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A Prairie Parable The 1933 Bates Tragedy

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It was one of the more harrowing episodes of the Great Depression. Ted and Rose Bates had failed in business in Glidden, Saskatchewan, in 1932 and again on the west coast of Canada the following year. When they were subsequently turned down for relief assistance twice, first in Vancouver and then in Saskatoon, because they did not meet the local residency requirements, the couple decided to end their lives in a remote rural schoolyard, taking their eight-year-old son, Jackie, with them rather than face the shame of returning home to Glidden as a relief case. But it was only the child who died when the suicide plan went terribly wrong, and the parents were charged with murder and brought to trial in the spring of 1934.

The sorry tale of the Bates family has come to epitomize the collateral damage wrought by the collapse of rural Saskatchewan during the Great Depression of the 1930s. A popular Canadian university-level textbook, for example, uses the tragedy to open the chapter on the Depression.¹ Trent University historian James Struthers, on the other hand, employs the incident as an exclamation point. In No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941, he deliberately places the story at the end of a chapter to illustrate the “devastating consequences” of the strict enforcement of municipal residency policies to reduce relief rolls.² “In the eyes of Glidden,” Struthers summed up the sad affair, “it was the Depression, not the Bates, that had murdered their young son and it was R. B. Bennett’s unemployment policy, with its insistence of local responsibility for the jobless, which was a direct accomplice.”³

Struthers never mentioned the fate of the Bateses when they went to trial in Wilkie in

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March 1934. That was left to Pierre Berton, the only other author to examine the Bateses' story in *The Great Depression.* In a section subtitled "Death by Depression," Berton drew on contemporary newspaper sources to flesh out Struthers's account and suggests that the Bateses were tragic victims not only of Depression relief policies but of their own headstrong pride, something that many Canadians struggled to overcome at the time. "It is this stiff-back sense of pride," Berton observed, "that comes through again and again in the stories of those who were forced by circumstances to accept relief." And even though the Bateses were too ashamed of being sent home as charity cases, it was their former friends in Glidden who ironically rallied around the family in their time of distress and paid for Jackie's funeral and started a legal defense fund. In the end, the Bateses were found not guilty, a verdict that was applauded, according to Berton, because people understood the dilemma faced by the family.

Berton noted that Ted and Rose Bates returned to obscurity once "the hot light of publicity . . . was finally extinguished." Indeed, except for the brief coverage already mentioned, the incident has never been studied in any detail. Nor is it widely known in the historical community. Even people living in the area today have at best a vague recollection of what happened. On one level, this outcome is hardly surprising given that the Bateses' story was only one tragedy among many during the 1930s, a decade of hopelessness that drove some to suicide and others to the asylum in the Great Plains. Jackie's death also happened more than seventy years ago, and those who had any direct connection to the incident and to the family are largely gone. But the murder of a child at the hands of his parents was shocking—even for the desperate times of the Great Depression—and the tragic circumstances behind the incident need to be fully examined in order to understand the story in all its complexity. In fact, the incident needs to be "interrogated" in light of new material, in particular the Royal Canadian Mounted Police murder file and the Saskatchewan Department of Justice prosecution file.

Those who knew Ted and Rose Bates readily accepted their explanation for their actions without question. The alternative—that the pair had planned to murder their son in cold blood—was unthinkable. Scholars coming upon the story have done much the same thing. They have used the Bates incident as a kind of parable that speaks to the human cost of mean-spirited relief policies, especially when they came hard up against a parent's stubborn pride. And who wouldn't reach this conclusion? Given the economic and social upheaval of the so-called Dirty Thirties, it has been easy to accept this portrayal of the troubled couple and what many dubbed at the time "a social murder." This article, however, deliberately looks beyond such assumptions to reexamine and reevaluate this archetypical Depression story and its exact meaning. It still remains a parable, but a parable with a different purpose, a different lesson—namely, the danger of accepting such incidents at face value. Perhaps the time has come for scholars on both sides of the border to reconsider other stories of hardship and deprivation that have been embraced as part of the Great Depression narrative.

**The Bateses' Background**

Ted and Rose Bates were British immigrants. Edward Albert Bates was born in London, England, on December 7, 1890. British census records for 1891 indicate that he was the son of a printer's warehouseman, Edward Bates, living in Blackfriars Road. By 1901, his father was dead, and he and his widowed mother (Alice Ewin) and younger sister, Lily, were living with another family in Byfleet. The exact year of Ted's arrival in Canada is something of a mystery. His 1954 obituary reported that he had been living in Canada for forty years; hence, he apparently arrived in 1914. A search of the large-sheet passenger-list manifests for 1914 confirmed that he entered Canada aboard the SS *Victorian,* sailing from Liverpool in steerage (ticket 3800), through the port of St. John,
New Brunswick, on April 10, 1914. But Ted's entry listed him as a returning Canadian; he had been working in Ontario for two years, had been engaged in farming for four years, and was headed to Woodstock to take up farming there. A search of the passenger manifests for 1910 and 1912 did not turn up his name.\textsuperscript{12}

Ted's first years in Canada are also difficult to sort out. His obituary, prepared by his wife, Rose, suggested that he first lived in Manitoba before taking up residence in Saskatchewan in the early 1920s.\textsuperscript{13} But his name is not listed in any of the Manitoba directories for the period.\textsuperscript{14} Nor did he homestead in any of the three western provinces, based on a search of these online records.\textsuperscript{15} Given his nationality and age, Ted might have been expected to have enlisted during the First World War. But he did not serve in either the British or Canadian Expeditionary Forces, a fact confirmed by the answer he provided on his 1940 National Registration form under the authority of the National Resources Mobilization Act.\textsuperscript{16} One possible conclusion is that he evaded military service during the First World War because he was working on a farm and was therefore doing work considered essential to the war effort. A newspaper article at the time of the incident suggested that Bates had once been a farmhand on the Gatenby farm near Lemberg (between Regina and Yorkton), before taking up land near Glidden on the west-central side of the province.\textsuperscript{17} This information was partly corroborated by federal immigration records. When Ted returned to Canada in the spring of 1922, following a five-month visit with his mother, he reported on his Form 30A that he was going back to Glidden to resume farming (Fig. 1).\textsuperscript{18}

Rose (Slatter) Bates did not emigrate to Canada until 1924. Born in Rotherfield, Sussex, England, on April 26, 1892, the daughter of a general laborer, Rose was working as a cook in London when she likely met her future husband during the winter of 1921-22. Two years later, on July 15, 1924, she stepped ashore at Quebec City with thirty pounds in her possession and immediately boarded a train for Saskatchewan and marriage.\textsuperscript{19} Rose, at thirty-two and with limited schooling, seemed content to be a housewife—that was the reason she gave for coming to Canada—and she and her new husband took up residence in a small cottage off the main street of Glidden.

These were heady days for Saskatchewan and its wheat economy. Beginning in 1907, homesteaders first took up land in the Newcombe area, along the Old Bone Trail heading west from Saskatoon's Eleventh Avenue. But a Canadian Northern Railway branch line did not reach the district for another ten years. Glidden, established the same year that the steel arrived, soon boasted four elevators and about one hundred people. Once the stubborn postwar recession finally lifted in 1924 and wheat prices rebounded, farmers began to produce record harvests under ideal growing conditions. The 1928 crop, at almost a third of a billion bushels of wheat, for example, was the largest ever produced by any province or state in the world.\textsuperscript{20} The boom only encouraged producers to grow more wheat, now with the assistance of new power machinery. It also seemed to guarantee the future of places like Glidden, and the community invested in sidewalks, streetlamps, and a new community hall, while local businesses, like Ted's new business, the local meat market, thrived. It was also the time when Edward Jack (Jackie) Bates was born on October 12, 1925, in nearby Eston Union Hospital.

Ted and Rose were doting, if not overly protective, parents of their only child (Fig. 2). In the letter that George Couper sent the prime minister about the tragedy, he declared that Jackie, or “The Nipper” as he was called, “was the sunshine of their home.” He continued, “I do not need to say that these people loved their boy—they worshipped him.”\textsuperscript{21} Jackie's parents, in the meantime, seemed to grow increasingly apart, at least in the eyes of the community. Whereas Ted was quickly remembered as an easygoing, affable figure, Rose seemed a shadowy, reclusive presence. She rarely left the Bates home and never joined any of the local organizations or had much to do with other
FIG. 1. West-central Saskatchewan, 1933. (Map by Articulate Eye Design, Saskatoon.)
women in the village. One unidentified local man told a Saskatoon Star-Phoenix reporter in the days after the incident that Rose was "high strung" and "neurotic." But it is readily apparent from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police murder file that Rose deeply regretted her decision to join her future husband in Canada and was looking for a way out. Ted had not only failed to meet her train but was living with another woman when she arrived and had made no provision for her. He also ignored her for days and weeks, preferring to drink heavily and gamble in the back of his shop. The promise of a new, supposedly better, life in Canada was anything but for Rose. What probably made things worse, if that was possible, was the place she found herself in. The open, treeless prairie of southwestern Saskatchewan was a foreign, if not discomfitting, landscape, completely different from the world she had once known. Even small-town Glidden with its primitive ways, such as the lack of running water and electricity, probably offered little refuge.

**THE DEPRESSION, GLIDDEN, AND VANCOUVER**

Things would only get worse for Rose during the early years of the Depression. Much of Glidden's prosperity in the 1920s, like that for the rest of the province, had been fueled by the sale of wheat on the international market. Now, on the eve of the new decade, stalled export sales and plummeting prices sent shockwaves through the entire provincial economy, pounding the agricultural sector before washing over the retail, service, and transportation industries. In the face of this deluge, Saskatchewan, which had gambled its future on wheat, was helpless. Life in the province, according to two observers at the time, was reduced "to the lowest common denominator." Nor did the slow recovery help matters. The nadir of the Depression in the province was actually 1937, a time when other parts of Canada were already recuperating. Saskatchewan would become the most heavily indebted province by the end of the 1930s, an almost complete reversal
of the financial situation at the beginning of the decade. The repercussions were nothing short of catastrophic, all the more so for a province and a people whose livelihood rested almost exclusively on wheat. With expenses outstripping cash receipts, and already carrying a heavy debt load from the expansion of the 1920s, many farmers simply could not stay afloat. And when they went down, they took with them other sectors of the provincial economy, like the vortex created by a sinking ship. Few were spared, if only because nearly seven of every ten people, according to the 1931 census, lived and worked in rural Saskatchewan. Many rural municipalities, including Newcombe, were pushed to the wall and had trouble providing basic services, let alone meeting their relief responsibilities.

The other nightmare was the prolonged drought that placed a stranglehold on the shortgrass prairie district and would not let go for the better part of the decade. Severe droughts had always been a persistent feature of the prairies, occurring on average every twenty years or so. The 1930s, however, were notorious for the number of consecutive dry years. Hot, drying winds scooped up loose topsoil and whipped it into towering dust storms that made outdoor activity nearly impossible in places like Glidden. Darkness at noon was not uncommon, while churning soil piled up in deep drifts along buildings, fence lines, or ridges—anything that stood in the way of the swirling dust. It also seeped into homes, even though people set wet rags on windowsills and hung wet sheets over doorways. “The sun through the dust looks big and red and close,” Sinclair Ross wrote in his classic novel, As For Me and My House. “Bigger, redder, closer every day. You begin to glance at it with a doomed feeling, that there’s no escape.”

By 1932, Ted’s butcher business, as described by Rose in a candid letter to her sister-in-law, was “not all that good now.” He was even toying with the idea of “having a fire and getting the inshorence [sic] money.” Rose had her own solution to her woes. “I am never been more sain [sic] in my life,” she assured Ted’s sister in one of her bleaker moments, “but I have just got to end my life and Jacks [sic] just because the man I got is an utter bad.” In an apparent attempt to try to salvage their marriage, the Bateses decided to get out of Glidden while Ted could still get something for his shop. He struck a deal to sell the meat market to a farm family, the Warmans, and then, like many others on the move at the time, the family quietly slipped away. Only Stan Elliott, the local justice of the peace and good friend who had been entrusted to wrap up Ted’s affairs in Glidden, evidently knew that the Bateses had decided to try their luck in Vancouver. Why they left for Canada’s Pacific city is easy to understand. Vancouver at the time was a kind of mecca for the down-and-out, especially transients, because of its milder winters; it offered the Bateses an escape from the dreary prairies and their seemingly dead-end lives in Glidden. Ted also likely believed that he had a better chance of getting back on his financial feet in Vancouver where there was greater opportunity, even if it was no longer in the butcher business. Most of all, it was probably closer to the world that Rose had imagined, hoped for, in Canada—a large, modern city with a mostly British population. And she would not likely feel as trapped as she had been in Glidden.

In Vancouver, drawing on the funds from the sale of the meat market, Ted Bates tried his hand at the corner grocery business—first in Marpole, then on East Fourth Avenue. Both failed. He returned briefly to Glidden to try to collect money from his former customers and the outstanding balance from the sale of his shop, but came back to Vancouver empty-handed. He opened another store at Kingsway and Fifteenth, only to go bankrupt by the early fall of 1933. His search for a job also ended in failure. The Bateses resisted asking for help for as long as they could by selling their furniture and pawning personal possessions. They even insisted, according to Jackie’s teacher at Florence Nightingale School, on paying for their son’s scribblers and pencils. Soon there was not enough money to put food on the table. A reluctant Ted, forced by necessity, applied to
the city for relief but was told he would have to deal with provincial authorities, since his family had lived in Vancouver for less than a year and consequently did not meet the residency test for assistance. Provincial relief officials, on the other hand, were just as keen to cull their welfare lists and advised him that he had to take his family back to Saskatchewan if he wanted assistance; all they would do in the interim was give him a scrip order for five dollars’ worth of food.\footnote{Rose was devastated by the news. The Bateses’ Vancouver landlord later testified at their Wilkie trial that Rose did not understand why they had to leave. “‘After we’ve lost all our money, everything we have, we’ve got nowhere to go when we get back there,’” he quoted Rose as saying. “‘I would rather kill myself than go back to Glidden.’”\cite{Rose_testimony}

Ted was equally distraught at the prospect that people in village would learn that they had sent back to Saskatchewan because they were destitute. “He looked to me,” the landlord confessed, “like a man blown up by a shell, buried, and blown up again.”\cite{Landlord_testimony}

**THE SUICIDE-MURDER PLAN**

Through an arrangement between the provincial relief department and the local Salvation Army, the Bateses were given train tickets to Glidden in late November 1933. They arrived in Saskatoon on Friday, December 1, a bitterly cold day, and had to wait until the following Monday for the next passenger train to Glidden. At this point, there is conflicting evidence about how the Bateses were treated by the city. A local minister insisted that he had to intervene on behalf of the family, including making a direct appeal to some members of the civic relief board, before they were granted temporary relief during their weekend stay in Saskatoon. Local officials maintained, however, that assistance—in the form of two meal vouchers per person per day and three nights in a local hotel—was readily granted to the family.\footnote{The matter would prove so controversial that the Saskatchewan Conservative premier, J. T. M. Anderson, issued a press release a few days later in which he squelched newspapers reports that relief had been denied the family.\cite{Anderson_press_release}}

What upset Ted and Rose, though, is that they could not stay in Saskatoon but were expected to continue on to Glidden. “They won’t have us here,” Ted stoically told his former Vancouver landlord.\footnote{Whether the Bateses ever intended to return to Glidden is unlikely. It was a past they did not want to revisit, especially given the pathetic circumstances they found themselves in. It was bad enough that they were burdened with the personal failure and disgrace of needing relief; now they were being shipped halfway across the country like unwanted chattel. But why they decided to take their own lives and that of their son is another matter. Clearly, the relief system had boxed them in, leaving them few options if they wanted help. Many others, however, faced similar predicaments at the time and found a way to survive without being driven to murder.\cite{Bateses_tragedy}}

It was a question that would haunt former friends and neighbors as they tried to make sense of how Jackie’s parents could plot the death of the child they cherished. The most popular explanation, offered in the days after the incident, was that the Bateses had cracked under the strain and really did not know what they were doing. “Those of us who knew these people,” reasoned George Couper, “know that their minds had snapped.”\footnote{The loss of dignity, likely to become even more profound if they returned to Glidden, had driven them over the brink. They saw no future for themselves, and in their depressed stupor, they did not want to leave their boy alone in the world. This reasoning certainly seemed to make sense of what had happened. But what was not widely known at the time, except by those involved in the investigation and prosecution, was that Ted and Rose had fought bitterly over the boy during their rocky marriage. And since neither one of them was willing to give Jackie up to the other, Rose later confessed to the police, it was decided that he would have to die with them.\cite{Police_interrogation}}
Over the weekend, Ted and Rose made plans to end their lives. They shipped, collect, three trunks of their belongings back to friends in Vancouver. In a letter placed in one of the boxes, Rose hinted at what they were about to do: "When you go through [the trunks] will you burn all traces of us you may come across and mums the word to all. . . . May you have better luck than us. I can't stand the pressure of it all."42 Ted also wrote his sister in England, as well as Stan Elliott, who was handling his affairs in Glidden. "Have turned all my interests over to my sister," Ted advised Elliott. "I told her you was [sic] our agent so I guess she will get in touch with you sometime. We was [sic] coming back to Glidden but changed our minds."43 The couple, with their son, then visited a local garage, Allen Service Station, and asked about renting a car for a day. They told the owners that they had just returned from the west coast, where they owned property, and that they were interested in buying land in the area. With money from the sale of some of Rose's last few possessions, they returned late Monday morning, December 4, and rented a 1929 Chevrolet coach for the day for ten dollars. They left the city along Highway 14, headed west toward Biggar. In the backseat, Jackie amused himself reading "Mickey Mouse The Mail Pilot" and "Chester Gump at Silver Creek Ranch" Big Little Books.44

At nightfall, Ted pulled the car off the main highway, halfway between Purdue and Biggar, and drove a few miles north to the isolated Avalon schoolyard, where he parked next to a shed (Fig. 3). Ted and Rose then got in the backseat with Jackie under some blankets. They left the car running, confident that the carbon monoxide gas would kill them in their sleep. But when they woke hours later, it was only Jackie who had succumbed to the exhaust fumes. Distraught, Rose begged Ted to kill her. Sick and dozy, he tried knocking her out with repeated blows from the heavy engine crank, but he did not have enough strength. He then slashed at her neck and wrists with a knife. Finally, he took a razor and cut his own wrists. Once again, they waited for death to take them.

INQUEST AND TRIAL

Early the next morning, a farmer discovered the couple, groggy in the backseat of the car with the cold body of their dead son between them, and contacted the local Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment. The Bateses were taken by police car to Biggar, where after receiving medical attention, Ted freely admitted to the police that he and his wife had decided to commit suicide, taking Jackie with them, to avoid the shame of going back to Glidden and facing their former friends. Rose, who had to be hospitalized because of the severity of her neck wound, made a similar statement from her bed in St. Margaret's Hospital.45 Based on the confessions and evidence gathered at the scene, the mounties laid murder charges against the couple on December 6. That same day, local newspapers, scrambling for whatever facts and hearsay they could uncover, carried the first lurid reports of the incident on their front pages. The Star-Phoenix lead headline read, "Child Dead in Alleged Suicide Pact," while the Leader-Post announced in large, bold text, "Boy Dies in Family Death Pact." The Edmonton Journal, which also provided extensive coverage as new details were made public, called for the better administration of relief to prevent such future tragedies. "It was all so unnecessary; all so pitifully futile," it observed in an editorial. "These strangely doomed parents appear to have failed in life; to have failed in death."46 The One Big Union Bulletin used the Bateses' situation to argue that the choice was between suicide or socialism.47

The Glidden village council, meanwhile, held an emergency session on Friday, December 8, and made arrangements for Jackie's funeral, as well as contacted Saskatoon lawyer Harry Ludgate about serving as the Bateses' defense counsel. At an emotional mass meeting in the community hall the following afternoon, people from throughout the Newcombe district unanimously approved a resolution blaming the tragedy on the Depression and the federal government's refusal to accept responsibility for relief in the country. The Bateses, according
FIG. 3. The Eagle Hills District, where the murder occurred in December 1933. (Map by Articulate Eye Design, Saskatoon.)
to the last part of the motion, had been placed in a kind of relief limbo: “moved long distances before they could secure relief with no certainty that relief would be granted when they reached their destination.”48 What this sentence was effectively stating, albeit obliquely, was that the Bates family would have been no better off in Glidden.

George Couper said as much a month later in a letter appealing to Canadian National Railway station agents to canvass their community for donations to Bateses’ defense fund. “There is no relief here in Glidden for residents,” he acknowledged, “so Bates could have been in as desperate state had he returned here as he was in Vancouver except whatever charity he could receive at the hands of neighbors.”49 But in the days after Jackie’s death, such an admission might have been seen as justification for the Bateses’ actions—that they were right in not going back to Glidden, that Glidden’s heyday was effectively over. Instead, the community reached out to the Bateses in their time of crisis and offered whatever support it could muster. The Depression and Canada’s relief system may have triggered the incident in the schoolyard—as the resolution charged—but the more pressing concern was saving the Bateses from a murder conviction. In a way, so-called sinners had been transformed into victims. “If this was an ordinary cold blooded murder,” George Couper explained in his letter seeking funds for the Bateses’ legal costs, “our citizens would have let matters take their course, but when decent citizens have been face to face with starvation through no fault of their own we feel public opinion can best assert itself by providing adequate defense.”50

One week after leaving Saskatoon in the rented car with his parents, eight-year-old Jackie was buried in the rural Madison cemetery following a funeral service in the Glidden community hall attended by many of his former schoolmates.51 To this day, many of Jackie’s childhood friends recoil at the thought of seeing his body.52 The coroner’s inquest opened in Biggar four days later and largely revolved around the testimony of renowned provincial pathologist Dr. Frances McGill, who had performed the autopsy and attributed the boy’s death to carbon monoxide poisoning. Never one to be subtle, she claimed that the car exhaust was just as deadly as the gas chamber used for capital punishment in the Nevada prison. The Bateses’ lawyer, Harry Ludgate, tried unsuccessfully to have the couple’s confessions excluded as evidence, claiming that they had been given under duress. He then challenged their reliability by getting Dr. McGill to admit that the parents could have been suffering from exposure to the fumes when they had made their statements to the police. Crown prosecutor Walter Smyth of Wilkie moved to discredit this suggestion by recalling the two mounted policemen who had interviewed the Bateses in the hours after Jackie’s death (Fig. 4). Both testified that the pair were lucid and forthcoming, as if they wanted to tell their sorry tale. In fact, Constable Donald McLay created a stir when he said that Rose had called her husband “yellow” because he “didn’t have the guts enough to cut his wrists deep enough.”

At the conclusion of the two-day hearing, the coroner, at the request of the Crown prosecutor, instructed the six-man jury to assign responsibility for the death of the child. But after deliberating for fifteen minutes, the jury returned with a verdict that was anything but a clear-cut finding: Jack Bates had died of carbon monoxide poisoning “while in a car in the charge of his father and mother.”53

Later that same day in the Biggar police court, the preliminary hearing was held to determine whether the Bateses should proceed to trial on the murder charge. Many of the same witnesses at the coroner’s inquest gave testimony, while Ludgate once again objected to the admission of the statements that the Bateses had given to the mounted police investigators. No new evidence was introduced, but there was enough after only a few hours for magistrate J. T. Leger to commit the couple to trial the following March on a joint murder indictment.54 Ted was taken to the Prince Albert Jail the next day, while Rose, once she had fully recovered from her injuries, was
FIG. 4. Corporal Charles Carey parked his patrol vehicle in the same position as the Bates car in the Avalon schoolyard as part of the RCMP investigation. (Photo courtesy of Saskatchewan Archives Board, R-A 7513.)

held at the Battleford Women’s Jail. Regional newspaper interest in the story, following the initial flurry of sensational articles, ceased. Nor did the incident cause a ripple in either Ottawa or Regina, probably because both legislatures were not in session at the time. Besides, both governments were grappling with the problem of the single, homeless unemployed and the larger challenge of getting back on the road to economic recovery. The plight of the Bateses was just another Depression tragedy.55

The Bateses’ trial opened in Wilkie on March 20, 1933, before a crowded courtroom. Defense lawyer Harry Ludgate tried to establish from the outset that the Bateses were loving parents whose world had been turned upside down by the Depression. “I never saw a mother [Rose] more devoted to a son in my life,” C. H. Babcock of Vancouver testified. But he added that Rose looked “like a prisoner going into an exile in hell” when she learned that she had to go back to Glidden.56 The second day, with the jury excluded, there was another long delay as Ludgate tried several legal arguments to have the Bateses’ statements excluded, but Judge H. Y. McDonald ruled them admissible because they had been given voluntarily. He also allowed into the record damaging evidence from the police matron who had guarded Rose in St. Margaret’s Hospital. She claimed that Rose had remarked shortly after her arrival there: “I know we will hang, we deserve it.”57 This statement was part of the prosecution strategy to demonstrate that the Bateses had calmly plotted to include their son in their own suicide plan. No detail of the grisly business was left out—from the time they had arrived in Saskatoon to the time they were charged with murder by the police. The prosecution’s case, however, was skillfully undermined the third and final day of the trial when Ludgate called his only defense witness, Wilburn D. McPhail, a family physician from Kindersley. Dr. McPhail, who had once attended Jackie in
1928, claimed that the autopsy by the provincial pathologist was incomplete because it did not consider the child's enlarged thymus gland as a possible cause of death. “My opinion is that the boy died from a hyper-active thymus poisoning,” the doctor declared with the air of authority.58

This testimony proved crucial to the outcome of the trial. In his closing address to the jury, Ludgate played up the contradictions between the two medical experts, while exonerating the Bateses. “The worst that could be said of them,” he observed, “was that they were too proud to accept relief.” The prosecution countered that the accused should be held responsible for the death of their son and urged the jury not to be swayed by “sympathy, compassion or pity.”59 It was a false hope. After deliberating for just two hours in the early evening of Friday, March 22, the jury returned with a “not guilty” verdict to smiles and some tears in the courtroom. Ted and Rose hugged and kissed one another in the prisoners' box before accepting congratulations from friends. The decision went without comment in the media; it was simply reported that the Bateses' ordeal was over after nearly four anxious months. Nor did the Crown decide to appeal the verdict, even though it steadfastly stood by the pathologist's report about the cause of Jackie's death. The provincial Department of Justice seemed to appreciate that it had been a painful case for all concerned and that a conviction was unlikely. As for the twelve local men on the jury, it would appear that they were looking for a reason—to acquit the couple, and Dr. McPhail's testimony provided at least one of them with that reason. A mounted police report prepared shortly thereafter noted that “the general feeling was that no one wanted the accused to be found guilty although the general opinion was they were Guilty.”60

MURDER BY DEPRESSION?

The morning after the Bateses' acquittal, a group from Glidden picked up the couple and took them back to the village—probably one of the last places they wanted to go. Before leaving Biggar, Ted announced to the press that he was looking for work, and it was rumored that they might head north to farm using the small sum of money that they had been given from a local church fund.61 Their whereabouts over the next few years are difficult to determine with any certainty. In Ted's obituary notice, no mention is made of Glidden whatsoever, only that they resided in nearby Eston for a few years before moving to Rosetown in 1939. But according to the information they provided on their 1940 National Registration forms, the couple was separated during the first years of the Second World War. Ted was working for the Hellofs butcher business in Kerrobert and did not list his wife as a dependent, while Rose, who identified herself as a homemaker, was back in Glidden for some inexplicable reason and willing to relocate if needed by the war effort. The pair did eventually end up living together again in Rosetown, where Ted was the butcher in the back of the Red and White grocery store. That's where Harry McDonald, Jackie's childhood friend who was then working as a salesman for General Foods, found him in 1948. Ted insisted on taking Harry home to meet Rose, who on discovering Harry's identity, broke down. Throughout dinner, Ted and Rose talked constantly about their late son and what he had meant to them. McDonald, who had visions of dead Jackie in his casket, was so unnerved by the experience that he never went back to see them.62

Ted Bates died from cancer in Rosetown on December 9, 1954, at the age of sixty-four. Rose went back to England shortly thereafter, to the same village where she had been born, and died there almost a quarter century later, on February 14, 1978.63 Long before their passing, though, the dreadful circumstances surrounding Jackie's death were largely forgotten except by those who had some connection to the Bateses or to the incident. A schoolteacher who arrived in Glidden in 1940 reported that people did not want to talk openly about the tragedy, as if it was something that was best left alone.64 William Wardill, a seven-year-old
boy in nearby Eatonia at the time of Jackie's death, had a similar perception. While many people knew the Bateses and quickly learned the details of their botched suicide attempt, the incident, coming just three weeks before Christmas, was deliberately kept from the children of the village, a surprising feat given the short distance between the two communities. "In an unspoken accord, the older people erected a ring of silence," he related years later in an article. "We were never told about Jack Bates."65 In fact, it was not until Wardill read Pierre Berton's account in The Great Depression over fifty years later that he first became aware of Jackie's fate, even though he regularly traveled to and worked in Glidden in the 1930s and 1940s and is recognized today as the leading local historian of the area. 66

This local reluctance to talk about the Bates family and what happened that December 1933 night in the Avalon schoolyard suggests that there was something more to the narrative than the hard times, Canada's relief policies, and a parent's pride. In fact, these factors were no more than extenuating circumstances—and not the real reason for the Bateses' actions. Saskatoon lawyer Harry Ludgate, for example, never did put the Great Depression on trial in Wilkie in his defense of the Bateses, even though he could have used any number of examples of how the economic collapse had destroyed the lives of thousands of ordinary Canadians, including the Bates family. Maybe he believed it was an unspoken subtext to the proceedings. Or maybe he realized that the couple's troubled existence had more to do with Jackie's death than people who knew Ted and Rose were willing to admit. Whatever the reason, Ludgate never made the Depression the centerpiece of his defense of the Bateses. Instead, he concentrated on how Jackie died by challenging the validity of the pathologist's report.

The why was another matter. For the Bateses, the Depression was a ready-made alibi for taking their son's life when personal problems were at the root of the tragedy—personal problems that had brought Ted and Rose to the precipice of something catastrophic before the twin scourge of depression and drought had staggered Glidden. The sad truth, as revealed by newly released documents, was that Ted and Rose were unhappy partners in a bitter marriage held together by their struggle over their only child. Giving Jackie up—one of the last things they had in the world when the Depression had taken everything else—was impossible for either of them. And in their selfishness, they decided to kill him and themselves when they had lost all hope.

In one of the most poignant passages about Jackie's murder, William Wardill thanked the people of Eatonia for keeping Jackie's death a secret: "The cordon of silence imposed by our elders saved us from the horror of imagining that, while we read our books, people we loved and trusted might kill us with a stealthy, legal gas."67 Jackie Bates was thankfully spared that horror, only because he died in his sleep from carbon monoxide poisoning, lying between the two people in the world he loved and trusted.

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NOTES


2. James Struthers, No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 83-84. According to his endnote reference, Struthers found the Bates story in Conservative prime minister R. B. Bennett's papers. In a somewhat convoluted telegram dated December 9, 1934, George V. Couper, a Glidden storekeeper, excitedly
told the prime minister that the citizens of the village were "horror stricken" that Ted and Rose Bates had been charged with murder after being denied relief in Vancouver and Saskatoon. "It is the firm conviction of this community," Couper wired, "that it is the direct result of the depression and steps should be taken to have the dominion government shoulder the responsibility for relief so that any indigent persons applying for relief be taken care of at the place where application is made." Library and Archives Canada, Manuscript Division, R. B. Bennett Papers, G. V. Couper to R. B. Bennett, December 9, 1933, 489460-1.

3. Ibid., 84.


5. Ibid., 188.

6. Ibid., 189.

7. A summary of the Berton material appears in the Glidden community history book amidst the other family stories. It has become the standard account of the Bates incident and part of the local memory. When I was conducting interviews in the area, one woman recited the Berton account as if it were her own recollection. See As It Happened: *History of the R. M. of Newcombe #260* (Madison, Saskatchewan: Friesen, 1992), 204.

8. Depression stories set in the Canadian prairies include the Fehr family, Mennonites from the Nuenlage Colony north of Saskatoon, who sold everything they owned, bought an old car, and headed for the promise of a new start in Alberta's Peace River country. By late June 1934, Abram and Elizabeth Fehr and their seven children, one of them a three-month-old baby in his mother's arms, were stranded in Edmonton's Market Square, barefoot, hungry, and broke, when a newspaper photographer captured their utter destitution in what would become one of the most-famous—and enduring—pictures of the Depression. Today the photograph of the Fehr family is prominently displayed in an exhibit at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. Then there was Tom Sukanen, a Finnish immigrant who had homesteaded near Macrorie, who spent the decade building an ocean-going ship that he intended to sail all the way home. He suffered a breakdown while hauling the vessel to the Saskatchewan River and later died in the Battleford asylum. Ken Mitchell's play, *The Shipbuilder* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1990), is based on the Sukanen incident. The ship is on display today at a small museum south of Moose Jaw; Sukanen is buried nearby. Edna Weber, meanwhile, was only sixteen in September 1937 when her parents sold her into marriage to a farmer thirty years older. Her father reportedly told the dust bowl bride, "If you do this thing, it will help all of us. . . . There'll be one less mouth to feed here." Quoted in *Toronto Globe and Mail*, June 27, 1998.

9. Both these files were secured through access-to-information requests.


11. Much of this information on the Bates family was provided by a British-based genealogy research service. The 1901 census for England and Wales can be accessed online for a fee at www.1901census.nationalarchives.gov.uk.

12. Passenger-list manifests, organized by Canadian port of entry, are available on microfilm at many Canadian archival institutions.

13. I secured a copy of Ted Bates's death certificate and obituary notice from the Rosetown funeral home that handled his 1954 burial.

14. The search of the Manitoba records was performed by John Richthammer, a graduate student in the archival studies program at the University of Manitoba.

15. Homestead records are part of the Library and Archives Canada online research database, www.collectionscanada.ca/archives. A more detailed search engine for the Saskatchewan records (www.saskhomesteads.com) was recently launched by the Saskatchewan Archives Board. Ted Bates could have purchased or rented land, but one would have to know the legal land description to begin a search of these records.

16. Starting in 1940, all persons sixteen years or older were required to complete a questionnaire to facilitate the mobilization of Canada's human resources for the war effort. The form required the registrant to provide detailed information on a number of matters, including place and country of birth (and parents), occupation, previous military service, and date of entry into Canada (if an immigrant). The National Registration forms, arranged by electoral district, can be accessed today through Statistics Canada. Unfortunately, Ted Bates did not indicate on his form what year he arrived in Canada.


18. Between 1921 and 1924, the Department of Immigration and Colonization required all individuals arriving at Canadian ports of entry to
complete a separate form or individual manifest (Form 30A). The documents were microfilmed in quasi-alphabetical order (groupings based on the initial letters of surnames). In the hope of accessing another possible source of personal information, I decided to review these records to see whether Ted Bates had ever left Canada. On his Form 30A in 1922, Ted Bates indicated that he had previously entered Canada in 1914, but then crossed the year out and put down 1912 instead.

19. The personal information about Rose Bates is based on census material and her Form 30A at the time of her emigration to Canada.


22. Personal communication, Harry McDonald to author, September 4, 2002. When I contacted them, all other former residents of the village made the same general observations about the Bateses.

23. Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, December 7, 1933.

24. Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Headquarters, f. 33-HQ-681-F-10, “Edward Alfred Bates et al. murder,” Rose Bates to [name removed], n.d. The letter was sent to Ted’s sister, Lily, in England, since Rose signs her name, “sister in law.” The date is sometime in 1932 since Rose says twice in the letter that she has been married to Ted for eight years. All personal names were removed from the police file prior to its release to the author, but most names can be figured out using the court documents and newspapers.


27. Total farm cash income in Saskatchewan went into a nosedive during the Depression, slipping from 273 million dollars in 1928 to just 66 million dollars in 1931, where it remained, roughly, for the better part of the decade. To put these figures in perspective, the average net cash income for a Saskatchewan farmer went from $1,614 in 1928 to a mere $66 by 1933; by 1937, this annual income had crept up to $141. Donald Garfield Matheson, “The Saskatchewan Relief Commission, 1931-34” (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1974), tables 1 and 4.

28. Sinclair Ross, As for Me and My House (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1941), 96.

29. RCMP Headquarters, “Bates murder,” Rose Bates to [name removed], n.d.

30. Ibid.

31. The Bateses’ financial situation is far from clear. The Saskatchewan Sun on December 8, 1933, reported that Ted had $1,400 in cash from the sale of the meat market but was still owed more than $8,000 from overdue accounts on his books. But at the preliminary hearing in Biggar, it was suggested that Ted initially received $450 and was to be paid more in the future under the terms of the agreement of sale. Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, December 13, 1933.

32. Harry McDonald, Jackie’s closest friend in Glidden, never remembered saying goodbye to the Bateses. McDonald to author, September 4, 2002.

33. Vancouver Sun, December 8, 1933; December 9, 1933.

34. Quoted in the Biggar Independent, March 22, 1934. Since the Bateses were acquitted and the verdict was never appealed, there is no official transcript of the Wilkie trial. Newspapers accounts provide the closest thing to a transcript of the trial proceedings.

35. Quoted in Ibid.

36. Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, March 20, 1934; Battleford Court House records, “Coroner’s Inquest: Touching the Death of Jack Bates,” Biggar, December 6, 1933. Transcripts of the coroner’s inquest and preliminary hearing are located in storage in the basement of the Battleford courthouse; these court materials had been transferred to Battleford following the closure of the Wilkie courthouse in the early 1960s.

37. Regina Leader-Post, December 11, 1933.

38. Quoted in Vancouver Sun, December 8, 1933.

39. For a discussion of the moral underpinnings of the relief system and its determination to preserve the work ethic at the cost of human dignity, see Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo, Making Good: Law and Moral Regulation in Canada, 1867-1939 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 124-33.

40. Bennett Papers, Couper to Bennett, December 18, 1933, 489488.


42. Ibid., Rose Bates to [name removed], n.d.

43. Quoted in Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, December 15, 1933.

44. Ibid., December 7, 1933.

45. The mounted police investigators would be later chastised for going to the hospital and asking Rose Bates to make a statement so soon after the incident. Prime Minister Bennett raised the matter with RCMP Commissioner James MacBrien, who
insisted that his men had acted properly and that Rose had volunteered to make a statement. RCMP Headquarters, "Bates murder," J. H. MacBrien to H. Guthrie, December 28, 1933.

46. Edmonton Journal, December 8, 1933.

47. One Big Union Bulletin, December 9, 1933, 2.

48. Bennett Papers, Couper to Bennett, December 9, 1933, 489461. Copies of the resolution were sent to the prime minister and provincial premier. One of Vancouver's neighbourhood councils sent Bennett a similar resolution. J. Bell to R. B. Bennett, December 26, 1933, 489506.

49. Western Development Museum, G. V. Couper to Station Agent, Clair, Saskatchewan, January 20, 1934.

50. Ibid.

51. Glidden paid for Jackie's funeral. The grave, a long cement slab with no name marker, is located on the extreme eastern side of the Madison cemetery.

52. McDonald to author, September 4, 2002.


54. "Rex v. Rose Bates and Edward A. Bates," preliminary hearing transcript, December 15, 1933. This document was found in the basement of the Battleford Court House. See note 36.

55. There is no mention of the Bates incident in the voluminous papers of Jimmy Gardiner, former Saskatchewan Liberal premier and leader of the Opposition at the time. There are no J. T. M. Anderson papers, as the premier's papers, along with those of other government ministers, were reportedly burned shortly after the government's electoral defeat in 1934.

56. Quoted in Ibid.

57. Quoted in Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, March 21, 1934.

58. Quoted in Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, March 23, 1934. Although a reasonable medical opinion in the 1930s, an enlarged thymus gland in a young boy is today considered normal.

59. Quoted in Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, March 23, 1934.

60. RCMP Headquarters, "Bates murder," H. W. H. Williams memorandum, March 24, 1934. One of the investigating policemen said much the same thing in his report: "The Jury were satisfied that the accused was legally 'GUILTY,' but on account of the severity of the punishment refrained from bringing in a verdict to that effect." Ibid., C. E. Carey report on conclusion of case, March 24, 1934.

61. Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, March 23, 1934.


63. Letters to people with the surname Slatter living in the same area have never been answered.

64. Bessie Hammel, telephone interview by author, November 30, 2005.

