Castle Valley America
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Depression, 1930–1941

The story that has made the rounds more than any other about those days was about Omar shoplifting a small can of chili powder. We couldn’t get home for Thanksgiving one year, and, of course, had no money for holiday food. We did have beans and tomatoes and fifteen cents for a pound of hamburger. I hope we will be forgiven for that little infraction that made a Thanksgiving chili dinner a little more palatable.¹

—Helen E. Bunnell, wife of future Utah state senator

Studs Terkel, famous for his books of collected oral histories, had his own unfocused memories of the 1930s, of his youth. “That there are some who were untouched or, indeed, did rather well isn’t exactly news,” he wrote. “This has been true of all disasters. The great many were wounded, in one manner or another. It left upon them an ‘invisible scar,’ as Caroline Bird put it.”² Castle Valley, scarred already by the mining and farming depression of the 1920s, suffered further from spreading poverty and cyclical drought. Depression conditions became so severe, money so scarce, and human suffering so acute, that local residents actively sought federal aid, inviting in authorities whom they had previously avoided. From the 1930s onward, Castle Valley became more and more connected to the big, outside world, seeming smaller and less significant by comparison. Like its people, its future became more uncertain.

In Castle Valley, folks initially carried on much as they had for a decade, their long-standing poverty seemingly untouched by the Wall Street Crash. In 1930, the Thompson brothers opened a new coal mine in the walls of Price Canyon above Castle Gate, driving two inclines and constructing a modern tipple to handle it. Their New Peerless absorbed all their capital in its construction. Faced with a continuing depression, they had to close the mine in 1931.³
Green River soldiered on: farmers had expanded their melon crops and introduced sugar beets during the 1920s, bringing back Green River Melon Days in 1925 after several years without a celebration. By 1928, special trains had brought in visitors who enjoyed over forty tons of free melons. Egg production also increased due to commercialization of poultry operations. This expansion made them all the more vulnerable when agricultural prices dropped an average of forty percent between 1929–1933. Finally, beef prices fell and valley land turned more alkaline, so many livestock owners switched from cattle to sheep. But Castle Valley farmland values kept dropping.4

Even the Ku Klux Klan sold its property in one of the strangest land deals in American history. The Klan had acquired the hilltop at the south end of Gordon Creek Canyon which it had used for cross burnings. In February 1930, Carl Nyman, former KKK member, surveyed, subdivided, and platted this plot. Then, Glen Jackson, who had originally come from Tampa, Florida, probably as a Klan organizer, sold forty acres of it for $150 to a group of Slavic lodges filled with exactly the kind of foreigners that the Klan had loved to hate. Slovenian Martin Millarich and Croatian Anton Dupin, respectively president and secretary of the Austrian Central Cemetery Association, received the land transfer in time for the first burial: Dupin’s twenty-one-year-old daughter, Annie, a tuberculosis victim. Meanwhile, Jackson had become good friends with John and Louis Kosec, sons of Slovenian immigrants, as they worked side-by-side in the mines. So in 1930, he gave John Kosec his old electric Klan cross, which folded up and fit nicely into a box for easy transportation to the next rally, frequently held in the field below the cemetery hill. Kosec’s oldest boy later took some of the red lights out of the cross and substituted green; for decades the cross hung on the front of their house in Spring Glen, lit up every year as a Christmas decoration.5

After the Great Crash, President Herbert Hoover had led a conservative approach to recovery. A self-made man, he hesitated to provide massive federal aid since he believed it would weaken the country’s moral fiber. Businessmen and workers, scared by the continuing slump, failed to cooperate. As voluntarism fizzled and the economy sank to its lowest depths in 1932, Hoover sponsored the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to give banks easy credit in order to jump-start the economy. This program briefly bolstered what was left of America’s banking system, but did nothing to ease the Depression. In the elections that fall, the Democrats swept into office nationwide, including Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) as president. Utah’s Republican stalwart, Reed Smoot, lost. His Senate career was over.6

By then, the Great Depression had come to Castle Valley. It reached its nadir during the winter of 1932–1933, before Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inauguration the following March. “There was no work!” remembered Helper’s Ann Slavensky Spensko. “If people are getting laid off and they say, well, where are we going to get work? There was no work to go to.”7
Price’s Helen Bunnell felt particularly badly for her parents, who finally had to abandon their farm in 1934. “Four children, a couple of month’s supply of canned food and farm produce, and $1,000 were all they had to show for five year’s hard work on the farm and twenty-three years of married life.” Not everyone had to leave. Eva Westover Conover survived the Depression on a “small, run-down farm, three miles up the canyon from the town of Ferron,” bought by her husband, Harry Conover, whom she married in 1933. He had found a job at Mohrland but lost his right eye in an industrial accident the first day on the job. His settlement money paid for the farm, and Eva counted herself lucky that the house lacked electricity, a telephone, and running water, so they had no utility bills to pay. She remembered seeing “entire families riding freight cars. . . . People lost whatever was not paid for, their cars, their homes, their farms, lost all they’d struggled a lifetime for.” Some of those who rode the rails stopped at the Bee Cafe in Helper, begun by Japanese immigrant Masaki Okura and partners who had left Mohrland as workdays dwindled. “While the train loaded up,” remembered his daughter, “we would all rush around like mad and get them fed and then they would leave without paying. Other times we would have nothing to do but sit around.” After a year they sold out and opened a restaurant in Price, catering mostly to the local trade.

When FDR came into office, he faced similar financial distress all across the country. He immediately declared a “bank holiday,” closing all banks nationwide until, after investigation, only the sound ones could reopen. Green River’s Commonwealth Bank, the town’s third, had begun with great hopes in the mini-oil boom of 1921. It closed on March 5, 1933, during the bank holiday. After paying depositors in full, it stayed closed. Two other local banks had already reorganized. The Emery County Bank, founded by Manti sheepman and Orangeville winter resident James Crawford, Jr., had opened in 1906 and had operated successfully ever since. Farther north, in the early 1920s Wallace Lowry had helped found the Carbon County Bank to provide more sympathetic treatment to fellow sheepmen than the old First National Bank. In February 1932, directors of the Emery and Carbon institutions agreed on a merger, becoming the Carbon-Emery Bank with $633,000 in assets and preserving all their depositors’ savings.

To restore public confidence, Roosevelt began broadcasting his famous radio Fireside Chats. His first Hundred Days ended with the creation of the New Deal and its original plethora of federal agencies: the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA); the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA); the Civil Works Administration (CWA); the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC); the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA); and the New Deal’s centerpiece, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). Labor delighted in the passage of the NIRA in June 1933. Its famous Section 7(a) contained three major provisions working people had long been fighting for: employees could organize in groups of their own choosing
and elect representatives with whom business must bargain collectively, no one seeking work could be forced into a company union nor be prohibited from joining a labor union (the end of the “yellow dog” contract), and employers had to comply with maximum hours, minimum wages, and other conditions of employment stipulated by the president. Other sections of the act protected business in an attempt to insure reasonable profits, prevent unfair competition, and avoid overproduction, while compelling companies to pay a living wage. Unionization and collective bargaining had just become legal. Nationwide, miners’ expectations for a better life soared.

Even before the passage of the NIRA, the coal industry began changing. The Anaconda Copper Company switched from coke to natural gas for smelting, closing out one major buyer for the Castle Valley product. Back East, disaffected members of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) felt that they had been sold out by John L. Lewis in the 1927–1928 strike in Pennsylvania and Ohio. They formed the militant National Miners Union (NMU) to lead “the miners’ struggles against the capitalist owners of the mining industry, and their agents, for better working and living conditions . . . to participate in the struggle for abolishing the capitalist system and replace it by socialism.” In May 1933, NMU organizers arrived in the Castle Valley coal fields. Their union tried to spread its appeal among entire families. Organizers rented the Millarich Hall for their rallies, created a women’s auxiliary and a youth section, and sponsored Saturday night dances and Sunday meetings. They also relied on the silver tongue of leaders like Charles Guynn, Charles Weatherbee, and Paul Crouch. “Charles Guynn had what they call charisma now. He could really put it across,” remembered Frances Dupin Vouk. “Once we went to a dance up at what used to be the roller rink . . . out of Spring Glen on the highway, and they had this big symbol, this Communist symbol, with this sheaf of wheat. . . . They didn’t do that until they got everyone really interested.”

At that point, some people left the NMU. Some stayed, not caring if the union was communist or not. While Helper mayor Frank Porter refused to take sides, Price mayor Rolla West branded every NMU supporter a Communist and forbade the organization to march in the July Fourth parade, which alternated between the two towns. Incensed, NMU parents pulled their children out of the Carbon High School marching band, which had just won first place honors at the national competition and marched in the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair Parade. If the parents couldn’t march in Price, neither could their newly-returned children.

Breaking up the band underscored how divisive the Strike of 1933 had become. Band participation and competition had long helped unify not only the diverse communities of Castle Valley, but had helped connect this isolated corridor with the rest of Utah and the region. Children joined the Price band from every coal town in the region (except Mohrland, whose children went to school in Emery County), riding buses from Columbia,
Standardville, Latuda, and elsewhere to board in Price and study at Carbon High. Edgar M. “Toot” Williams, an Emery County native and the Carbon High School music director since 1923, had brought his students to a nationally recognized pinnacle with considerable local support. With the backing of the Price Chamber of Commerce and the cooperation of the entire area, throughout which people opened their homes to visiting musicians, Price had begun hosting the Intermountain Music Meet in 1931, welcoming bands from other Utah towns and from western Colorado. By 1932, Price hosted thirty-two bands with 1,450 students. In the state contest at Logan that year, the Carbon High School band won the right to represent Utah and Region Ten at the national competition at Evanston, Illinois. There, in 1933, although the smallest band there, they were “acclaimed by the judge as the greatest marching unit ever to enter a national contest,” according to the Price Sun Advocate. Dorr Williams Hanson, who played clarinet in his Uncle Edgar’s band, rated the Chicago trip a highlight of his early life. Thelma Mathis Jewkes, who chaperoned the students, credited Williams with their success not only for his insistence on music and drilling, but because he never let the students run around in their uniforms and made sure they were well fed and well rested. While Castle Valley missed seeing these champions that July Fourth, the Intermountain Meet returned to Price in April 1934, drawing a number of bands second only to the national competition. Williams worked on the state patriotic music committee.
in World War II, and music meets continued on and off until 1953, drawing together a community periodically split by mine disputes, different backgrounds, religions, and social classes. But well into the twentieth century, everybody loved bands.19

In 1933, bitterness continued escalating after the July Fourth parade fiasco. Some NMU members felt unfairly accused of violence. Stressing that they worked peacefully, John Spensko remembered, “We [even] went down here to Emery County mines . . . to Huntington and down in Salina.” The men parked their trucks on the county road (public property) “and when a truck comes we’d stop them and we’d talk to them and tell them, . . . ‘Don’t go up there and get that coal, if you want to join with us! . . . But they wouldn’t listen.”20 When local coal companies cut miners’ wages in defiance of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation’s rules, miners, in general, became more pro-union. One local mine boss even took young Remo Spigarelli aside and said, “I’ll tell you, you’ll be better off belonging to a union than without it. . . . Of course, I can’t say what I feel [publicly] . . . but’ he says, ‘We’re not stupid enough not to know that organization is the best thing.”21 The UMWA’s John L. Lewis, hearing of NMU inroads in the Castle Valley coal fields, started his own, belated recruiting drive. But the NMU was gaining steam. With a prelude of two quick strikes at Mutual in August 1933, on Labor Day many miners walked out for good, with standoffs centering on Gordon Creek, Spring Canyon, Castle Gate, and Kenilworth.22

In subsequent months, the competition between the NMU and the UMWA, and between strikers and strike-breakers, drove deep wedges between Castle Valley’s people. In general, the Helper area and the South Slavs (Croatians, Slovenes, and Serbs) supported the NMU. Price, the American Legion, and Carbon County government sided with the UMWA. Italians, Greeks, native-born Americans, and other ethnic groups were split. The divisions became so bitter that, in August, UMWA members, armed with pick handles, rifles, and shotguns, tried to break the NMU picket line in Spring Canyon and Gordon Creek. The UMWA also joined the local power structure in successfully requesting Utah’s Governor Blood to send in the National Guard and cooperated in aiding the coal companies: the only known instance of such an “unholy alliance” in American labor history.23 UMWA flyers secretly distributed at the coal camps read, in part:

Please do not mistake the United Mine Workers of America for the National Miners’ Union which is now in your midst blowing their trumpets of discord. . . . The United Mine Workers of America is really an American institution, working under American ideals and ideals. . . . The National Miners’ Union, on the contrary . . . [follows] policies dictated from Moscow, Soviet Russia . . . [and] is a menace to the coal miners, to the coal industry, and to our nation.24

The ghost of the old Red Scare walked again.
Soon, newly-deputized UMWA members moved in against NMU strikers at the Gordon Creek camps, joined by the National Guard. At Consumers, strikers had barricaded the road with railroad ties, mattresses, and a truck. Women joined men guarding the entrance to the camp, and when the women caught superintendent David Parmley (also chair of the Carbon County Commissioners) trying to leave, six big Slavic women seized and disarmed him, then held him down and peed on him in a typical old-country insult. Parmley soon reached the shelter of the approaching deputies. When a dozen NMU hotheads followed him down the canyon, the first three of them were felled by punches from Bill Stapley, the Mormon bishop of Castle Gate who had replaced Bishop Thomas, killed in the 1924 explosion. The bested NMU sympathizers escaped back up the canyon, and Stapley was known as “Bill the fighting Bishop” ever after. At nightfall, the posse took down the barriers and proceeded to Consumers, where a group of deputies stayed to patrol the camp. The next day, they made military preparations to take Spring Canyon.

As the strike began, Joe Myers had come back from California after suffering an injury that ended his professional baseball career. He went to visit the Spring Canyon picket line where his mother and other Austrian women helped picket and feed the strikers. Meanwhile, lawmen began massing from all over the state. Walt Borla recalled seeing a “plane . . . flying around.” He added, “I always remember sitting in the front yard, ‘cause we lived off the highway, and watching those old Model-A patrol cars . . . I bet I counted about sixty . . . as they went by.” He worried about his father up on the Spring Canyon picket line. “Pretty soon over the hill he came, over that tunnel. And he came down through those fields and came home and I was so relieved.” The clash had started. At Spring Canyon, the National Guard began lobbing tear gas canisters at the strikers, whom, they claimed, were on company property. Myers, with his great baseball arm, picked up one of the canisters and threw it right back at the soldiers. After a scuffle, he was arrested and locked up in the bullpen with over two hundred other men, “and I wasn’t even working here!” he remembered. For a full day, the men in the bullpen were denied food, water, and blankets as the Carbon County deputies concentrated on cleaning up Helper. After twenty-four hours, the prisoners got food and coffee. After forty-eight hours, Price mayor Rolla West led seven truckloads of deputies into Helper, made searches of NMU-affiliated houses without warrants, and arrested Charles Guynn and Charles Weatherbee, talking his posse out of a plan to lynch the NMU organizers. Most of the previously arrested men stayed in the Price bullpen; some, together with Guynn and Weatherbee, were booked into the Price city jail.

Two weeks after the raid on Spring Canyon, the state championship baseball game was scheduled to be played in Helper, the best ballpark in all of Castle Valley. Due to the strike and resultant ordinances forbidding public meetings, the game was transferred to Provo. Joe Myers, still in jail, was on the Helper championship team. Popular Carbon County Sheriff
Marion Bliss, the only Republican elected in the county in 1932 (and the last for quite a while) offered deputies his car to take Myers to Provo. Myers rejected the whole idea: “bring me up in the sheriff’s car with bayonets and [they think] I’m going to play ball? I said, ‘You either let me go on my own, or I’m not going.’” So the Helper mayor put up $5,000 bail so Myers could get out of jail. Sheriff Bliss lent Myers his car. Myers drove to Provo, played in the ball game, “drove back, parked the car and knocked on his [Bliss’s] door, and he put me back in the cell.” (The Bliss family lived adjacent to the courthouse and jail.) “Bliss says, ‘I sure hate . . . to do this to you, Joe . . . but you know the law’s the law.’ . . . Mrs. Bliss kind of liked me,” Myers continued, so “Marion used to come over and say, ‘Joe, somebody outside wants to talk to you. It’s important.’ He’d take me back into the kitchen. . . . And she used to let me eat with the family. . . . But they booked me for criminal syndicalism. That’s a felony!”28 Myers, however, was released without trial and only learned of the charges years later when his sister, working at the county courthouse, found the old records. By then, Myers was a World War II veteran and Helper’s police chief. Meanwhile, humane Sheriff Bliss was killed in a disorganized shoot-out in 1945.29

After the NMU organizers went to jail, a peaceful march down Price Main Street to protest their incarceration ended in a fire hose and tear gas attack by armed county deputies. J. Bracken Lee, later Price City mayor and subsequently Utah’s governor, filmed the melee from a nearby rooftop. Some liberal Salt Lake City Mormons compared the terrorizing of the NMU members to the terrorizing of U.S. marshals ferreting out cohabts over a generation earlier. In subsequent trials of NMU organizers for criminal syndicalism, one of the former deputies served as jury foreman but no mistrial resulted. Instead, the defendant was found guilty, although the conviction was set aside and the case remanded on appeal. Investigative articles in Salt Lake’s Deseret News never appeared. In the words of historian Helen Papanikolas, “The organizers’ trials. . . . crushed the NMU. . . . From the day the UMWA and management signed their agreement [bringing in the union], Carbon County ascended in union affairs.” Price became the headquarters of District 22 covering Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado; it remains so today.30 The Strike of 1933 made other changes in Castle Valley. It thoroughly discredited the NMU, while the United Mine Workers and its members became more popular. Frank Bonacci, long-time UMWA organizer whose family had suffered so at Kenilworth in 1922, was elected to the Utah State Senate in 1936 and for five terms thereafter.31 Nationally, the unionization process took longer. In 1935, the Supreme Court overturned the NIRA, forcing Congress to repass it in modified form. On its second try, the Wagner Act passed the judicial test.32 Utah responded quickly to solidify labor’s gains: it became one of five states nationally to approve a statewide labor relations law modeled on the Wagner Act.35 Nonetheless, the 1933 strike left an uncomfortable bitterness in Castle Valley. Almost half a century later,
Joe Myers asked, “How would you feel if you worked in a mine with me and I was on the picket line and you packed a gun for the company? How would you feel?” Speaking of a recently deceased neighbor and former strike deputy, he added, “For years and years nobody would have nothing to do with him. . . . Up to this day . . . [certain people] don’t even talk to each other. . . . and that don’t happen in Carbon County. But it did.”

The strike’s bitterness soon became drowned in the desperation of the Great Depression. As livelihoods dried up and mine workdays dwindled, municipalities and counties, as well as individuals, faced ruin. People without work could pay fewer and fewer taxes. In the midst of the strike, the state had attempted to boost county coffers with new legislation that transferred to them a share of the coal royalty (lease) payments that the federal government returned to the states. In November, 1933, for example, Carbon County had almost $17,300 extra income, which its commissioners earmarked for roads, bridges, and schools. But the mining sector was becoming increasingly unstable as a 1936 study of the Utah coal industry showed. Mines had long overcapitalized and, by 1934, produced over eighty percent more coal than the existing market could absorb. Demand disappeared as railroads turned to diesel; homes to electricity. Although twenty-nine percent of the nation’s electricity was generated by coal, even electrical demands had dropped from 1927 to 1934. Freight rates for coal remained high, and a national fuel economy movement, stabilized population growth rate, and environmental concerns about smelter smoke all hurt the coal market.

As the Depression worsened, U.S. Fuel, like the other companies, struggled to keep its highly seasonal workforce intact. It began the innovative practice of working Mohrland and Hiawatha on alternate months so everyone earned half a paycheck. People did what they could to survive. For example, the family of Albert Vogrenic spent Mohrland’s off months on Joe Penovich’s farm near Consumers. They swapped labor for cabbages and potatoes, getting a few wiener pigs as well, so they did not starve. After doing other odd jobs, Vogrenic started mining coal for forty-three cents a ton, but when summer came his workdays almost ended. The company finally gave up working the mines on alternating months. Mohrland closed in 1938, when U.S. Fuel decided to take the coal out through tunnels connected to Hiawatha. Emery County lost its only large, commercial coal mine to date and individuals scrambled for whatever work they could find. Newly married, Vogrenic went down to the farm of his wife’s folks, the Oviatts, in Elmo. Her father and brothers taught him how to farm.

Mohrland’s demise hit the county’s coffers particularly hard. During 1931–1934, Emery County could collect only about three-fourths of its taxes, and hard-pressed residents banded together to form local Tax Reform Leagues. Green River, seeking better access to government, made particularly strong demands. Its residents had to drive through Price (the Carbon
County seat) to get to Castle Dale (the Emery County seat), while Moab (the Grand County seat) was half the distance of that to Castle Dale. Consequently, Green River wanted to be annexed to Grand County. Restructuring counties, in Utah, remains a virtual impossibility, but Green River’s dilemma was finally ameliorated in 1938 when the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built a cutoff road roughly following the Old Spanish Trail that reduced the distance from Green River to Castle Dale by almost half. The road is still in use. Other Depression-era road projects done with state and federal funding greatly improved Castle Valley’s internal communications and did a small bit to help alleviate crushing poverty. In 1932, workers paved Highway 10 all the way from Price to Huntington and realigned and rebuilt the road from Woodside some fifteen miles northwest to Icelander Wash. Two years later, pavement of Highway 10 extended to Castle Dale and of Highways 50 and 6 from Green River to Woodside. Castle Valley’s main north-south artery gradually received a complete upgrade: Highway 10 pavement reached Ferron in 1938 and Emery in 1941, while the spur to Orangeville was paved in 1940.

Even if one could find work, wages remained dismal, even in the newly-unionized mines. Before Mohrland closed, Remo Spigarelli earned just over three dollars there for an eight-hour shift loading coal. Consequently, he (like others) sometimes doubled back for a second continuous shift despite the physical toll of working sixteen straight hours shoveling coal. Brandishing his pay statements for March and April 1934, he later explained, “We didn’t work March. So you see, the Medical Department was a dollar and a half [per month], but they took off three dollars [for March and April], and the rent of course was ten bucks!. . . . And there is ten more dollars [rent deducted]. And the Welfare Association was a dollar a month, so two dollars, now that’s the store, $27.03 and our union dues was $3.00, a dollar and a half a month. I made a total of $55.03, and my take-home pay was 54 cents, for two months!”

Life was no better on the farms. As Castle Valley’s jobs dwindled, the Great Depression drove almost forty percent of Emery County families to federal relief. Ironically, some natives had worse problems elsewhere and came home. For example, Huntington’s Willard Sandberg, a son of miller Olaf Sandberg, had left Castle Valley for college and an LDS mission. For eight years, he had been at a New York bank with “7,500 employees,” he remembered, “and they let 2,500 go at one crack.” He came back to Huntington, started in the mill, and remained until 1970, replacing his father as miller. Clawson actually grew during the Depression. People took over all available housing—sometimes even two families to a dwelling—because there they could grow a garden to survive. Many folks stayed put and made do. Karl Seely of Castle Dale creatively juggled his assets when the price of wool went from forty-seven cents per pound to nothing. Under rigorous bank loan restrictions, he bartered old ewes for coal, lumber, oats, lettuce,
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his daughter’s dance lessons, and other commodities to keep himself and his herdsmen going. And he paid off the loan. Mohrland’s closure also allowed people to buy the surplus, wood-frame, four-room, camp houses and have them hauled away by teams, so they could use the lumber or place the houses on new foundations where they competed with other Depression-era homes built with sweat, barter, and ingenuity, yielding a frugal comfort.43

 Everyone practiced daily economies, regardless of background or social standing. As Helen Bunnell of Price explained, she “cooked and canned and sewed and made over, turned collars and put hems up and down, relined coats, and patched sheets. Instructions to my sister to ‘double the recipe and use one egg’ became a family joke. Using up the annual supply of venison was also a family tradition, but no joke.”44 For all that, she also joined Price’s selective New Century Club, formed in 1933 (before the Bunnells came home). Founding members created this women’s literary, entertainment, and community service organization, admitting only a portion of those who applied until its demise in 1985. It and its predecessor, the Literary League, both had roots in the old Woman’s Club of the 1920s. Bunnell surmised that “the club probably provided an outlet for the energies of some young women who were being prevented by the Depression from going away to college,” the closest one got to being “elite” in Castle Valley.45

 At home, Bunnell’s economizing efforts were paralleled by those of her husband, future state Senator Omar Bunnell. Usually, he worked “patching up used cars and performing other odd jobs for his dad’s foundering automobile business, selling Fuller brushes, and raising sugar beets for a couple of summers. . . . Actually, the most profitable work he had during that time was not raising sugar beets—a New Deal program that really helped us.”46 She referred to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), which attempted to eliminate farm surpluses by paying farmers to reduce production until “parity prices” (those earned during World War I) were attained. In Utah overall, the AAA paid out over half a million dollars during fiscal 1933–1934 alone, or approximately one dollar per person. The Soil Conservation Service also had a major Castle Valley impact. Conditions got so bad that in 1936, local farmers invited the federal government to help, and in 1948, the Huntington Soil Conservation District became the second in the state of Utah.47

 Castle Valley’s rangelands also demanded stricter conservation, although they had already been regulated for decades. By 1934, however, the local livestock industry teetered on the brink of extinction due to one of Castle Valley’s periodic freeze-drought cycles. First, in the winters of 1931–1932 and 1932–1933, severe cold and snowfall had killed thousands of sheep on Castle Valley’s rangelands. Then, the blessedly mild winter of 1933–1934 became a scorching summer drought. Instead of the usual thirteen inches, Utah’s annual precipitation for 1934 equaled just over nine inches for the state as a whole; only two inches fell at Hanks ville, just
southeast of Castle Valley. All over the range, springs dried up and forage withered. Stock died. Moore received limited help through Utah’s drought relief fund, which paid to raise the dam that fed the irrigation canal and financed construction of a large storage cistern on a plateau above the town, allowing piped-in culinary water. To save their stock, desperate ranchers began agreeing to further federal regulation. James Allred, speaking for many of his neighbors, opined that lands near Cleveland suffered from considerable overgrazing “due to grazing in the summer as well as winter making it necessary to feed stock in the winter much heavier” than previously. Consequently, Castle Valley ranchers generally accepted the federal 1934 Taylor Grazing Act, sponsored by Utah Representative Don B. Colton (although he had left Congress by the time it passed). Designed to regularize use of federal grasslands, it impressed Preston Nutter, who with control over 180,000 acres (281 square miles) owned Castle Valley’s—and Utah’s—largest privately-held cattle ranch. He appreciated “its intent to stabilize the livestock industry,” according to his daughter, Virginia Price. Historian Carl Abbott noted, “Within two years, the Taylor Act removed 142 million acres of western lands from potential sale and reserved them for grazing under federal control. . . . The new Grazing Service of the Department of the Interior was to lease grazing rights at reasonable rates while controlling use of the fragile rangelands.” The Taylor Act also superseded a clutch of federal homestead laws, ending “forever the fantasy of free public land, and the hope of someday ‘proving up’ on a picturesque homestead,” in the words of historian Stanford J. Layton. By 1935, that long-lived fantasy had been largely swallowed by Depression realities. Hard-pressed Castle Valley stockmen consequently also embraced the livestock program of the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation, which purchased unwanted animals (usually culls), paid for their slaughter, and allowed the unemployed to pick up the meat, free of charge. Over five thousand head of Castle Valley cattle and several thousand head of sheep came off the range under this plan. Unnecessary animals, particularly wild horses, had to be eliminated. Harry Mahleres noted that some Greek sheepmen, rather than buy permits for iffy federal rangelands, had purchased their own acreage to run their stock. “In this way,” he added, “the sheepmen have entrenched themselves here, especially in Carbon County.”

The 1930s freeze-drought cycle not only killed animals, it destroyed farms inhabited by thousands of desperate people driven home or to a neighbor’s place to try to weather the Great Depression. Weather conditions dropped irrigation water to less than a quarter of the normal supply. In southern Castle Valley, around Emery and Moore (formerly Rochester), eighty-five percent of the crops died, leading to an almost total unemployment rate by the end of 1934. Crops also failed at Cleveland. Ferron’s water system sporadically went dry. Castle Dale’s flowed so sluggishly that residents received emergency typhoid immunizations to protect them from a
disease known to be spread in bad water. Federal records revealed that during 1934–1935, in Carbon County, where the mines barely scraped along, over 3,900 families lived on 408 farms which received eighty federal loans totaling over $52,000. In Emery County, almost 1,500 families on 924 farms received 140 loans for $25,000 in the federal drought relief program. This local dependence on federal relief funds exemplified Utah’s acceptance of “the economics of ambivalence,” a phrase coined by historian Wayne K. Hinton to describe the attitudinal reversal in a state previously highly suspicious of federal “meddling.”

In addition to those that helped livestock and farming, other New Deal agencies made a lasting impact on Castle Valley, particularly the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The WPA, part of the Second New Deal inaugurated in 1935, made practical improvements at Clawson where it hired virtually every man in town to gravel streets and sidewalks. Overall, however, it had its greatest influence in art. Nationally, it hired artists and provided them with materials; it also arranged locations for muralists in an attempt to promote art education and provide community service. Utah received approval to hire 15,000 heads of families; by November 1935, the state’s monthly WPA payroll exceeded $1,000,000. Helper first took advantage of this largesse, applying for a WPA grant to create an art center. Its leaders agreed to spend $250 to remodel the civic auditorium and to pay $25 per month for an exhibitor fee. As a result, Helper acquired a traveling art exhibit that, in the first three weeks, attracted 3,057 people to a town of only 2,700. Price, not to be outdone, also sent in a grant proposal and thus Castle Valley became home to two of the four art centers in Utah (the other two being Salt Lake City and Provo). Helper also utilized New Deal funds to construct an underpass connecting Main Street to Janet Street under the railroad, opening up the east side of town for further development and greatly improving access to the city park. The new Helper Junior High School, another Depression-era project, greatly relieved crowding at the old Central School (which burned down in 1965, to be replaced by Sally Mauro Elementary School). Finally, in 1937, the WPA funded construction of the Helper Post Office from construction plans identical to others used nationwide (to save time and money), but financed a distinctive mural of a “typical western town” by Jene Magafan on the interior.

In Price, Carbon County artist Lynn Faucett earned $1,600 to paint another mural on the top half of the new WPA-funded Price Municipal Building. Laboring from 1938–1941, Faucett created a pictorial history of early Price. He included such figures as Caleb Rhoades, Abraham Powell, Chinese railroad workers, business people, religious leaders, educators, coal miners, and his own blind grandfather being led by the artist as a boy. Simultaneously, Faucett achieved a “dramatic turning point” in his artistic career, painting three more WPA murals which led to commissions in Salt Lake City, New
York, and elsewhere.\footnote{60} Other WPA workers in Utah also worked on roads, other public buildings, sidewalks, flood control, insect eradication, and recreational facilities, to name a few.

In the mid-1930s, the federal government not only added new programs but expanded projects around since the First New Deal. One example of this continuity was the long-lived CCC, signed into law in April 1933. It had come to Castle Valley the following month with the arrival of the first thirty men of Company 959 at Joe’s Valley. Eventually numbering two hundred, of which about fifty came from Emery County, they united to fight the biggest fire ever on the Manti Forest in the droughty summer of 1934. “I’ll never forget the night a week after the fire started,” remembered a former CCC man. “We was lying in bed during a light drizzle hoping it would bail out a good rain, and it did. No one cared if his bed and person got wet, if we could only get the fire under control.” They did, earning an unprecedented eight-day leave thereafter.\footnote{61} Company 959 left in the winter of 1934, worked on various Utah projects (such as building the Skyline Drive and the Huntington-Fairview Road over the Wasatch Plateau), and returned to the area three years later. Meanwhile, the CCC established other camps near the coal mine in Dog Valley, south of Emery; at Castle Dale; at Green River, and at Price, mostly to build roads. Ferron received a year-round camp built in the town park under local supervision with locally-milled lumber, a real boon to the economy. Since all CCC participants had to be unmarried, unemployed men from the ages of seventeen to twenty-five whose parents were on relief, romances flourished. Bill Anderton, who wed Ferron’s Genevieve Funk, later remarked, “We could [have] control[led] the elections in Ferron by telling our wives how to vote because so many of us
married Ferron girls”—assuming the wives would have obliged them. Oth-
er benefits came to the Price Steam Laundry of Angelo Georgedes, who had learned to make soap in his native Greece. To survive the Depression, Georgedes bid successfully against state-wide competitors for the CCC laun-
dry contract, then had to collect blankets and sheets over a 1,300–mile route in Utah and parts of Nevada, Wyoming, Colorado, and Arizona. Locally, in addition to fire-fighting and road-building, the CCC terraced hillsides to prevent erosion, marked several mountain trails, built the swing-
ing bridge over the San Rafael River, prepared picnic grounds, built fences and ranger dwellings, and otherwise promoted conservation, sending (by law) $25 of the $30 earned monthly home to their parents.

These federally-funded local improvements, valuable though they were, did nothing to help Castle Valley’s always-marginal farmlands. Northern Castle Valley farmers had been struggling with recurrent water problems ever since the Gooseberry Dam went out in 1917. In 1921, A. W. Horsley, Henry Mathis, and others had organized the Price River Water Conserva-
tion District to purchase a new reservoir site in Pleasant Valley, relocate the old railroad, and build a new dam. The Horsley Dam at Pleasant Valley was finished in 1926, its construction funded by $750,000 worth of bonds bought (mostly at a discount) by area farmers, miners, and town residents. Castle Valley, then caught in one of its periodic droughts, could not fill the reservoir until the spring of 1928, by which time the dam’s earth fill had dried out. As the reservoir filled, the earth cracked and settled. Water
poured through holes in the dam’s face. The watchman sent out a flood alarm; men rushed to the dam, opening outlet gates to their fullest as the water slowly lowered. The dam held, but the local irrigation district could not handle the extensive repairs needed.⁶⁶

Although a state committee made basic improvements that kept the Scofield dam functional for over a decade, only federal money could finance a new dam. This seemed an ideal New Deal project since big dams became major federal pets during the Great Depression. Nationwide, they provided multiple benefits: mainly flood control, irrigation, and electrification. In the East, the government originated the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA); in the West, it sponsored Boulder (Hoover) Dam. Both of these grew on politicized foundations. Private utilities fumed impotently as the federal government built the “socialistic” TVA, still a model for developing nations. Hoover Dam had been affected by the Teapot Dome scandal of 1924, which had led the Interior Department to abandon the use of federal employees in preference for outside contractors. The low bid on Hoover Dam—by almost ten million dollars—came from the Six Companies, a consortium which included brothers Edmund O. and William H. Wattis, who owned (together with the Eccles family) the Utah Construction Company, target of the 1913 IWW strike. They also owned the Wattis coal mine in southwest Carbon County, but had long invested their Castle Valley earnings elsewhere. For example, in California, they built Yosemite’s highly controversial Hetch Hetchy dam, the only such structure ever erected in a national park.⁶⁷ Among the others connected with the Six Companies, entrepreneur Henry Kaiser would soon have a major impact on Castle Valley, drawing rural Utah ever closer into the national economic net. One of Teancum Pratt’s grandsons joined the rush to build Hoover Dam, attracted by wages of about fifty cents an hour for unskilled labor and about seventy-five cents for skilled carpenters.⁶⁸ He found “a forbidding hole . . . [to become] the mighty daddy of all dams,” but did not stay long in this world of shanties, dynamite explosions, and heat prostration.⁶⁹ After four years of struggle, effort, and human misery, officials dedicated Hoover Dam in September 1935.⁷⁰

Despite its desperate water needs, no such grand plan touched Castle Valley, where, by the mid-1930s, most farms along the Price River had become so unproductive that an estimated three-quarters were subject to foreclosure. The federal Resettlement Administration of the FSA took note of this dismal situation and seriously considered buying out 17,000 farmable acres, reorganizing the nineteen local canal companies (the major stumbling block), and resettling 250 families on the only 70 arable acres left by 1936. To assess the situation first-hand, both the Western Regional Director, Jonathan Garst, and the Regional Labor Advisor, Paul Schuster Taylor, visited northern Castle Valley, accompanied by photographer Dorothea Lange. Her unflattering photographs of snowy Consumers coal camp each
bear the phrase, “controlled by absentee capital,” to underscore the Resettlement Administration’s view that the miners’ only chance for improvement came from federally funded homes and subsistence farms.71 (Two years later, its back to the economic wall, Consumers closed abruptly in the spring of 1938, after hiring new miners that very morning. The buildings were sold and carted off; the iron tracks torn up and sold to Japan.72) In 1936, based on the FSA study, the Price River Reclamation Project manager concluded that water was the main problem and made “some very startling discoveries” (to a government employee) that the farmers with the poorest lands owed the most back taxes.73 Officials also noted the unsettling economic affect of the coal industry’s volatility and pinpointed problems associated with handling a highly diverse population “from the standpoint of nationality.” Director Garst also observed that “some of this land is rapidly being spotted by the infiltration of alkali caused by irrigation and poor drainage,” officially recording what Castle Valley residents had known for generations. Finally, remarking that “the income of the Price River area comes largely from the range livestock, mines and railways; so the community is not entirely dependent upon the irrigated area,” the Resettlement Administration put the project on hold.74 A local 1937 attempt to revive it received little better than a form letter, stating, “It is regretted that the project . . . could not have been included in our present program.”75

While the federal government shelved the Castle Valley resettlement effort, the state stepped in to foster local education. In 1937, after considerable lobbying, the Utah Legislature passed an act to create a junior college at Price. Carbon College, built for just under $200,000, began operating in the fall of 1938 on the site of the old baseball field used as a bullpen in the strikes of 1922 and 1933. The first year, it enrolled 731 students who could take technical, mine-related instruction as well as the usual range of academic courses. Thereafter, the federal government boosted the college technical program through the National Youth Administration (NYA), which hired 100 local youth (and students) to make additions on the vocational building.76 As the college readied for opening, an official contacted Leonard Shield, then working at Rolapp as a night welder and mechanic. Shield, born in Sunnyside of English parents in 1907, welcomed the professed instructional job although he had spent the 1930s trying to develop a mine of his own. After being laid off at Kenilworth, he had accompanied his father, William, a former assistant state coal mine inspector, in walking across the face of the Book Cliffs eastward from Deadman Canyon, tracing a known coal vein. At Soldier Canyon, the potentially workable vein disappeared, hidden by dirt slides. The men laboriously dug a trench along the mountainside, uncovering seven veins of coal, from six inches to twelve feet thick. Initially working with his father, brother, and Charlie Baker, Shield hauled coal to Price in a truck during the winter of 1931–1932 until he got hired back at Standard. Then he went to Los Angeles for training in
welding and diesel mechanics, and later in Cleveland, Ohio—certification later crucial to his college job. In 1940, Shield became a full-time college welding instructor, selling his coal lease to Andrew Marinoni who eventually sold it to California Portland Cement.77

By the time Shield began teaching, all eyes had turned to world events. Fascism had spread through Europe and North Africa. The Italians conquered Ethiopia in 1936; Spain’s Fascist leader Francisco Franco, with Italian and German backing, defeated the Loyalists in 1937; and in 1938, the German Nazis annexed Austria and invaded Czechoslovakia. As the world waited, hoping Hitler’s conquests had sated his imperialistic demands, America began quiet preparations for war. On March 28, 1939, President Roosevelt issued an Executive Order which revoked all private-stock driveways in the state of Utah—the only state so restricted. He wanted to get animals off the Salt Flats, freeing up land originally regulated under the Taylor Grazing Act for the creation of Wendover Field. Activated in July 1941, it was the largest military reserve in the world.78

By then, Europe had exploded into World War II. The German invasion of Poland, in September 1939, triggered a declaration of war from France and Great Britain. Italy sided with Germany to form the Axis powers. In the spring of 1940, Hitler launched his blitzkrieg, conquering Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France by summer. The war separated some Castle Valley families such as the Ariottis, who had traveled back and forth between the American West and northern Italy several times. They had to endure the war with their father, Rocco Ariotti, in Italy, and their mother, Albina Giacoma-Rosa Ariotti, and her five children in Castle Valley.79

As the rest of the world slipped into war, FDR won an unprecedented third term in 1940. His administration continued to support the British and their allies, billing the U.S. as “the arsenal of democracy.” In this spirit, he signed the Lend-Lease Act in March 1941, sending war materiel to nations the U.S. considered vital for its own security—in essence, an economic war on Germany. Thanks to this pact, federal money filtered into America’s agrarian hinterlands. Castle Valley enjoyed “increased employment, and war markets through our exportation of foodstuffs and materials to Britain,” noted C. C. Anderson early in 1941, emphasizing “quality [stock] production at a peak of the carrying capacity of the range.” Anderson also remarked on increased consumer buying power and the possibility of “boom days” ahead as war, not the New Deal, finally pulled America out of the Great Depression. His prediction was realized when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, and Roosevelt extended Lend-Lease to it.80

While all eyes remained on the European Theater, the Japanese continued their conquests on the other side of the Pacific. Few Americans paid much attention, but Fred Wataru Taniguchi, an American citizen born in 1914 in Dinuba, California, understood the seriousness of Japanese
military aggression. Shortly after his birth, his father fell ill and went back to Japan to die. His mother had to take the infant Fred back, too. Raised near Hiroshima, Taniguchi grew up hearing all about Japanese military exploits in China and Korea from returning veterans. Although neighbors greeted the soldiers as heroes, lavishing them with food and drink, their boasts of killing dozens of men, women, and children repelled Taniguchi. Therefore, as the world-wide Great Depression deepened and his guardian (an uncle) offered Taniguchi the choice of joining the Japanese navy to fight in Asia or a return to the land of his birth, Taniguchi chose America. The sixteen-year-old disembarked in Seattle in 1930, speaking no English. After years of hard manual labor, he finally established himself in southern California. In June 1941, Taniguchi contracted an arranged marriage with Ferry Hiroko (formerly Utah) Okura, born in Kenilworth’s “Jap” boarding house, who joined him in California, feeling she had finally left the coal dust of Castle Valley behind. Then, on December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. America could no longer stay out of the war, which sucked men and minerals even out of such remote corners of the nation as Castle Valley.