

Observations on John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s and the Rockefeller Foundation's Involvement with Colorado's Work-Relief Program

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Abstract

With the formal conclusion of the coal miners' strike at the Colorado Fuel and Iron pits in December 1914 and the suspension of the United Mine Workers' strike benefits in February 1915, former strikers and their families were once again solely dependent on wage labor. Yet demand for coal had plummeted due to mild winter weather and a deep economic recession. The lack of work quickly left many families destitute. In response to this dire situation, local officials turned to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (JDR, Jr.) and the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) to create a work-relief program for unemployed miners in the form of local road-building projects. The RF supplied \$100,000 for the work-relief program that employed 4,250 men. (They were paid in vouchers that could only be used for clothes or food.) The program lasted from April through June 1915 in seven Colorado counties.

W.L. Mackenzie King represented the Rockefeller Foundation in negotiations with Colorado officials to hammer out an agreement to access RF funds. During these talks, King not only made sure to protect RF funds from misuse, fraud, and waste by incorporating multiple oversights into the final agreement, but he also had to convince JDR, Jr. that the relief effort was a worthy endeavor. King clearly oversold aspects of Colorado's work-relief program. He exaggerated the degree of private/public partnership as neither sector contributed meaningful dollars to the endeavor. In the end, the entire work-relief project rested solely on the Rockefeller Foundation's funding.

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Unbeknownst to most readers, authors often struggle with decisions of when to start and stop a historical narrative. A variety of factors often contribute to these choices. The availability, or the lack of availability, of primary sources, for example, weighs heavily on these verdicts, as do page count and topic focus. Finding what appears to be so-called natural narrative bookends often tips the scales in favor of certain starting and stopping points. Yet what appears to be “natural” is really a matter of perspective. Change the perspective, and the natural bookends also shift.

This dilemma of when to start and stop a historical storyline has left the efforts of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (JDR, Jr.) and the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) to fund a large-scale, work-relief program for unemployed miners in Colorado during the spring of 1915 largely unnoticed. The Colorado work-relief program has gone completely unmentioned by the major works on the Colorado coal strike and its aftermath. Authors have focused their attention on the bloody battles between strikers and business supporters, often ending their accounts just after the Ludlow Massacre on April 20, 1914.¹ This ending point, in particular, seems “natural,” given the books’ focus on industrial conflict and fights for laborers’ rights. Works examining events after the strike’s conclusion pick up with the United States Commission on Industrial Relations and Rockefeller’s Industrial Representation Plan (commonly called the Rockefeller Plan), skipping over the local events in the spring of 1915.² This starting point also seems “natural,” given the desire to explore efforts to calm strife between miners and the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. From the perspective of destitute coal miners and their families, however, both these particular stopping and starting points seem anything but “natural,” since daily needs for food, clothing, and shelter persisted regardless of these more well-known events.

The work-relief project was of great importance, making an immediate and vital difference in destitute miners' and their families' lives. With the formal conclusion of the coal miners' strike at the Colorado Fuel and Iron pits in December 1914 and the suspension of the United Mine Workers' strike benefits in February 1915, former strikers and their families were once again solely dependent on wage labor. Yet demand for coal had plummeted due to mild winter weather and a deep economic recession. The lack of work quickly left many families destitute. In response to this dire situation, local officials turned to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and the Rockefeller Foundation to create a work-relief program for unemployed miners in the form of local road-building projects. The RF supplied \$100,000 for the work-relief program that employed 4,250 men. (They were paid in vouchers that could only be used for clothes or food.) The program lasted from April through June 1915 in seven Colorado counties.³

The material at the Rockefeller Archive Center sheds light on this little-known relief effort. One letter in particular from W.L. Mackenzie King to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. sums up the arguments that persuaded JDR, Jr., as president of the newly formed Rockefeller Foundation, to donate funds in support of the relief effort. King represented the Rockefeller Foundation in negotiations with Colorado officials to hammer out an agreement to access RF funds. During these talks, King not only made sure to protect the Foundation's funds from misuse, fraud, and waste by incorporating multiple oversights into the final agreement, but he also had to convince JDR, Jr. that the relief effort was a worthy endeavor. Some of King's justifications used to assure him of the project's structure, oversight, and appeal proved to be exaggerations, if not outright misrepresentations, of the final work-relief program. How much of this misrepresentation or exaggeration was deliberate or the result of misunderstanding is unclear. But what is clear is that the Colorado effort funded by the RF was one of the first work-relief programs to move beyond a single municipality, foreshadowing the New Deal programs of the 1930s and the need for enormous amounts of funds to address mass unemployment. State and county government funds and private sector money simply could not solve such a huge social problem.

W.L. Mackenzie King's nineteen-page letter of April 26, 1915 to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. clearly articulated his understanding of the work-relief project and what aspects were essential to win over Rockefeller's support.⁴ Written from Trinidad, Colorado, much of the letter focused on measures put in place to protect RF funds from misuse, fraud, and waste. On February 22, a mass meeting was held in Trinidad in which a formal request was made for the RF's assistance in addressing the dire circumstances both in the coal fields surrounding Trinidad and in other mining districts throughout the state. At the time, reports of malnutrition and even starvation were commonplace in these mining areas. While Colorado offered no monetary support to relieve the situation, nevertheless, the governor did create the three-member Committee on Unemployment and Relief to work with the Rockefeller Foundation to organize and oversee the distribution of aid. This was the group that King corresponded with and, to a degree, negotiated with in order to guarantee the \$100,000 from the Foundation. King noted several positive interactions with the committee. He credited, for instance, the practice of direct and private communications between the committee and himself for the success in quickly reaching an agreement and obtaining the RF's support and funds. King mentioned numerous safeguards put in place to make best use of the Rockefeller Foundation's money such as paying only for road work, paying in vouchers good for only clothes and food, requiring multiple signatures on each voucher, using carbon duplicates on the vouchers, and limiting the number of days someone could receive relief. King clearly and repeatedly spelled out these and other measures in the April letter to assure John D. Rockefeller, Jr. that money would not be misused but would be allocated wisely.

A portion of King's letter also explained other appealing reasons to provide Rockefeller Foundation money for the relief of Colorado's unemployed miners. One aspect that impressed King was the mixture of private and public funds used in Trinidad to aid the unemployed. Prior to soliciting the involvement of the RF, businessmen in Trinidad had already used funds from the local chamber of commerce and county government to enact their own work-relief program. This small-scale, work-relief effort entailed work on nearby roads by unemployed miners, allocating donations from the business community and Las Animas County government funds to pay laborers and to supervise the work. King latched onto this concept of mixed funding and cooperation involving private and public

entities as a desirable model to replicate. The goal of the Committee on Unemployment and Relief, according to King, was, “not so much those of originating new plans as a systemizing and extending the organized efforts already commenced, and of devising ways and means whereby those might be carried out on a scale sufficiently comprehensive to adequately overtake the urgent need.”⁵ Evidently, King liked the idea of simply ratcheting up the existing organizational structure already in place in Trinidad and applying it to the rest of Colorado’s mining districts in the south, north, and mountains. King believed that this was not only a proven model, but possibly more importantly, that this organizational structure would encourage large amounts of both private and public funds to be used in the expanded seven-county work relief program.

In addition to this appealing organizational structure, King argued that the dual purpose of the enterprise – road building and relief – would make raising funds from both governments and the private sector easy. The “plan of relief which is not less a plan of road improvement” would make it easier to “secure funds from state and private sources in Colorado,” predicted King. The issue of relief, King believed, would strongly appeal to state and county governments as a “public benefit.”⁶ This welfare element would stabilize the needs of locally unemployed citizens until the economy improved or until at least seasonal jobs returned with the coming of summer. The hope was that with the arrival of warmer weather, unemployed miners and other workers could work in the state’s agricultural areas on the eastern plains. The road-building aspect, reasoned King, would strongly appeal to the private sector. King, in fact, used the term “Good Roads,” a phrase associated with Jacob Coxey’s 1894 campaign to have the federal government pay unemployed men to work on improving the nation’s shoddy road network.⁷ At the time, Coxey, and others, argued that his Good Roads program would benefit both labor and business during the deep economic depression of the 1890s. Unemployed laborers would benefit by once again receiving a steady paycheck, and businesses would benefit from the creation of more reliable and improved roads for commerce.⁸ Essentially, King believed that Colorado planned to implement a scaled-down version of Coxey’s plan. It would cover only seven counties within one state by having not the federal government, but rather having the private sector, county governments, and the state contributing funds to the

work-relief plan. At least that was the way King understood the plans of the Colorado Committee on Unemployment and Relief.

King's hope of an extensive public/private partnership proved overly optimistic. F. J. Radford of Trinidad, the chairman of the Committee on Unemployment and Relief, had devised this partnership plan and implemented it locally. Yet, Radford's scheme never proved as successful as King believed it had been in Trinidad. In the final report by the Committee on Unemployment and Relief, a tally of private donations lists Radford as the only person contributing funds to the work-relief project in Las Animas County. He gave a total of \$550.00 to the cause. This sole private donation, while generous, surely indicated more of an anomaly than a promising trend to build an expansion community-supported relief program on. And it appears that much, if not all, of Radford's donation occurred before the involvement of the Rockefeller Foundation. Only one other county, Boulder County, successfully collected private donations, a total of \$978.09. And like the circumstances in Las Animas, Boulder County had a representative, Albert A. Reed, serving on the Committee. Reed's service as the Committee's secretary, may have triggered community awareness resulting in the private contributions. For the other five remaining counties—Huerfano, Fremont, Gunnison, Garfield, and Weld—in which laborers worked and received assistance, however, no private funds were collected. The amount of private donations looks even more miniscule and disappointing when compared to the funds given by the Rockefeller Foundation. In all, the RF pledged \$100,000 and gave almost the full amount minus \$15.41.⁹ As a result, the Rockefeller Foundation funds accounted for 98.49 percent of all private donations for the entire three-month, work-relief program. As a consequence, there was no meaningful private funds raised for the work-relief project beyond the RF's funds. In many ways, this outcome is not surprising. Given the large amount of money available to the Rockefeller Foundation, its donation of almost \$100,000 had a very good prospect of dwarfing all other private contributions, which it did.

Not only did the private part of the public/private partnership not materialize beyond the Rockefeller Foundation funds, but the public part also did not emerge, or least did not emerge in the manner that King had anticipated. While King praised the idea of public/private partnership, the very structure of the relief plan

precluded any substantial public monetary involvement. Prior to the RF's participation, local workers and business leaders had approached the state to contribute funds, specifically the State Highway Commission. Yet, no funds from the Highway Commission or the state were made available. Governor George A. Carlson claimed that the state had no money to offer. The extent of state involvement only consisted of Governor Carlson sanctioning the three-member Committee on Unemployment and Relief, absent any state resources. The Committee members donated all their time and effort, and local newspapers likewise donated space for the Committee's publicity campaign to stimulate the economy. County governments did pay for supervision of the local road projects and provided needed tools, but that was the extent of public funds for most of the seven counties. Only in Las Animas and Huerfano Counties in southern Colorado did county governments contribute meaningful amounts to the work-relief program. Las Animas contributed almost \$32,000 and Huerfano chipped in nearly \$5,000.¹⁰ Yet, it seems as if these contributions were made in the weeks before the involvement of the Rockefeller Foundation, when those two counties ran a localized version of the relief project. In the end, the much hoped for private/public partnership that King noted never materialized from either the private sector or the public sector. The entire scheme for the seven-county, work-relief project rested solely on the Rockefeller Foundation's funding. Without these funds, the work-relief effort would not have existed.

While King clearly oversold aspects of Colorado's work-relief program, especially funding sources, he still noted some key underlining motivations for the project that probably got at the heart of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s reasons for supporting it. King wrote near the end of his April 26, 1915 letter of two underlying benefits of the enterprise. First, he mentioned the fact that "assisting the unemployed and their families in Colorado has meant very much to many hundreds of individuals in the State."¹¹ Indeed, destitute miners and their families, some reportedly suffering from starvation, clearly needed the food and clothing purchased with the vouchers earned from the road work. The work-relief project seemed to have successfully accomplished one of its main aims of providing some support until the economy improved or until seasonal jobs returned with summer's arrival. Second, King noted that the Rockefeller Foundation's support of the work scheme produced "good-will." King wrote that "over and above these material gains it has

meant an increase of good-will, the most valuable of all assets to Colorado at the present.”¹² Certainly Colorado had suffered pitched battles between strikers and business interests during the coal strike. Yet, the person who benefited most from this good will would not be the destitute miners and their families but rather it would be John D. Rockefeller, Jr. The Colorado work-relief program occurred after the Ludlow Massacre and before Rockefeller’s testimony for the United States Commission on Industrial Relations, chaired by Frank Walsh. And while JDR, Jr. seemed to have never mentioned the work-relief program to the Commission, still the Rockefeller Foundation’s funding and involvement surely improved attitudes toward him in Colorado’s mining districts. So, while the work-relief project definitely helped needy miners and their families, at the same time, it was part of a public-relations campaign to improve John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s severely tarnished public image.

¹George S. McGovern and Leonard F. Guttridge, *The Great Coalfield War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972); Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on the Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Priscilla Long, *Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America’s Bloody Coal Industry* (New York: Paragon House, 1989); Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

²Jonathan H. Rees, *Representation and Rebellion: The Rockefeller Plan at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, 1914–1942* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2010); Fawn-Amber Montoya, editor, *Making an American Workforce: The Rockefellers and the Legacy of Ludlow* (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2014).

³ Report, Committee on Unemployment and Relief (Denver: Smith-Brooks Printing, 1916).

⁴W.L. Mackenzie King to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 26 April 1915, Rockefeller Foundation, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 16, Folder 170, Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter, RAC), Sleepy Hollow, NY.

⁵W.L. Mackenzie King to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 26 April 1915, page 6, RAC.

⁶W.L. Mackenzie King to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 26 April 1915, page 17, RAC.

⁷W.L. Mackenzie King to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 26 April 1915, page 18, RAC.

⁸Carols A. Schwantes, *Coxey’s Army: An American Odyssey* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

⁹Report, Committee on Unemployment and Relief (Denver: Smith-Brooks Printing, 1916), page 47.

¹⁰Report, Committee on Unemployment and Relief, page 9.

¹¹W.L. Mackenzie King to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 26 April 1915, page 19, RAC.

¹²W.L. Mackenzie King to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 26 April 1915, page 19, RAC.