

Washburn during the Roaring Twenties-Part 1

After the Great War there was a brief period of economic readjustment, then a short-lived boom, followed by a depression that began in the summer of 1920. But by 1923 the economy had recovered and expanded, fostering the dream of prosperity for all. During these years the conditions on which the modern consumer economy depends emerged: on the one hand, high volume production of cheap consumer products, and, on the other hand, a large number of people with money to buy the products and the leisure time in which enjoy them. But the nation's traditional social fabric was rent by the consequences of national prohibition (which became effective January 20 1920) and by an emerging style of life dramatically different from the traditional one. The excitement of illegal drinking, provocative dances, stimulating music widely available on the radio or the phonograph, the automobile, the "newly liberated" woman, the breakdown of traditional sexual mores, and money made available by prosperity, created a "fast," indulgent life style, particularly among the younger generation, earning these years the appellation of the "roaring twenties."

While affected by the rapid economic and social changes occurring in the nation, the people of Washburn were largely observers of, rather than participants in, the national mania of the roaring

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twenties. Soon after the November 11th armistice that ended the Great War, Washburn's war boom collapsed, its people rudely awakened to peacetime realities, their dream of a large, prosperous city shattered. Instead of the war boom continuing, as people hoped and anticipated, Washburn began a period of decline that transformed it from a boom town into a small maintenance community. By the summer of 1920 the population had declined from an estimated 7,500 people at the height of the wartime boom in 1918, to 3,707, or 123 less than the 1910 population. By 1930, the population had further declined to 2,238 people, or 60% of the 1920 population. Despite losses among the foreign born and first generation native born, together they still constituted 74% of the population in 1920, compared to 66% in 1930. But in the process of assimilation and "Americanization" that began after the turn of the century, intensified during the Great War, and continued during the 1920s, Washburn lost much of its heavily ethnic

character. Old world language and culture were no longer daily experiences but were celebrated on Christmas, national holidays of the old countries, or on other special occasions. Even the churches, the last bastions of ethnicity, began to "Americanize."

The decline in the city's population base was accompanied by the deconstruction of its material base, its stock of houses, public and private buildings, and factories, mills, and docks. With the exception of a few houses and buildings constructed during the war, and the monumental brownstone buildings, Washburn's material base was old and steadily deteriorating. Abandoned buildings and the foundations of buildings now gone, lined Bayfield Street, while dilapidated mills, factory buildings, and docks were scattered along the waterfront from Tenth Avenue West to the coal dock at Central Avenue. The city council voted to have the old city dock, constructed in 1895 during the lumbering boom years, dismantled. But the council could not bring itself to raze the old town hall, a building that symbolized the hopes and promise of Washburn when erected in 1887 and within which so much of the community's history had taken place.

The deconstruction of the city's material base was aided by the fire monster. In the early morning of December 10

1920, fire swept through four business buildings and was only prevented from destroying an entire block of businesses by a fire wall. On May 22 1922, five business buildings were destroyed in another early morning fire. In the afternoon of February 4 1924, during a raging blizzard, a garage was totally destroyed along with 16 automobiles. In the early morning of August 29 1925, fire swept through boarding houses and adjacent buildings on Omaha Street. In the early morning of November 15 1927, again during a blizzard, two stores were destroyed. Residence fires were even more numerous than business fires, with 17 homes destroyed or heavily damaged during the decade.

Ferry service between Washburn and Ashland ended in the spring of 1920, a victim of Washburn's declining population and the growth of automobile ownership. For almost forty years little ferry boats-Daisy, Fashion, Plowboy, Skater, Lucille, and others-shuttled back and forth across the bay, providing a key communication and transportation link between the two communities. The end of ferry service symbolized Washburn's new future as a small, insular community, its people dependent on Ashland as a regional shipping center for many of their necessities and for the few luxuries that they could afford.