

Washburn during the great depression: PART 5

Work relief projects

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Work relief projects, financed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and by the state, county and city, complemented the direct relief programs. About 1925 the city came into possession of the former Northern State Bank building, a large brownstone structure located on the northwest corner of Bayfield Street and Washington Avenue, and another building directly north of it along Washington Avenue. In May 1927 these buildings were sold to the Standard Oil Company, which intended to demolish them and construct a "modern gasoline filling station" on the site. Some council members and citizens expressed reluctance about having a filling station built on such a prominent main street corner, but the lure of the substantial amount of money offered by the oil company for the property apparently could not be resisted. By 1936 the petroleum company had demolished the Times building and had started on the bank building. Meanwhile, the city had received approval for a WPA project to complete the demolition of the bank building, and to use the brownstone and other materials from the two buildings to construct a large addition to the north side of the city hall (the former library building). This additional space was to be used for a council chamber and a fire hall. The project was completed in early 1938.



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A second important project along Bayfield Street was the paving, with concrete of "lower Bayfield Street." As part of the paving of Highway 13 from Washburn to Ashland, the "asphaltic concrete" pavement, between Third Avenue West and Eighth Avenue West (laid down in 1916), was torn up and replaced by a 20 foot wide concrete roadway, paid for by state funds. WPA labor and city funds were used to lay concrete between this roadway and the curbs on both sides. Included in this project was the angled relocation of Bayfield Street to eliminate the dangerous right angle turn at the intersection of Bayfield Street and Washington Avenue. The third Bayfield Street project was the extension of the "white way," installed in 1916 between First Avenue East and Third Avenue West, to Eighth Avenue West. The original stylish, black iron lamp posts were replaced with 48

hexagon posts of polished concrete, fabricated in the old Lemke Building. In addition to these large WPA projects, major county-projects included the construction of a heating plant, garage, and annex for the county courthouse.

Other improvements throughout the city on a lesser scale, some of which employed WPA labor, included opening new avenues and streets, construction of tennis courts, extending water lines, construction of curbs, gutters and sidewalks, redecoration of the interiors of the library and city hall, creation of a park on the north side of Bayfield Street, between Third and Fourth Avenues West (Wikdal Park), along with many other small projects. Projects that were proposed, but never undertaken, included development of the waterfront, with a breakwater 1,000 feet long, extending from the old city dock that "would make a basin for small water craft" (location of the marina, constructed in 1982); extensive improvements at Memorial Park; "a narrow boulevard up and down the center of Washington Avenue to improve the appearance of the city's central avenue and to eliminate some traffic hazards;" and an airport "at the top of Washington Avenue Hill."

The WPA supported not only public works projects but also recreational activities of various kinds. In addition to providing

employment for those who planned and supervised the activities, these projects also afforded interesting diversions for people, particularly children. For example, in January 1937 the WPA sponsored winter sports meets; a bird house building contest for boys; a sports field day at Lake Owen, attended by 20 boys from Washburn; a craft shop for boys in the old Pioneer School; activities at the city playgrounds; and even social dancing for boys and girls, 13 years and older, held at the city hall (the writer frequently worked in the craft shop but managed to avoid the social dancing lessons).

By early 1938 Washburn had obtained so many WPA projects that WPA officials meeting with the Ashland city council stated that "In the little city of Washburn, it is astounding the [number of] WPA projects completed and how enthusiastic they are about them," urging the council to follow Washburn's example. But toward the end of the decade an increasingly conservative Congress forced cutbacks in the New Deal relief programs. In April the city council approved a resolution urging Congress to appropriate money for WPA, so people would not have to go on direct relief. Apparently such protests, and there were many, had little effect, for 63 WPA workers were terminated in Bayfield County in July.