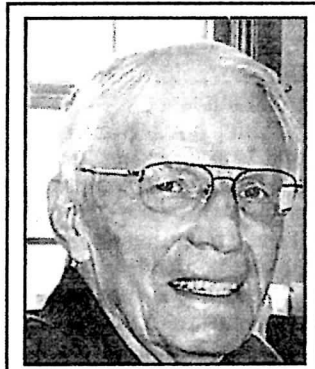


# Washburn During The Great Depression—The Economic Base -1

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By 1930 all that remained of Washburn's formerly large shipping operations was the coal dock, a small operation of the Northwestern Fuel Company that owned the unloading super-structure but leased the dock itself from the Omaha Railroad Company. In late 1931, despite an appeal from the people of Washburn, the Northwestern Fuel Company ceased operations, and the unloading super-structure was torn down in the summer and fall of 1932. In February 1937 Mayor Hans J. Thompson announced that the dock would be reopened by the Michela Coal and Dock Company. Projecting a great future from a small beginning, the mayor said "that the reopening of the coal dock may be the beginning of more marine activity here," including "boat cargoes of automobiles brought here for distribution to dealers in this region."

The first boat, the self-unloader, T.W. Robinson, arrived in late May 1938 with 10,000 tons of coal. At 575 feet the huge ship, the largest ever to call at Washburn, loomed over everything on the waterfront, and people flocked down to the dock to watch the coal pouring out of the end of the massive unloading boom that had been swung out over the dock. About 50 feet longer than the original coal dock, the Robinson had to tie-up with its bows in the corner formed by the old



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commercial dock and the coal dock, and its stern projecting at an angle out into the bay because the old grain elevator foundation was in the way. During the summer, with appropriations from the city and the federal government, the timbers and stone of the foundation were dredged up, removing this obstacle. Thousands of board feet of timber in excellent condition were recovered that were used to improve the dock.

When the Omaha Railroad Company refused to sign the lease for the dock, the city was successful in having the property condemned, purchasing it from the railroad company, then leasing it to the Michela Company. Coal was screened at the dock, then shipped out by rail or truck, the first rail shipment of three cars being made in late June 1938. Five coal cargoes were received during the summer and fall of

1938 and two in 1939. In 1931 at least one raft of pulp wood from Canada arrived at the old Sprague mill site, where the logs were shipped by rail to Wisconsin paper mills. There were no reports of pulp wood rafts or barges after 1931, however. No "cargoes of automobiles" or any other cargo beside coal arrived, so Mayor Thompson's optimistic prediction regarding Washburn's new maritime future was unfulfilled.

As the Depression deepened, the Omaha Railroad continued its efforts to reduce its passenger service—the "scoot"—on the line between Ashland and Bayfield. The Times, usually an ardent defender of private business, had little sympathy for the Omaha, claiming that the Ashland to Bayfield line was profitable, even though the company demonstrated that it was not, and declaring that if it was not, the company should absorb the loss. "Who, in business, has made money during the period of the Depression?" the paper asked. In December 1931 the state regulatory authorities held public hearings in Ashland on the company's proposal to abandon the Ashland to Bayfield service. Representatives from Washburn and Bayfield were at a severe disadvantage at the hearings because the company had the information regarding the cost and profitability of the service and obviously would not share

it. In 1933 the company proposed to substitute buses for rail service, but this idea was abandoned because of strong public opposition. Finally, on March 31 1934, scheduled passenger service was abandoned, replaced by one mixed freight and passenger train daily. The company did a good business hauling the coal, pulp wood, and soda that had arrived by ship, also occasionally running tourist trains from Minneapolis and St. Paul to Washburn and Bayfield during the summer months.

The Chequamegon Cooperative Creamery, located in its new building at Washington Avenue and Omaha Street, continued to prosper, in May 1937 reportedly processing 8,000 pounds of milk daily received from about 175 farmers on three milk routes. It also began to produce casein, a protein precipitate from skim milk, the principal ingredient of cheese, as well as having numerous other commercial and industrial applications. In May 1933 the creamery refused to join other creameries in the county (except the Bayfield creamery) in a statewide "milk strike" by farmers. In an effort to increase the price they were paid for their milk the farmers in a "Milk Pool" refused to bring their milk to market and attempted to stop other farmers from doing so. The strike failed to achieve its objective, however.