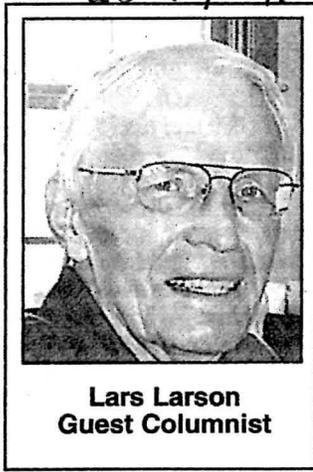


Washburn In The Great Depression—Part 3 2

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It is generally believed that the great depression was a shared national experience, at least affecting, if not altering, the lives of everyone. But in fact the majority of the population—the wealthy, the well-to-do, and those with jobs (even during the peak of unemployment in 1932 and 1933, three-quarters of the labor force was employed)—escaped the consequences, or at most were inconvenienced, by the adverse economic conditions. In Washburn senior members of Du Pont management held well-paying, secure jobs. For them Washburn was just a temporary stop in their careers. Then there were the successful professional and business people, lower level Du Pont managers, and government and other white collar employees. They were permanent residents of Washburn for whom the welfare of Washburn as a community was important, but who were, to a considerable degree, insulated from economic adversity. However, the largest group by far, perhaps three-quarters or more of Washburn's population, consisted of workers at the Du Pont plant, in government, and in other blue collar occupations, marginally employed and unemployed workers, fatherless families, and a large group of elderly people that included many widows. It was these people—who paid their taxes, obeyed the law, patronized the businesses, sent their children to school, took



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care of their property, participated in the political process, and did the hard, dirty work—who bore the brunt of the great depression. While a few people survived with “scrapping by” and “making do” many were forced by their circumstances to accept private or government relief.

“Relief,” that is the provision assistance to those who, for one reason or another, are in need, is of two types: direct relief, usually cash payments but also cash substitutes such as food stamps, or in-kind, such as agricultural commodities; and work relief, wages paid for employment on public works projects, often of the “make work” variety. Private relief efforts began in December 1926 when the American Legion placed decorated “cheer barrels” in the grocery stores in which customers could leave packages of food for distribution “to the needy of the city and vicinity.” The Legion continued its “Christmas cheer”

program in 1930, placing barrels for food donations and cans for cash donations in the several grocery stores in the city. The Legion's women's auxiliary sponsored a “charity ball” in December, which collected \$60, while Du Pont employees donated the “General Manager's prize fund” of \$250 for the purchase of clothing. These contributions, along with donations by the public, provided the money to help about 50 needy families in Washburn and the surrounding rural areas with food and clothing. In 1931 the Christmas Cheer program was taken over by a United Community Relief Committee. The committee collected \$650 for the purchase of food for over 80 needy families, while Du Pont employees again contributed \$250 from the safety prize fund toward food for about 25 families. The committee also paid unemployed men to tear down old buildings that it had purchased, recovering part of its expenditure by selling the lumber. In December 1934 Legion members collected used toys in the community and reconditioned them in a “Santa Claus' workshop” in their hall. Toys and games with an estimated value of \$350 were distributed as Christmas presents to 189 children in 77 families.

There were no further reports regarding private relief work until December 1937, when the sharp recession of 1938 began. When it was learned that 49 households including 132 people

“were faced with the prospect of a bleak and cheerless Christmas . . . a movement was launched to provide Christmas Cheer to every one of these homes.” Over \$300 in donations was collected, providing money for food baskets and clothing certificates distributed to 72 households in the city. The situation in December 1938 was much worse, with an estimated 120 to 150 “needy cases.” A city-wide solicitation campaign was undertaken during which members of the Civic Club called on every “solvent household.” Not so subtle pressure was applied by the Times, which threatened to publish the individual amounts donated street by street. Eventually about \$650 was collected, including an “anonymous contribution” from a former Washburn resident plus donations from organizations and individuals. Over 140 baskets of food, clothing, and reconditioned toys were distributed to 575 needy city residents. By December 1939 the number of “needy cases” had declined significantly because of a general improvement in economic conditions in Washburn, due primarily to increased employment at the Du Pont plant to fill defense orders. The Civic Club distributed about \$300 to provide food boxes, reconditioned toys, and clothing certificates to 245 “Christmas Cheer recipients,” less than half the number of the previous year.