

THE WPA IN DAKOTA COUNTY

by Russ Withrow

MENDOTA WORK CAMP NO. 1

The decade of the 1930s has gone down in history as one of the most distressing periods the United States has ever suffered in peace time in magnitude of domestic crises, eclipsed only by the Civil War of the 1860s. Commonly called the Great Depression, this debilitating period was precipitated by the stock market crash of October 29, 1929. On that calamitous day, stock prices began to spiral downward when 13,000,000 stocks, more than twice the normal five million daily shares, changed hands on the New York Stock Exchange. For the next two months stock prices continued to decline, and by the end of the year the NYSE had lost \$40 billion.¹

The Depression was further heightened by a drought that turned the heartland of America from Mexico to Canada into a giant dust bowl. Beginning in 1932, this drought turned the soil into a powdery dust that the wind blew into drifts as high as the fences, and “black blizzards” carried the soil away, with ships as much as 500 miles out in the Atlantic reporting it descending on them. Thousands of farmers were forced from their land when they saw their wheat crops decline from 18.2 bushels per acre to less than 5 bushels. The drought lasted for eight years until 1940 when adequate rainfall returned.²



Franklin Delano
Roosevelt

By the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated as president on March 4, 1933 this country was already into its fourth year of the Great Depression, and millions of people had been forced from their jobs by the anemic economy of the previous three years. Col. Arthur Woods, head of the President's Emergency Committee for Unemployment Relief, estimated that by January 1, 1931 there were between 4,000,000 to 5,000,000 unemployed in the country: by 1932, 13,000,000 Americans – one in every four – had no income.³

Former business executives, who had just recently been contemplating where to build a second home, could be seen on street corners shining shoes or selling apples, neckties, and patent medicines. Hundreds of jobless people stood in soup lines, that stretched for blocks, at missions and other charitable organizations for a meal or shelter.

Shantytowns consisting of cardboard, wooden boxes, newspapers or whatever else the homeless could use began springing up all over the country.⁴

Some of these downtrodden, who were normally law abiding citizens, tried to find an easy solution to their problems and turned to crime to solve their financial dilemma. In one such instance, a 38-year-old Summit, South Dakota farmer was arrested in 1934 for participating in the \$5,000 holdup of the Hampton State Bank on July 6, 1933. He confessed to Dakota County Attorney Harold E. Stassen that he drove the getaway car because he needed money to make up for drought-induced crop losses. What he got for his efforts, instead, was a 20-year sentence in the Stillwater Penitentiary.⁵

The majority of the unemployment was in major manufacturing areas, such as Chicago, where in 1932 the toll was reported to be 50 percent, and an astounding 80 percent in Toledo, Ohio. In one of the largest layoffs in labor's history, half of the automotive workers found themselves without jobs. In the entire State of Minnesota the rate was 29 percent in 1934, which was intensified by 70 percent on the Iron Range. Dakota County, by not being dependent on large manufacturing plants, fared better than other parts of the country during the Depression. The county's unemployment rate in 1930 was a modest 3 percent with 1,035 of its 34,592 population idle: this rate was still a paltry 2.6 percent in 1940.⁶

Before the 1950s, Dakota County was largely agrarian with 2,251 farms occupying 84.9 percent of the county's approximate 383,360 acres, and almost every town, including Hastings and Farmington, was largely dependent on this agricultural activity for its existence.⁷ Because of this, more people in the county were able to make a living when their urban counterparts could not. This doesn't mean they prospered and were living lavishly, however. Depressed farm prices in the 1920s and 30s kept many farmers near the impoverished level. By 1933 farmers in the county were receiving 43 cents for a bushel of wheat, 10 cents for oats, and a trifle less than 1 cent a quart for milk; corn, their principal crop, wasn't wanted for any price. Then there was the case of one Minnesota farmer who shipped a carload of cattle to the South St. Paul stockyards. The cost of shipping was more than the cattle, and instead of a check for a profit he got a “please remit \$70” note from the railroad.⁸

When Roosevelt picked up the presidential reins he quickly set about the task of reviving the sagging economy. In his inaugural address he bolstered the American people's hope by telling them, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” His intent was to provide work for the unem-

ployed by instituting a number of federal agencies. Condensed into an alphabet soup lingo by newspaper headline writers, some of these agencies were referred to as AAA, NRA, TVA, SEC, FDIC, and WPA.⁹ (See column on right). Although these agencies helped Roosevelt to achieve most of his goals, it would take the rest of the decade and the threat of war for the economy to return to more normal times.

Roosevelt felt strongly that to preserve their skills and dignity the people should do useful work for a wage rather than be on the dole. This was echoed by Harry L. Hopkins, the head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, who observed, “Give a man a dole and you save his body. Give him a job and you save both body and spirit.” On March 6, 1935, Roosevelt signed the executive order creating the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In 1939 its name was changed to the Works Projects Administration. Its goal was to bring about economic recovery to the country by providing light public works projects for the unemployed.

During its eight-year tenure, the WPA spent \$11 billion building 1,634 new schoolbuildings, 105 airports, 3,000 tennis courts, 3,300 storage dams, 103 golf courses, and 5,800 mobile libraries.¹⁰ WPA did much more than just construction work. It employed thousands of actors and artists, dentists for repairing teeth, nurses for making home visits, and provided 6,000,000 nutritious lunches to 70,000 pupils in 700 schools. In point of fact, the WPA employed people from just about every job description to help them preserve their skills while they weathered the Depression. Of great importance to present historians was the Historical Records Survey (HRS) that employed up to 6,000 clerks, teachers, writers, librarians, and archivists to catalog, analyze, and compile inventories of state and county records. Making up 13.5% of WPA’s employees were women who were engaged in sewing clothes for needy people, bookbinding, caring for the elderly, school lunch programs, and recreational work.

By 1941 in Dakota County, the WPA had graded 6 miles of streets and regraded 48 miles, built 24 miles of boulevards, installed 37,044 linear feet of curbs and gutters, 33,300 linear feet of sanitary sewers and 1,500 storm sewers, built 9,600 linear feet of water mains, and installed 198,800 square feet of sidewalks.¹¹ They constructed the Hastings Post Office in 1936, converted an old gravel pit in Hastings into Todd Field, painted a mural inside the South St. Paul High School, mended books for the public libraries, and each month served 12,000 children in six locations with hot school lunches. In Hastings, in order to transfer prisoners directly from police cars to their cells, a 22 x 26 foot adjoining garage was built onto the county jail at a cost of \$2,200.¹² Other projects included reconstruc-

UNITED STATES RECOVERY PRIMER

A partial list of the ABCs of the New Deal:

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| AAA | | Agricultural Adjustment Administration |
| CAB | | Consumers’ Advisory Board |
| CC | ..... | Consumers’ Council |
| CCC | ..... | Civilian Conservation Corps |
| CCC | ..... | Commodity Credit Corporation |
| CSB | ..... | Central Statistical Board |
| CWA | ..... | Civil Works Administration |
| EC | ..... | Executive Council |
| ECPC | ..... | Executive Commercial Policy Committee |
| EHFA | ..... | Electrical Home and Farm Authority |
| FAA | ..... | Federal Alcohol Control Administration |
| FAA | ..... | Farm Credit Administration |
| FTC | ..... | Office of Federal Coordinator of Transportation |
| FDIC | ..... | Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation |
| FERA | ..... | Federal Emergency Relief Administration |
| FHA | ..... | Federal Housing Authority |
| FHLBB | ..... | Federal Home Loan Bank Board |
| FSRC | ..... | Federal Surplus Relief Corporation |
| GSC | ..... | Grain Stabilization Corporation |
| HOLC | ..... | Home Owners Loan Corporation |
| IAB | ..... | Industrial Advisory Board |
| IBRT | ..... | Interdepartmental Board on Reciprocal Treaties |
| ITPC | ..... | Interdepartmental Trade Policy Committee |
| LAB | ..... | Labor Advisory Board |
| NCB | ..... | National Compliance Board |
| NEC | ..... | National Emergency Council |
| NIRA | ..... | National Industrial Recovery Act |
| NIRB | ..... | National Industrial Recovery Board |
| NLB | ..... | National Labor Board |
| NPB | ..... | National Planning Board |
| NRA | ..... | National Recovery Administration |
| PWA | ..... | Public Works Administration |
| PWEHC | ..... | Public Works Emergency Housing Corporation |
| SAB | ..... | Science Advisory Board |
| SBPW | ..... | Special Board of Public Works |
| SRB | ..... | State Recovery Board |
| TCFT | ..... | Temporary Committee on Foreign Trade |
| TVA | ..... | Tennessee Valley Authority |

From the *South St. Paul Daily Reporter*, August 27, 1934

tion of the county court house, remodeling the State Hospital at Hastings, and building athletic fields and other playground facilities at Farmington. The WPA also constructed new schools in Inver Grove, Empire, and Greenvale for a total cost of \$22,446.¹³ In the summer of 1936, they constructed Sibley Junior High School (now called Heritage Middle School) in West St. Paul.

For the most part, the WPA attempted to have enough make-work projects in their own communities for its par-



*WPA Mendota Work Camp No. 1 next to Minnesota Highway 13 on the bluff overlooking the Minnesota River.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.*

ticipants, enabling them to live at home with their families. This was not possible in all cases, especially in small towns, and many ill-starred men took to walking, hitchhiking, and/or riding the rails, roaming from one end of the country to the other desperately seeking work of any kind. To house transients who found work with the WPA, the government erected camps complete with barracks and mess halls.

There were 25 such transient camps built in almost every part of Minnesota, from Altura in Winona County to Little Fork in Koochiching County; in Minneapolis a hospital with 91 employees was established to treat sick and injured transients. The names of most camps in Minnesota were usually taken from the nearest towns, but some were dubbed with very colorful names, such as Happyland, Thistledeew, and Paul Bunyan. The majority of these camps were built to house 150 to 200 men, but there were exceptions to the norm. One at Side Lake in Itasca County, for instance, had as few as 49, while 400 could be quartered at the Dan Patch Camp at Savage.

One of these camps was established on Minnesota 13 on the bluff overlooking the Minnesota River about a mile west of the Mendota Bridge. Labeled by the very prosaic Mendota Work Camp No. 1, it was expeditiously up and

running by June of 1935, less than six months after the formation of the WPA. In charge of the camp, which was run by the National Park Service, was Superintendent Henry Steinhagen. Curiously, despite the camp's proximity to Mendota, its post office was listed as Savage.

According to a transient survey from the records of the National Archives and Record Service, the camp had a population of 171 of "average 40 years, race colored." The camp's resources were listed as 8 acres of uncultivated land and natural rock for building purposes, with enough timber to be used for fuel. The natural rock listed in the report was undoubtedly the large quarry at the east end of the camp, adjacent to the Mendota Bridge, where the men extracted huge slabs of sandstone for use in projects around the state. In 1935 projects being done by the camp's residents were road construction, camp maintenance and cleanup, and construction work.

The camp was comprised of 10 buildings consisting of 6 bunk houses, a 20 x 60 foot latrine-wash room, a 20 x 120 foot kitchen-dining hall, a 20 x 60 foot office-store-room, and a 24 x 44 foot recreation hall. There was also a blacksmith shop where tools for quarrying were maintained, and two long rows of wooden garages where the



The inside and the outside of the unpretentious bunkhouses of the WPA workers in Mendota. Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.



Burton B. Benecke and Robert Rasmussen were in charge of the blacksmith shop. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

trucks of the camp and vehicles of the National Park Service were housed.

The barracks, providing sleeping quarters for 20 to 40 men each, were patterned after those used by the military and appointed with twin rows of double bunks. These lodgings were built in two sizes: four were 18 x 40 feet, while the other two were double in size at 18 x 80 feet. On each one there was an anteroom about four feet square on one end. With these facilities, the camp could accommodate up to 200 men at a time but, as previously noted, there were only 171 housed there. Upon studying photographs of the camp and a physical inspection of the site, it can be deduced that the buildings were of wood frame construction set upon concrete block foundations.

Some of the buildings were constructed on level ground, but others were on slightly sloping ground near a

deep ravine at the west end of the camp. These latter had one end of the structure flush with the ground while the other end was supported on piers to keep the floor level. Those buildings used for housing were all grouped at the west end of the camp, with the garages and shops on the more level ground in the middle of the complex. The combination latrine-washroom perched on the edge of the nearby ravine, a short walk away from the other buildings. In those long-gone days, pollution was not of the concern that it is today, and it appears that the effluent from this latrine merely drained into the gorge to be carried to the Minnesota River.

The men of Mendota Work Camp No. 1 were kept busy with a variety of projects, among them being the landscaping of Highway 55. Its most visible project - and undeniably most appreciated by the general public - was the construction of the overlook across the ravine from the camp. The stone for the overlook's retaining wall, quarried on the site, was the same blue-colored limestone that the WPA seemed to favor for its projects. The wall's stone was dug from a quarry that can still be seen between the parking lot and Highway 13 in what appears to be a large roadside ditch about 10 feet deep by 30 to 40 feet across, extending eastward from the overlook's driveway to the ravine. Until the latter part of the 1980s, some of the unquarried stone could still be seen jutting from the walls of the excavation, but Mother Nature has reclaimed the site, and they are now imperceptible.

The only visible reminder of the camp, as seen from Highway 13, is the large fireplace with its accompanying chimney of the camp's recreation hall. This building was,



WPA workers from Mendota Camp No. 1 quarried limestone along the bluff of the Minnesota River. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society

like the others, of frame construction, and provided a living room of sorts where the men could have a comfortable place to while their off hours by socializing, reading, etc. There was also a commissary where the residents could buy such things as cigarettes, beer, and candy, the profits of which were used to buy magazines and sports equipment for the camp.

This building had one exception to the others, the door was on the side wall and not on the end as on the other buildings. Opposite the door, on the



A section of the WPA stone wall overlooking the Minnesota River today. Northwest Airlines hangars are on the horizon.

back wall, was the fireplace in a small alcove about eight feet square. Sitting in front of this little niche, with a fire glowing brightly in the fireplace, must have made a cozy little place to relax on a cold Minnesota winter night. Bill Cutting of St. Paul, who was the clerk for the commissary, remarked in later years that one of the camp's employees utilized his masonry skills to build the solid fireplace, which Cutting liked because it didn't smoke up the hall.¹⁴

In the summer the camp had a baseball team that competed against other teams from around the area on the camp's ball field. On June 18, 1937 the *West St. Paul Booster* reported that Hubers defeated the "Transient Camp" 8-4 behind the strong pitching of Howard Stiff, who recorded 13 strikeouts. The newspaper went on to say that "with Earl Stiff getting three hits, Hubers ran up their 8 tallies in short time, with seven of them coming in the first inning." It appears that the transient men were too



South of Hwy. 110 on Hwy. 13, a panel describes the Camp. The recreation hall chimney still stands in the background.

busy working to get in much practice, but they did run into a strong team that Sunday afternoon - it was Hubers seventh victory in eight tries.

Apparently there were some miscreants in the camp who found means other than baseball to amuse themselves. Most of the workers "were considered hobos. A lot of them were alcoholics . . . it was the deep depression."¹⁵ In illustration, it was reported in May of 1935 that one Alfred Little was apprehended by Deputy Sheriff Norman Dieter for attempting to shoot another camp worker with a small caliber firearm. Little's aim was poor causing him to miss his mark, whereupon his intended victim seized him, nearly tearing Little's thumb from his hand. Little was charged for assault and bound over to the district court for sentencing by Justice T. S. Kennedy.

Nor was this the only incident of unsavory behavior by the camp's residents. The citizens of Mendota township circulated a petition demanding the transfer of at least some of the workers to another facility. An article in the May 27, 1936 issue of the *Booster* states that "Ninety-three Negroes stationed at the Mendota transient camp were ordered transferred last Saturday morning to Camp Paul Bunyan, near Brainerd." A deputy sheriff was quoted as saying that the men of the camp were constantly in trouble, and that "the county jail at Hastings housed one or more of them all during the year." Despite the shooting incident, the men apparently practiced self-discipline in the camp. Cutting was quoted as saying that he was never bothered even though it was known that he carried as much as \$400 in canteen receipts to a safekeeping place.

By early 1941, when it looked inevitable that the United States would become involved with the war raging in Europe, issues relating to national defense became the focus of the WPA: its entire effort shifted to war preparation. The United States became fully embroiled into World War II on December 7, 1941 when the Japanese Navy made a surprise attack on the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Most industries in the nation quickly converted over to producing war materials, and factories began hiring personnel to man their plants which were running three shifts a day. Further, a void was created in the labor market when 15 million of America's young men and women marched off to a war that would last four years. With unemployment virtually eliminated, the WPA went out of existence on June 30, 1943.

Although the WPA was terminated two years earlier, Mendota Work Camp No. 1 was razed sometime around 1941. An attempt to use the site as a camp for underprivileged children did not materialize, and during World War II it was used briefly for military training exercises. In the ensuing decades the overlook remained a popular spot for the general public, and when Fort Snelling State Park was

formed in 1962, the entire area was included.

Besides the chimney, little is left of the camp except the block foundations of some of the buildings and the concrete wall of the latrine-washroom. At the rate that the locale has been reclaimed by nature in recent years, these scant evidences, like the wooden portions before them, may soon disappear into oblivion. In 1987, the Mendota-West St. Paul Chapter was approached by the superintendent of the park to inquire if there was some way to commemorate the work camp. The chapter, with the help of sign maker Len Endresen (husband of chapter member Audrey) erected a wooden marker, compatible with the park's other signs, beside Highway 13 to mark the site.

The overlook that the camp's residents constructed has always been a popular place to view the Minnesota River Valley and, in the last couple of decades, to watch the airplanes from Wold Chamberlain as they zoom in low overhead. In 1986, a private contractor working for MnDOT restored the overlook which had been damaged by vandals over the years. The wall was repaired and cleaned, and the spray painted graffiti was cleaned off. The parking lot, formerly inside the wall, has been moved so that it is now between the overlook and Highway 13, near the quarry, and the former parking area is for pedestrians only.

Of all the New Deal's programs the WPA was the most famous because it affected so many people's lives by putting 8.5 million people to work, with a peak of over 3 million in 1938, at an average salary of \$41.57 a month. In Minnesota the WPA had expenditures of \$42,795,120 and employed an average of 40,464 persons per month. It was reported in July, 1936 that there were 357 WPA workers in Dakota County compared to the 1066 it employed in January of that year.¹⁶

Throughout its entire existence, the WPA was not looked on favorably by all factions. It had its political detractors who claimed that state and county officials handed out jobs for political favors, organized labor claimed it undercut wages, and businessmen charged that it competed unfairly with private industry. Though these disparagements held some legitimacy, it was a popular program with the majority of the people and was deemed a success.

Though long gone, the WPA has left a legacy in its projects, many of which are still enjoyed today, sixty-some years later. Included among these are: Todd Field (now MacNamara Stadium) and the post office in Hastings, the overlook at Mendota, and the wall around the parking lot at Harmon Field in West St. Paul, to name a few. In other communities, there are still extant many sidewalks they built, such as the one at Haskell and Gorman Avenues in West St. Paul that is still in the pristine condition it was when first laid in 1937.



Built by WPA workers in 1940, the limestone wall bordering Harmon Field in West St. Paul as it looks today.

Notes

1. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 1, 2000. Some typical examples were: General Electric went from \$201 to \$8.50, Hudson Motor Co. dropped from \$139 to \$2 7/8, and Case Tractor Co. fell to \$17 from \$467. People from all walks of life, in attempts to make a big killing on a "sure bet," were using their life savings, mortgaging their homes, and cashing in treasury bonds to buy more and more stocks on margin. When the market crashed these investors were left virtually penniless.
2. John Anthony Scott, *The Story of America*, (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, Elizebeth L. Newhouse, Ed. 1984) p. 262
3. *ibid*, p. 265.
4. Dennis Nishi, *Life During the Great Depression*, (San Diego, CA., Lucent Books, (1998) 26:Scott, p. 265.
5. *Dakota County Tribune*, March 16, 1934.
6. Figures for the unemployment rate between 1930 and 1940 are unavailable. It appears that no agency has kept a record for the years between.
7. "Inventory of the County Archives of Minnesota," Prepared by the Minnesota Historical Records Survey Project, Division of Professional and Service Projects, Works Projects Administration, No. 19, Dakota County, (St. Paul, The Minnesota Records Survey Project, May 1940) pp. 28 & 29.
8. *Dakota County Tribune*, February 17, 1933; Helen Davidson, "It Was Built By Many Of Us Who Toiled To Endure The Great Depression . . .," *D.A.R.T.S. Journal*, April, 1980, p. 6.
9. Gordon Curruth, *The Encyclopedia of American Facts & Dates*, 8th Edition, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987) p. 494; *We Americans*, Daniel J. Boorstin, Editorial Consultant, (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1975) p. 399.
10. *Dictionary of American History*, Volume VII, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1976) p. 323.
11. *Dakota County Globe*, June 13, 1941.
12. *West St. Paul Booster & Dakota County Globe*, November 6, 1936.
13. *Ibid.*, September 13, 1935.
14. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 6, 1986.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *West St. Paul Booster & Dakota County Globe*, July 3, 1936.