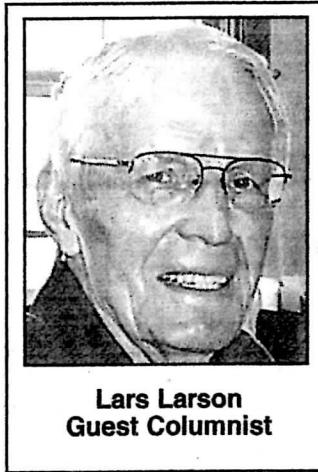


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The people's government, part two

While the hope that Washburn would once again be resurrected dimmed, it was never extinguished despite the evidence that its past was dead and gone forever. In January 1928 the council voted to have the old city dock, constructed in 1895 during the boom years, dismantled. The Times was not discouraged, however, commenting that "It will likely be the first step in the direction of a new dock, one of Washburn's great needs." The Times was wrong, for there were no "great needs" for a city dock, and a replacement was never built. But the council could not bring itself to raze the old, dilapidated town hall, a building that symbolized the hopes for and promise of Washburn, when it was erected in 1887, and within which so much of the community's history had taken place. Bids for wrecking the building were solicited, but the council apparently decided to put off the inevitable, instructing the street commissioner "to see that the building is kept in such condition as would keep it from deterioration."

During these years, regardless of which administration was in power, there was little money to do anything except routine maintenance of the city's infrastructure and even much of that work was neglected. Washburn's red clay streets, now used by an



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increasing number of automobiles, continued to be dust bowls in the summer, mud holes in the spring, with rock-hard ruts in the winter, street maintenance amounting to little more than spreading gravel and grading to smooth out the ruts. A few minor improvements were made—an occasional sidewalk laid and sewer extended—but on the whole the city's streets and avenues, sewer system, and other components of its infrastructure, inherited from earlier days, were barely maintained, certainly not modernized and would not be for many years to come.

Despite the precarious economic condition of the city after the war, the old question of purchasing the public utilities re-emerged, the belief being that the cost of water and electricity to consumers would be lower under public ownership. In February 1920 the council

approved placing the question of purchasing the Washburn Water Works Company and the Washburn Electric Light and Power Company on the ballot but it was not until the April 1922 election that the voters approved the purchase of the Washburn Water Works Company. There followed several years of intricate legal maneuvering among the city, the state Railway Commission, which oversaw public utilities, the courts and the Washburn Water Works Company. Meanwhile, the owners of the company pursued a two-part strategy to profit from the situation, demanding a high price for the water works, on the one hand, and charging the highest possible rates to consumers as long as the water works remained in private hands. The losers in all of this were the citizens of Washburn, who were paying high rates for their water plus the legal costs of the litigation in which the city was involved regarding the rate increases and waterworks assessment, while the city was not any closer to purchasing the waterworks than ten years earlier.

After much haggling between the city and the water works company, in the April 1934 election voters approved the purchase of the system for \$67,500. The system was managed by a three-person commission and a

superintendent elected by the city council. Plans were immediately made for improving the system, including the installation of a smaller efficient pump at the pump house and lining the reservoir with concrete and covering it with a screen that would allow sunlight to penetrate to the water but would keep out birds, insects, and debris (and rocks thrown in by mischievous boys). A new pump may have been installed, but the reservoir remained unlined and uncovered until 1971, when a new water supply system, with drilled wells and a new reservoir, was constructed.

Meanwhile the Lake Superior District Power Company purchased the Washburn Electric Light and Power Company, taking over the task of providing the city with electricity. However, there was dissatisfaction with the rates the company charged and with the street lighting it provided. A committee was appointed to investigate the possibility of constructing a power plant, but before it had completed its work, the city came to an agreement with the power company to provide adequate street lighting until 1:30AM, and no more was heard of the fanciful idea of a municipal power plant on the Sioux River, at least for the time being.