frances Strong gave him permission to go back home. From the letter, it appears that Floyd looked to Strong as a leader and provider. The KTB gave Floyd the care and hope he needed until he could provide for himself again. Instead of merely ignoring Floyd’s plight, the KTB offered a workable solution. In the transient publication Opportunity Knox, “Unzel Guntzel” explained the commitment of Strong and the KTB, “Rain or shine, hot or cold, no matter the state of the weather, F.D.R’s haven of rest, so ably operated in this district by Mrs. Strong at 505 still receives a steady influx of men, women, and...young boys.”222 Dad Scott, a seventy five year old transient, praised the KTB. Scott stated that he liked Knoxville, and “this plan is one of the greatest things for wandering poor people I have ever seen...I have everything I need-tobacco for my pipe, clean clothes, a nice bed and fine food.”221 In reality though, Strong probably never received the praise she deserved.

Faced with a daunting task, Strong made the KTB into a well-functioning center of rehabilitation for transients. Whenever crisis occurred, such as the meningitis scare, Strong responded quickly and carefully to defuse the situation. If a client’s problem exceeded the caseworker’s capabilities, as in Clarence Maples case, Strong and the KTB worked together to find a solution. Strong developed an “excellent” relationship with the local police, medical community, and business leaders to enable the KTB.222 Moreover, Strong acted as an interpreter to those ill-disposed to the KTB. In the case of Judge Williams, Knoxville City Judge,

213 Susan Ware, Beyond suffrage, women in the New Deal, 24.
215 Strong, “Narrative Report.”
216 Helen Mawer, “Report on Tennessee Transient Division.”
217 Ibid.
Strong was to “arrange an interview with him, with the idea of explaining the transient program in more detail.”223 Strong dealt with the precarious situation of local hostility by attempting to foster good relationships with the media as well. The successful work relief, recreation, education, and medical programs are the best testament to Strong’s efforts. Of course, she was backed by a devoted staff to which transients also expressed gratitude. Ultimately though, Strong was the central figure of the KTB, an integral part of the female network in the Federal Transient Service.

Despite Frances Strong’s success, anonymous letters demonstrated the hostility towards a female in a position of power. However, the hostility directed towards Strong was not unique. Robert McElvaine noted that many relief clients objected to the young women that acted as caseworkers. 224 In fact, female workers faced “increased psychological pressures.”225 The belief that the women had somehow taken jobs from men led to antagonism from clients, as well as male workers and housewives.226 One anonymous letter, from an “admirer of present administration,” stated that the:

Woman that runs this place is making untold enemies for the administration and I feel sure if you knew just what is going on there with the money supplied by the Govt. you would clean the whole thing out…put a competent MAN in charge and let the women do something they are qualified to do, these women don’t know what it is all about, they just spend money hand fist…”227

The writer’s concerns were relatively unfounded; the KTB had the one of the lowest administrative costs in the state. Compared to the Memphis Bureau, which had 16.6% of its budget as administrative, the KTB had only 11.9% of its budget as administrative. 228 The KTB did in fact spend the most money per client than any bureau in the state, but this is more an indication of the adequate care rather than excess. Those benefiting from the expenditures were those in need, although many were hostile to even that fact.

In another anonymous letter, a writer expressed similar fears about Frances Strong. On December 14th, 1934, the writer professed that Frances Strong tried to get as many enrolled into the KTB as possible. Furthermore, the writer believed that Strong should be investigated. In addition, the investigation should be secret, as Strong was “cunning in every way.”229 The image of a guileful, irresponsible female is more literary archetype than reality. Interestingly, the writer acknowledges Strong’s intelligence despite the suspicions surrounding her. Nonetheless, both letters illustrate the severe economic stress many were experiencing. For an unemployed male, the employment of females in government positions, particularly those in which there was no male leader, would have been anxiety provoking.

Fortunately, the female staff of the KTB probably did not experience the same hostility females in other areas did. By 1930, the social work field was dominated by women (68% of all social workers). The New Deal simply allowed females to hold higher positions in the field. Hence, the hostility certainly existed at the KTB, but the presence of females in the social work field would not have been entirely surprising. More significantly, important male members of the field praised females, as seen with William Plunkert and Ellery Reed. Frances Strong and the rest of her colleagues embodied the enthusiasm of females in the New Deal. The women of the FTS certainly echoed Congresswoman Mary T. Norton’s proposal, “To prove that women are neither brainless or useless is the job of every woman in America.”230 Thus, the women of the New Deal were not only concerned with the humanitarian aspect, but also hoping to gain credibility. Despite the remarkable growth of women in government, the network of women did not leave the next generation prepared for similar growth.231 Of course, the presence of women in public service was also curtailed by changing mindsets towards female employment in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Molly Dewson, part of the Washington D.C network, wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt that, “These women’s organizations have the jitters on the attack on women made by Hitler and others. They feel the trend is toward prohibiting women from functioning in any other capacity than wives, mothers, and homemakers.”232 Nonetheless, the New Deal marked an impressive period for females in public service. These females defied the typical bureaucratic system and created organizations that dealt sensitively and devotedly to those in need.

225 Ibid., 183
226 Ibid., 183.
230 Susan Ware, Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal, 14.
231 Susan Ware, Holding their Own, American Women in the 1930s (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 94.
232 Ibid, 117.
Conclusion: Liquidation and Legacy

By the summer of 1935, officials at all levels of the Federal Transient Service were sending nervous correspondence about the program’s future. On July 29th, 1935, Georgia Ball (TN Director) wrote to Elizabeth Wickenden with such concerns. In her letter, Georgia Ball asserted that state officials were attempting to “stave off hysteria” from both transients and staff. The nervous anticipation of liquidation was justified; the official order to terminate the program was issued in September of 1935. From the beginning though, Harry Hopkins and the Roosevelt administration intended the FTS to be a temporary fix. The administration was eager to transition from emergency relief to work relief, and the success of the FTS was justification for its demise.

Since the transient population had grown smaller, many assumed local and state governments could adequately handle the problem. For some, the only “cure” for transients was halting relief altogether. The period of grace for transients had officially ended with the demise of the FTS. In a 1936 Works Projects Administration survey, one police official stated that, “Only those shiftless or lazy ones are still on the road…those were just “bums”, and nothing could be done for them.” Despite protests from social workers, an all-inclusive program for transients did not fit with the popular opinion. Thus, transients essentially reverted back to former ways of life. After the close of shelters, “jungle” communities experienced a revival. More importantly, “skid row” began to develop in urban areas. Therefore, the liquidation condemned transients to areas they still occupy today, especially “skid row.” Finally, the liquidation did not “save the spirit” like Harry Hopkins believed, but rather abandoned those who needed assistance outside of work relief.

For the Knoxville Transient Bureau, the liquidation occurred in January of 1936. At the time of closing, the KTB still had 241 men under their care. Following the liquidation, Frances Strong reported to Charles H. Alspach, director of Transient Activities, about the poor conditions in Knoxville for transients. The lack of proper care for transients prompted Alspach’s reply that:

> It is pretty hard to realize how communities are willing to put up with this sort of treatment of human beings, but I suppose there is going to have to be some more of this go [sic] on before states and communities are willing to do something a little more decent for this group of people.

The liquidation of the KTB minimally left 241 men homeless, not including the countless numbers who had gradually been forced out. After the KTB’s close, Frances Strong was briefly promoted to the state director of Transient Activities. While in this position, Strong proposed a new transient program utilizing $75,000 dollars leftover from transient funds. Strong imagined a much smaller scale operation that would enable transients to receive relief while assimilating. The memorandum probably fell to the wayside, and the sources do not tell us further. Notably, Charles Alspach, who had seemingly sympathized with transients’ plight months earlier, recommended incorporateing former rural camps into part of the prison system to the head of Public Welfare in Tennessee. Alspach suggested that the “chronic hobo” should be sent to these rural prison camps versus city jails. The change of sentiment further represents the change to the previous hostility and neglect. Finally, Alspach’s proposal thoroughly ushered in a new phase of dealing with transients, a sharp departure from Frances Strong’s vision.

In a brief time, the Knoxville Transient Bureau had expanded into a meaningful organization. Facing nearly every kind of obstacle, ranging from local hostility to disease, the KTB could have easily become a bureaucratic mess. The KTB’s success is even greater when compared to the contemporary failures of government agencies. One must look no further than Hurricane Katrina to realize how federal agencies with countless resources can easily fail to execute their purpose. With the considerable daily influx of transients, the KTB managed to house, feed, clothe, heal, educate, employee, and entertain transient individuals and families. In some cases, transients had better opportunities at the KTB than before. Additionally, Frances Strong and the women of the FTS were part of a new period in females in government positions. The network of women in Tennessee and Washington D.C.

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234 Hawkins, 293.
235 Philip Ryan, 10-11.
237 Kusmer, 221-224.
helped sustain the KTB, mirroring other powerful networks of women during the New Deal. Moreover, the KTB’s extensive documents inform us of the anxieties concerning gender, race, and class that deeply affected many aspects of the program.

Despite these anxieties, the KTB was truly radical. It is crucial, however, to separate the KTB from the FTS in this conclusion. Certain aspects of the FTS were radical, but variations among different bureaus make the assessment of the entire program impossible. The KTB’s ability to engage with their clients, as seen with Clarence Maple’s medical problems, went far beyond the federal expectations of transient bureaus. The KTB demonstrated an attitude and sensitivity to transients that was a critical change from previous attitudes. At the KTB, transients were not merely cases, but rather baseball players, writers, and musicians. Unfortunately, the same stigma that plagued transients outside of the KTB pervades popular opinion today. Transients are merely strange sideshows. For many, transients are victims of their own design. Although circumstances have changed, the plight of those without stable residence essentially remains the same. Hopefully, there is another “Frances Strong” to assist those in need.

Appendix One: Charts

Chart One: Unattached Total Cases, December 1933-June 1934

[Chart showing unattached total cases for December 1933 to June 1934, with distinctions for WUM (White Unattached Male), WUF (White Unattached Female), AUM (African-American Unattached Male), and AUW (African-American Unattached Female).]

Legend
- WUM: White Unattached Male
- WUF: White Unattached Female
- AUM: African-American Unattached Male
- AUW: African-American Unattached Female

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Chart Two: Attached (Individuals in Families) Total Cases, December 1933-June 1934

100 101 131 136
86
79
56
60
39
46
100
140
120
160
80
60
40
20
0
Dec Feb Mar Apr May June
Month

Legend
WFM: White Male Attached
WFF: White Female Attached
AFM: African-American Male Attached
AFF: African-American Female Attached

Map One: Map of Downtown Knoxville, KTB’s Spatial Presence\(^{244}\)

\(^{244}\) Map from McDonald and Wheeler’s *Knoxville, TN: Continuity and Change in Appalachian City*, 116.
Appendix Two: Photographs

Photo and Letter from Jean Card’s Family

Hobos in the Knoxville News Sentinel
Image One: March 9, 1932.

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245 Letter and Photo about Jean Card. Records of the WPA, series 69, box 278, TN Folder, National Archives, College Park.
Image Two: Cartoon Contest, March 3, 1929.
Whitfield Lodge: Opportunity Knox’s Illustration of KTB Shelter

Opportunity Knox, June 1934.
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