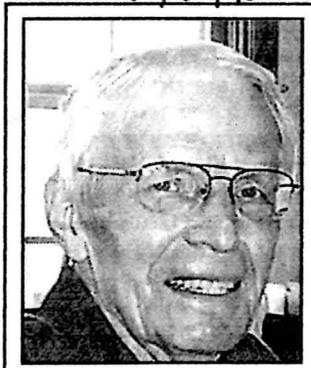


# Washburn In The Great Depression—Part 4

CS 11/11/10

The city of Washburn had always provided "poor relief" to a few destitute residents, apparently even maintaining for a time, a "city home" for the homeless. The first indication of a recognition by the city authorities that Washburn had a new and serious relief problem was a discussion at a city council meeting in early November 1930 regarding necessity of providing work for the unemployed. At a meeting in early December the council authorized a survey of unemployment in the city to provide a basis for setting up projects to provide work. Seventy-five men registered as unemployed, although it was the "general opinion" of the council committee that "many applicants were deserving while others were not." The first major "make work" project was the dismantling of the old town hall in January 1931, while other projects to provide employment included work on the city streets, remodeling of the fire hall, and construction of an ice skating rink. The magnitude of the relief problem confronting the city was revealed by a report by the mayor in March 1932: 40 families, including 160 persons, were receiving public assistance and 40 additional families would probably require aid during the year, while 210 single men and transients were also receiving aid, at an estimated cost for the year of \$5,000.

In 1931, the Wisconsin legislature, under the lead-



**Lars Larson**  
Guest Columnist

ership of the recently elected Governor Philip F. La Follette, enacted a series of laws intended to ameliorate the consequences of the depression, culminating in December 1931 in an unemployment compensation act and in January 1932 in an emergency relief act for direct relief and public works with a fund of \$18 million. While Wisconsin's relief program was far-reaching, the state government, like local governments, lacked the financial resources and expertise to deal effectively with the deepening depression. Also, the problem could not be addressed piecemeal by the states, some of which, like Wisconsin, were taking steps to meet the crisis, while other states did little or nothing. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his advisers recognized that the depression and its consequences were national in scope and had to be addressed at the federal level. In his inaugural speech on March 4 1933, the

President had used two phrases that were to ring down through succeeding years: "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," and "The Nation asks for action, and action now." And he took his own words to heart, creating during the years 1933 to 1938, with the support of a Democratically controlled Congress, laws, agencies, and programs, collectively known as the New Deal, which had two immediate objectives: to provide relief to the unemployed and destitute; and to aid the recovery of the economy.

In May 1933 Congress created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration with a fund of \$500 million dollars for grants to the states. Sensitive to the preference of the unemployed for productive work, rather than the "dole" of direct relief, the President established the Civil Works Administration by executive order to provide work relief on public works projects, during the winter of 1933-1934. Also established in 1933, with the same purpose, was the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Public Works Administration. By 1935 a more or less permanent federal relief program had been organized, consisting of the Social Security Program, created in August 1935 to provide direct relief to the elderly, blind, and mothers with dependent children; the Works Progress Administration, the Public Works Administration and the Civilian Conservation

Corps, to provide work relief; and the Resettlement Administration, to provide loans and direct relief to farmers. "General relief" programs of local and state governments provided for those among the needy who were not covered by the federal agencies and programs. There was no overall, integrated relief program, however, for the work of the several levels of government and their various agencies was not coordinated and occasionally were in conflict.

The New Deal agencies and programs were intended to meet particularly pressing or emergency problems. Some were well thought out and successful, while others were ad hoc responses, many of which were not too effective or outright failures. They did not "cure" the depression—it would take a war to do that—but they did alleviate, to a certain extent, some of its worst consequences, particularly unemployment and poverty. Many New Deal agencies and programs, such as Social Security, continue to influence the social, political and economic life of the nation. And through the Civilian Conservation Corps, Public Works Administration, Works Progress Administration and other federal programs, the New Deal bequeathed to the nation a veritable treasure of art, parks, forests, wilderness areas, buildings, highways, airports, and other public works.