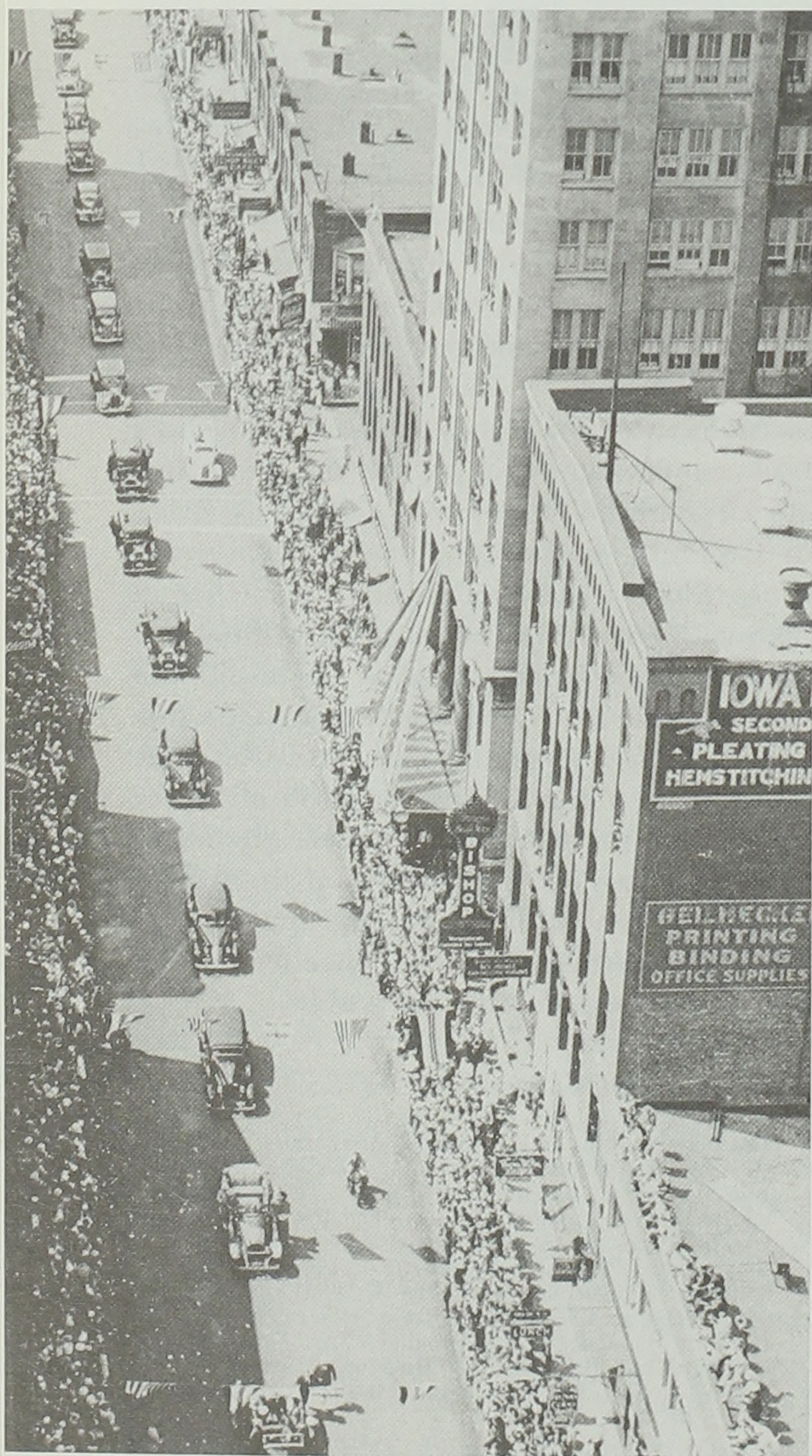


The National Drought Conference in Des Moines: When FDR and Alf Landon Met

by Herb Plambeck



The year 1936 was one of the most trying in the history of farming in Iowa. Early in the year temperatures dropped to bitterly low levels causing severe hardship throughout the state. Marks of 35 degrees below zero were recorded at Sibley with many other northern and central Iowa communities reporting -30 or lower. For a period of more than two weeks readings never went as high as zero in northern counties. Snow measured up to 40 inches in depth in western Iowa. Livestock feeding became an ordeal. Milk deliveries were a daily challenge.

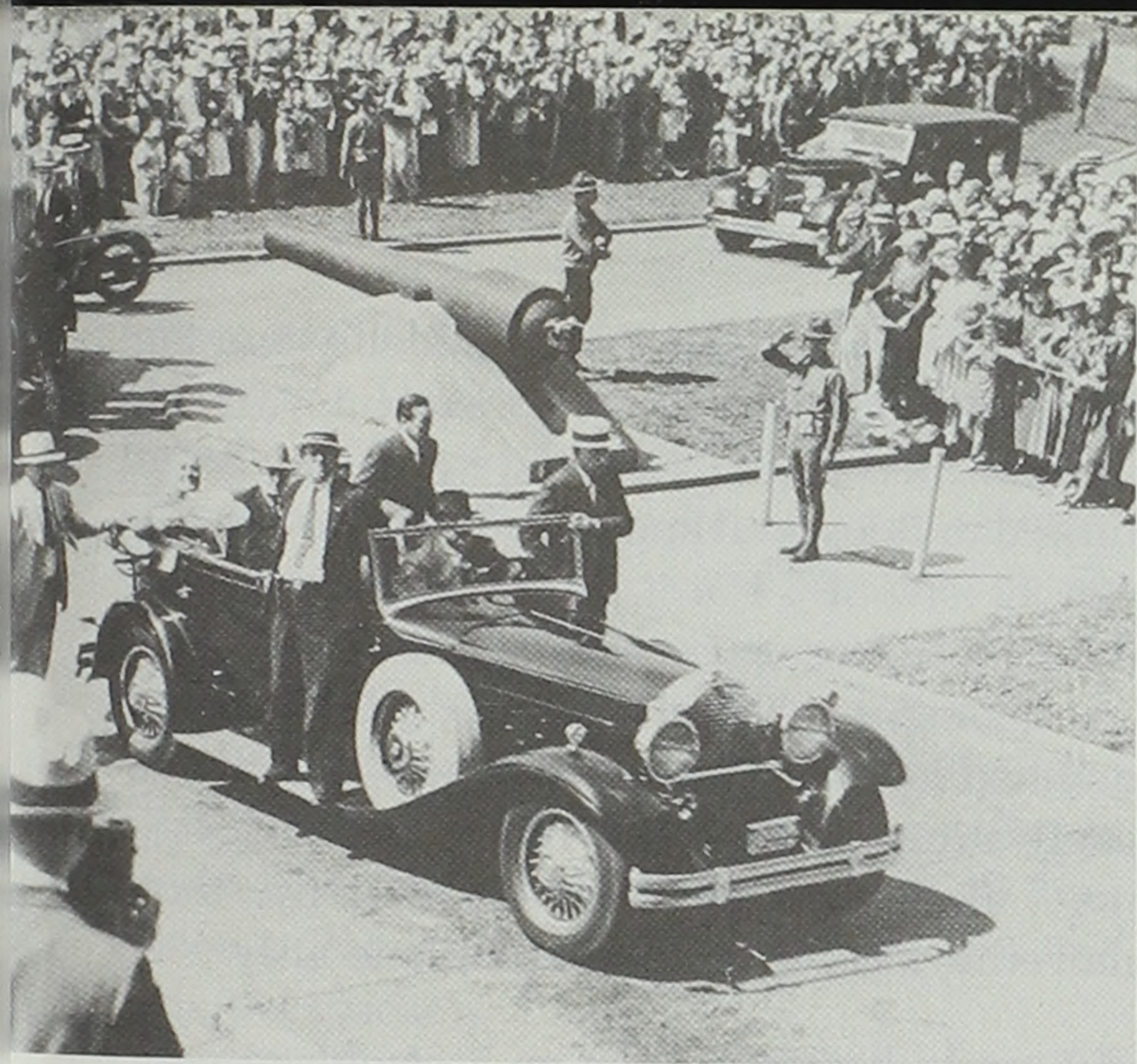
Later on, the summer months were in striking contrast. Searing heat and widespread, disastrous drought gripped the entire state and much of the rest of the Corn Belt, as well as the western plains. Temperatures in July soared up to 117 degrees in Atlantic and Logan, Iowa. Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma reported readings even higher.

Adding to the nation's farm plight, prices on some farm commodities plunged to near all-time lows early in the year. Corn was quoted at 47 cents a bushel in Iowa elevators. Wheat brought as little as 80 cents per bushel in the Plains states. Hogs sagged to \$8.70 per hundredweight in Iowa.

Thousands of farm families were on the brink of ruin. Parched fields and burned pastures were the story from Colorado through Illinois. Livestock feed ran precariously low. Forced

Left and opposite: Crowds lined Des Moines streets as FDR and Landon arrived. (Des Moines Register)

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sales were a daily occurrence. Unemployment was high. Relief rolls soared.

By mid-August the situation had become so critical that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ordered that a national drought conference be held. Iowa's capital city was chosen as the site. September 3 was designated as the date.

Because 1936 was a presidential election year, political ramifications at any gathering were inevitable. The proposed drought meeting involving United States senators, governors, and various other officials from seven or eight states would have to include Governor Alfred Landon of Kansas, the Republican nominee for president. Thus, for the first time since 1916, when President Woodrow Wilson and Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes met in Cincinnati, a face-to-face meeting between two presidential aspirants would take place. Although both FDR and Landon immediately decreed the forthcoming conference to be non-political, the nation's top news reporters, broadcasters, and newsreel camera crews lost no time in making reservations for the Des Moines meeting. That the conferees could avoid politics seemed utterly impossible.

Iowa governor Clyde Herring and Des Moines civic leaders were well aware of the significance of the September meeting and the nationwide attention it would receive. Elaborate preparations were made at the statehouse and in the downtown area. Secret Service offi-

cials arrived early to map out parade routes, check rail depots, determine the safest entryways, select meeting rooms, make meal arrangements, and attend to every other detail.

Telegraph operators, newsreel directors, newspaper editors, and radio broadcasters also set up shop early. Political operatives, however, could do little because of the non-political, nonpartisan order issued at the outset. Nevertheless, hawkers managed to have a generous supply of FDR-Garner and Alf Landon campaign buttons on hand.

Most conference invitees and other distinguished guests also arrived early, as did many journalists, including pollsters (who at that time were giving Landon an early lead). First to arrive were the governors, senators, Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Resettlement Administration leaders from Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin, and unofficial representatives from Colorado, the Dakotas, Illinois, and other states. Iowa participants, some of whom attended State Day at the Iowa State Fair on September 2, also arrived early.

September 3 dawned somewhat cloudy with temperatures much cooler than those earlier in the week. Ironically, forecasters indicated the possibility of showers during the hours of the drought conference.

An air of exciting expectancy prevailed. The president, coming by train from Salt Lake City, was due to arrive at noon. By 10:30, thousands had gathered at the Rock Island depot to welcome him. Governor Landon had left Topeka by auto at an early hour and would enter Des Moines by motorcade from Indianola.

By noon an estimated 200,000 onlookers lined the FDR parade route from the depot, through downtown, and on to the Capitol. All downtown traffic was halted. Police and firefighters were stationed along the route. Thunderous cheers greeted the president on his

arrival at the Rock Island depot. Warm applause was heard all along the two-mile parade route as FDR, with Governor Herring and Des Moines mayor Joseph Allen at his side, made his way to the Capitol. Smiling warmly and continuously waving his panama hat, Roosevelt acknowledged the warm welcome. At one point a farmer, clad in overalls, yelled, "God bless you, you saved my farm."

On crossing the Des Moines River, FDR is said to have noted that the water level was up. To that Governor Herring replied, "Yes, we had a good rain a few days ago and were afraid it might drown out the drought conference." The president was reputed to have chuckled about that for half a block.

With countless others, I was stationed along the parade route. I had signed on as farm director at WHO Radio just a week earlier. With an ear toward my broadcast the next morning, I wanted a glimpse of the popular chief executive. Little did I dream that within an hour I would find myself in a room a few feet from him.

On leaving the parade route I hurried to the statehouse to find a position where I could see FDR enter through a closely guarded back door, but I was not in time. Because the Landon motorcade arrived late, I did get a glimpse of Governor Landon, nattily attired in a light tan suit and straw sailor hat, waving to the crowd as he entered the building barely in time for the luncheon.

At the luncheon set for 1:15 the two presidential contenders first met — almost by chance. On his arrival at the statehouse at about 1:10, Landon had gone directly to the washroom just off the reception area. Roosevelt was in his wheelchair in Governor Herring's private office.

When the call for lunch was sounded at 1:15 Landon was still adjusting his necktie. Realizing he might be late he hurried to the luncheon room entryway just as the president was being

wheeled in by his son John. Suddenly Landon found himself alongside the president. After an awkward second of pause, the Kansas governor turned to Roosevelt and said, "How do you do, Mr. President." For a split second the president did not recognize who had addressed him. The moment recognition came, FDR quickly grabbed Landon's extended hand and, with his captivating smile, said, "Why, hello Governor." Both men blushed momentarily, then moved toward their table simultaneously.

Rarely has Iowa seen an assemblage with greater national clout. More than fifty high-ranking national, regional, and state officials were in the room. Among them were Henry A. Wallace, United States secretary of agriculture, and Harry Hopkins, WPA administrator, both Iowa-born. Rexford Tugwell, director of FDR's Resettlement Administration, Senators Lester Dickinson and Guy Gillette of Iowa, Arthur Capper and George McGill of Kansas, Harry S. Truman and Ben-

Both bidding for the presidency, contenders Alf Landon and FDR bid hello at the drought conference. Senator Roy L. Cochran (Nebraska) looks on. (SHSI, Des Moines)



nett "Champ" Clark of Missouri, Thomas Gore and Elmer Thomas of Oklahoma and Bob LaFollette of Wisconsin joined Governor Landon of Kansas and the drought conference host, Governor Herring of Iowa. Other governors included Guy Park of Missouri, Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota, Roy Cochran of Nebraska, Ernest Marland of Oklahoma, and Phil LaFollette of Wisconsin. Ironically no actual farmers were included among the luncheon guests, who dined on sweet corn and milk-fed chicken.

Many who had assembled outside the Capitol, obviously hoping for another glimpse of FDR or Landon, left before the lengthy luncheon ended. Meanwhile, I had a hunch that another contingent of conference participants — officials from the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), Resettlement Administration, Farm Security, flood control, and other advisers — would enter through the back way before the official conference session was to begin at 2:30. Accordingly I moved close to the entryway. My goal was to comment on the procession's personalities for my next morning's radio program. But my move toward the door changed everything.

To my delight, shortly after 2:00 a group of a dozen or more national and regional advisers arrived. One of them was a longtime close friend, B.W. Lodwick, then a Resettlement Administration official in Indianapolis. Walking four abreast, Lodwick was on the outside, right where I was standing. He instantly recognized me and extended his hand for a handshake. Naturally I was pleased and quickly grabbed his hand. What happened next is hard to believe. Holding my right arm firmly and without losing a step, Lodwick suddenly had me in the procession right alongside him. The next thing I knew I was entering the building walking directly past Secret Service and other guards.

Once inside I expressed my amazement to Lodwick, pointing out that I had no creden-

tials, no pass, not even a press or radio card. Needless to say I was bewildered and concerned. Previous contacts with the Secret Service had convinced me that no one could get near the president without clearance.

While waiting for the inevitable challenge — and distressed about the embarrassment that would result — I noticed a sudden commotion in the adjacent room. Then things became very quiet.

The next thing I knew we were filing into the conference chamber. Once again Lodwick placed me right behind him. Once again I was certain the "other shoe" would fall. A few seconds later the group I was with was in the presence of the president and his key advisers, Wallace, Tugwell, Hopkins, and others, some of whom I did not know. We were told to be seated.

George Yates, noted *Des Moines Register* photographer, and other photographers and newsreel crews were busy getting their shots of the conference leaders. George Wilson, the *Register's* Washington Bureau director, and several other reporters were making notes. I looked for H.L. Mencken, Roy Roberts, Barry Faris, Robert Trout, and other famed editors and broadcasters on hand for the conference, but I failed to see them (though they were there).

Despite my nervousness, the reporter in me jotted down names of participants. I kept hoping that Wallace, whom I had interviewed recently, would not see me and wonder why I was there.

Shortly after 2:30 Governor Herring called the conference to order. After a few short comments by some of the dignitaries, we watched the state delegations form for their reports to the president.

Many assumed that the Kansas delegation, led by Governor Landon, would be the first to be called. But the order was based on when the participating states entered the Union. Mis-



From left, standing: Senator F. Ryan Duffy (Wisconsin), Senator Lester Dickinson (Iowa), Governor Alf Landon (Kansas), Senator Thomas Gore (Oklahoma), Senator Roy L. Cochran (Nebraska), Senator Henrik Shipstead (Minnesota), Senator Harry S Truman (Missouri). Seated: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Governor Clyde Herring (Iowa). (SHSI)

souri, admitted in 1821, was first. Iowa, admitted in 1846, was second. Landon and his group appeared third.

Iowa actually had two groups participating. One was made up of Senators Dickinson and Gillette and other elected officials. Dickinson was one of the few who openly questioned the president's program and urged more home rule in distribution of relief funds.

The second Iowa group included Francis Johnson, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation president, several farmers (Harold Teachout, Shenandoah; A.E. Wendell, Bronson; Roy Smith, Spirit Lake; and Hervey Hazen from Denmark), Herman Aaberg, Iowa's assistant secretary of agriculture, and Robert Combs, Scott County extension agent.

The Iowa farm group asked for a reduction in freight rates for feed and seed, faster processing of AAA checks, purchase of seed corn by the federal government, rapid implementation of rural electrification, added funds for Extension Service, more crushed limestone from the WPA for alfalfa production, greater emphasis on soil and water conservation, subsidized shelterbelts, continuing Civilian Conservation Corps work camps, and the return of Iowa's resettlement offices from Indianapolis to Des Moines. Johnson offered to verbally summarize the report, but in typical bureaucratic fashion, Marvin McIntyre, the president's White House secretary, requested it be submitted and filed as written.

While seated next to Lodwick, I noticed

members of the press assembling at a nearby doorway. Some were receiving notes from fellow reporters. Fearful my unauthorized presence would be revealed at any moment, I hastily wrote a note to H.R. Gross (then WHO news director and later an Iowa congressman) in which I made a few comments about conference proceedings and listed names of Iowa delegation members. Intending the note to be conveyed to Gross by another reporter, I reached the doorway just as Gross and his right-hand man, Jack Shelley, appeared.

When Gross saw me coming from the conference chamber, he caught his breath a moment, looked at me sharply, and exclaimed, "What the hell are you doing in there?" Inasmuch as he had hired me only one week earlier, I wasn't sure whether that was a reprimand or merely a statement of total disbelief that I had been in the inner sanctum. Nevertheless, he eagerly accepted the note.

I went back into the chamber. The various state groups were reporting their plight and their needs. I could not see or hear the delegation reports, but we were told that FDR proved to be a good listener and a serious interrogator. Wallace, Hopkins, and Tugwell also listened well and asked tough questions. The gravity of the 1936 midwestern drought could not be minimized. Iowans reported 34,000 farmers in dire need of crop loans and another 14,000 requiring subsistence. Senator Truman of Missouri told how 107 of Missouri's 115 counties were drought-stricken and grasshopper-plagued. Oklahomans declared their state to be "drier than dust" and said that close to 100,000 farm families faced financial ruin and many would experience hunger. Governor Landon's Kansas group asserted that the Kansas harvest would yield only 30 percent of the livestock feed needed.

Other sobering facts were called to FDR's attention. The latest corn crop estimate was down 23 percent from July, for a national total of 1.426 billion bushels compared to 2.291 bil-

lion the year before. (By comparison, the corn crop estimate in October 1986 was over 8.220 billion bushels.)

The midwesterners repeatedly recommended to the presidential party federal crop insurance, a national policy on soil and water conservation, and the ever-normal granary (a concept inspired by Secretary Wallace wherein the government would acquire and store large quantities of grain to assure adequate food and feed supplies in the event of another serious drought; the stored grain would also help stabilize prices in years of plenty or of scarcity).

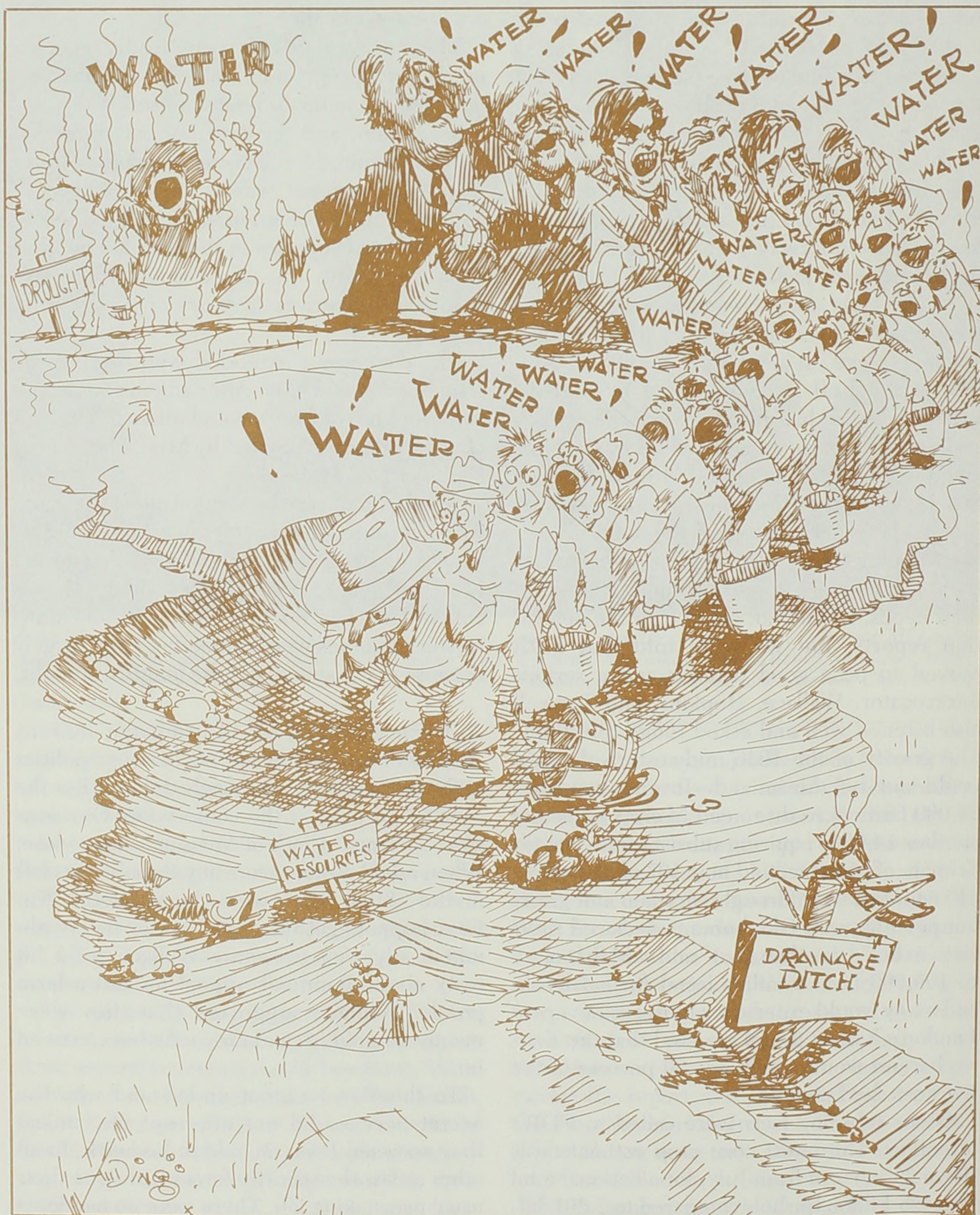
The conference extended well beyond the scheduled end at 4:30. After adjournment, the president heard from several other groups, including a peace group led by Mrs. Alice Carey Weitz of Des Moines.

Another large crowd formed along the route from the statehouse to the president's rail car, where he dined with the seven visiting governors, and where, among other things, it was concluded that no less than 350,000 midwestern families were in need of help, largely because of the severity of the lengthy drought.

Even though a lot of campaign buttons were hawked throughout the day, politics in the usual sense surprisingly did not alter the avowed purpose of the conference. One senator, "Champ" Clark of Missouri, came close: When asked if there were any Republicans left in the "Show Me" state, he replied, "No. Grasshoppers got them all." As for the Washington advisers, Secretary Wallace got a bit testy about Landon's appeal for more farm ponds. Wallace suggested that they were mainly for goldfish and for young boys to swim in.

To this day I cannot understand why the Secret Service did not intercept me, unless they assumed I was an aide to Lodwick. In all other areas, the security forces had done their usual painstaking job. There were no incidents

THE CANDIDATES WILL NOW PRESCRIBE FOR THE DROUGHT



Left: Cartoonist Jay N. "Ding" Darling suggested the obvious solution to the drought in the morning edition of *The Des Moines Register*, September 3, 1936. (courtesy University of Iowa Libraries)

along the parade route or during the conference. The angel food cake, lovingly baked for the president by Mrs. George Hicks of Des Moines, was minutely checked to make certain it contained no bomb. Elizabeth Clarkson Zwart, popular *Des Moines Register* writer, could also attest to Secret Service thoroughness. She made four attempts to get through a barricade, smilingly referred to as the "magic" canvas curtain — as waitress, photographer, secretary, and aide to Lieutenant Governor Nelson G. Kraschel. Each time she was thwarted. The fourth time Chief Secret Service Officer Woods gave her the final "no." (Zwart was the only female reporter on the scene. Today, women reporters are at work on every presidential assignment. No security officer or Secret Service agent would dare deny admittance to a female reporter with credentials of the kind Elizabeth Zwart had back in 1936.)

Iowa and Des Moines had had only three weeks to prepare for the historic meeting held fifty years ago. Led by Charles Grahl (adjutant general of the National Guard and Governor Herring's chief military adviser) the undertaking was carried out to near perfection. The eyes of the nation had been watching what some described as "one of the most dramatic events in American political history." Des Moines officials and other Iowa leaders had managed to keep it nonpolitical.

Although I find no documented record of the results of the Des Moines drought conference and its impact on problems facing agriculture in the mid-thirties, there can be no denying that the Iowa meeting focused nationwide attention on the plight of midwestern farmers and on millions of Americans dependent on farm prosperity. Well over 100 journalists (some estimates place the figure at over 300)

wrote, broadcast, filmed, or editorialized about the conference. Most leading newspapers had top news personnel on the scene, as did all the wire services, radio networks, individual stations, and movie newsreel syndicates.

Possible solutions to major farm concerns offered to FDR during the conference were given heavy focus. Soil and water conservation efforts were greatly expanded in the late thirties, with County Soil Districts formed throughout the nation. Extension Service funds were increased and farmer-controlled government farm program committees became extremely popular.

Rural electrification, discussed at length during the conference, was rapidly implemented. In 1936 one farm in ten had electricity. Five years later more than half of the nation's farms and ranches had been electrified, and by 1950 the figure was above 80 percent. (Today over 99.9 percent of American farms, ranches, hamlets, and small-acreage homes enjoy the benefit of electric light and power.)

Subsidized shelter belts, emergency feed programs, better seed distribution, consolidation of government farm agencies, increased emphasis on supply management — these are some of the other spin-offs of interest to farmers and ranchers resulting from the day President Roosevelt and his Republican challenger, Governor Alf Landon, met in Iowa in the depths of a farm depression back in 1936. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

The major sources behind this article were the author's personal daily diaries; newsroom records and farm news scripts from WHO Radio; news coverage in the *Des Moines Register* and *Des Moines Tribune*, September 2-4, 1936; and the author's recollections as an eyewitness of the drought conference. Weather information and crop and livestock prices were provided by Paul Waite, state climatologist, and Duane Skow, state statistician, in the Iowa Department of Agriculture. Portions of this article in a slightly different form appeared in the *Iowa Farmer Today* (September 27, 1986).