

Visions of a Great Lakes to ocean waterway

Washburn During The Roaring Twenties—Part 5

In an editorial in May 1926, the Times declared that "The trouble with us is we fail to see our opportunities. . . . We fail to see there is nothing lacking with Washburn or the surrounding country in a business way—but upon close investigation we will find the trouble is with ourselves. There is nothing wrong with Washburn—trouble is our own imagination." There were many people who did use their "own imagination," however, promoting "grand visions" of projects that would insure a prosperous future for Washburn. One of these grand visions imagined that Washburn, with its spacious and deep harbor, would inevitably become a great international port when the Great Lakes were connected to the Atlantic Ocean by what was then known as the St. Lawrence waterway. Occasionally ships with cargoes of soda from Chili and iron pyrites from Spain for the Du Pont plant docked at Washburn. But the size of ocean going vessels coming into the Great Lakes was restricted by the small locks on the St. Lawrence River to Lake Ontario and the Welland Canal, connecting Lake Ontario and Lake Erie (bypassing Niagara Falls).

Washburn's active interest in the St. Lawrence waterway began with the attendance of

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representatives from the city at deep waterway conventions in the 1890s. But no further reports about the project appeared in the Times until the summer of 1920, when the International Joint Commission held hearings in Ashland, attended by delegations from Washburn and other communities in northern Wisconsin and Michigan. There were, of course, no dissenting voices among the witnesses regarding the great benefits that the waterway would bring to industry and agriculture in the region. The Times declared that "The meeting on a whole was a dandy and the Commission is sure of one thing and that is Wisconsin, to a man, is for the project and will demand it until the project is completed." Throughout the following years of the decade many meetings and conferences about the project were held, several commissions issued favorable reports, engineers concurred that the waterway was feasible, while Presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge expressed their strong sup-

port. In July 1928, the mayor and a delegation from Washburn were granted an audience with President Coolidge, who was spending a vacation at Brule. They presented a long communication to the president that concluded with the declaration that "Every fact, every argument, every conclusion proves the Great Lakes-to-Ocean Waterway proposition to be the greatest economic conception, promising the most far-reaching industrial and social gains, that confronts the American people" and appealed to him for his continued support of the project. While it was probably an exciting event for the delegation—the mayor of little downtrodden Washburn meeting with the president of the United States—it was one of those "feel good" events of no real consequence. That same month, Herbert Hoover, the much admired "great engineer," predicted while campaigning for the presidency in Duluth that the "St. Lawrence Waterway will undoubtedly be under way within the next four years."

There was, however, a whiff of skepticism close to home. Guy M. Burnham, the U.S. Customs Officer in Ashland and an enthusiastic advocate of the waterway before the International Joint Commission hearings in Ashland, was less than enthusiastic in a speech to an audience of business men in June 1925, advising them "not to believe that

the Great Lakes Waterway . . . would revolutionize shipping here," because of Ashland's shallow harbor. But doubts about the project raised by Burnham and others did not dampen the high expectations, built-up by favorable reports and predictions of imminent action, that the waterway project would soon be underway. No one doubted that the waterway would be of benefit to Washburn, and, in an article in July 1929, the Times described just how immense these benefits would be. "Great wharves will dot our harbor," the Times declared, "ribbons of steel will lie along the waterfront," . . . and "development of the agricultural territory about us will be speeded up," while industry, summer residents, and tourists will come to Washburn. The prosperity dream that has been carried by every man, woman, and child that has ever lived in Washburn will come true," and "a much larger city than Washburn now is will stand on the shore of beautiful Chequamegon Bay." Unfortunately, the enthusiasm and predictions of the Times and others proved to be premature, for a Great Lakes waterway remained only a vision until the St. Lawrence Seaway was complete 25 years later. Not one vessel that passed through the new Seaway ever called at Washburn.