

2010

# They Built Our Community: Relief Work during the Great Depression

Lois M. Quinn

*University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee*, [lquinn@uwm.edu](mailto:lquinn@uwm.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://dc.uwm.edu/eti\\_pubs](http://dc.uwm.edu/eti_pubs)



Part of the [Public Policy Commons](#), and the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

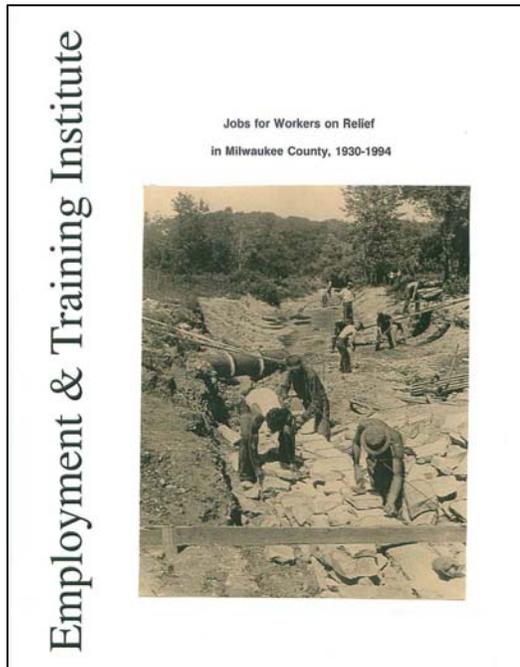
---

## Recommended Citation

Quinn, Lois M., "They Built Our Community: Relief Work during the Great Depression" (2010). *ETI Publications*. Paper 29.  
[http://dc.uwm.edu/eti\\_pubs/29](http://dc.uwm.edu/eti_pubs/29)

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by UWM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETI Publications by an authorized administrator of UWM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [kristinw@uwm.edu](mailto:kristinw@uwm.edu).

# They Built Our Community: Relief Work during the Great Depression



The full 109 page report is posted on the web at [www.eti.uwm.edu/reprints/WPAHist.pdf](http://www.eti.uwm.edu/reprints/WPAHist.pdf). The cover photo (from the *Milwaukee Journal*) shows CCC workers tackling flooding problems at Honey Creek.



The Milwaukee health department trained WPA workers to assist in citywide immunization of children for diphtheria, smallpox and scarlet fever and to sew needed medical materials. Thousands of school children received hearing, physical and dental exams, with problems reported to the parents.

## Meal programs for rural schools

The early school meals program for children in Milwaukee County were for the rural schools where women were employed under WPA to serve hot lunches.



## Parks and parkways

The most visible legacy of WPA and CCC projects in Milwaukee County was the parks system, which had more construction and landscaping during the Great Depression than any other time in its history. The WPA workers constructed swimming pools, pavilions, bathhouses, service and administration buildings, a golf club house, and new roads in parks and parkways throughout the county. The Park Commission's success in using unemployed workers was due to visionary plans the Commission had already developed for a system of parks and parkways, state legislation allowing land acquisition for parkways, availability of land parcels because of tax delinquency, and the zeal with which county and city park technicians detailed plans for landscaping and park lands. By the 1940s WPA workers had built one of the finest park systems in the nation.

### Works Progress Administration (WPA) Work in Milwaukee County Parks: 1935-1941

- Six reinforced concrete swimming pools were constructed, complete with filtration plants and bathhouses.
- A pavilion and wading pool were constructed at Red Arrow Park.
- A skating and boating pavilion was completed in Brown Deer Park.
- A new drive and parking station was laid out in Washington Park.
- The administration building for the Botanical Garden was completed and new golf club house was erected in Whitnall Park.
- A shelter and recreation center was built in Smith Park.
- Service buildings were provided in Jacobus, Jackson, and Whitnall parks.
- A curling rink building was constructed at Riverside Park.
- A new elephant house was built at the Washington Park Zoo.
- A bathhouse was built at Doctor's Park.
- New roads were constructed in nearly every park.
- Walks and drives were resurfaced.
- Lincoln Memorial Drive was completely repaved.
- Sewers and drainage lines were laid and existing ones repaired.
- Jetties along the lake front were realigned and repaired.
- A retaining wall and fence were erected along the Mitchell Park boundary.
- The pool in the sunken garden of Mitchell Park was cleaned and repaired.
- The lagoons at Washington and Jackson parks were drained and cleaned.
- New recreation areas were developed and old ones modernized.
- Lighting systems were installed for night ball games and tennis.

## Flood control

Milwaukee used Civil Works Administration funding in 1933-34 to employ almost 2,000 men straightening out an S-curve in the Milwaukee River and constructing a lagoon and islands in Lincoln Park in order to reduce flooding on the north side of the city. The *Milwaukee Journal* described the challenging work of the Civilian Conservation Corps on a dam at Kletsch Park in Glendale.

*“Most of the work on the dam was done in the winter of 1936, in a mad race between bad weather and a camp of lusty CCC youths who worked day and night in eight hour shifts. They strung floodlights over the project and set up steam boilers to heat materials. The bottom of the footings were about 14 feet below the river level and only a very small opening could be provided to permit the water to flow. Had a thaw come before the work was done, melting snow and causing the river to rise, the whole project would have washed out. The youths worked against time. On the afternoon they poured their last concrete, a blizzard came -- but the work was done. The CCC had won.”*

*-- Milwaukee Journal, April 3, 1938*

## School construction

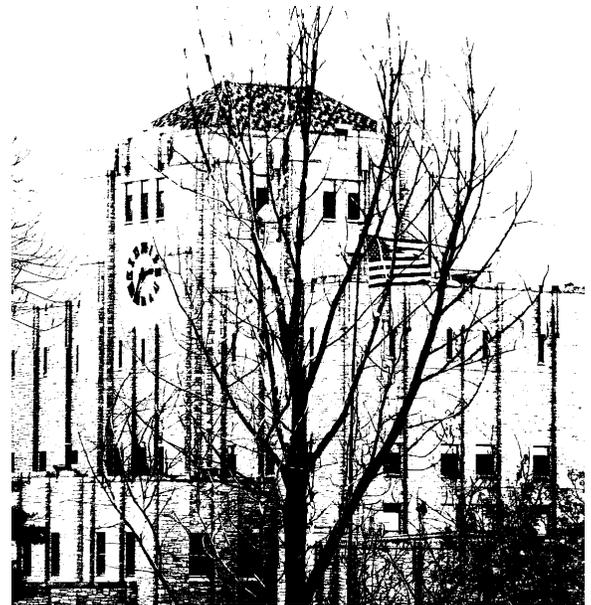
Public Works Administration-funded contractors built Gaenslen, Manitoba Street and Windlake Avenue schools (Milwaukee); Cooper School (Greenfield); West Allis schools; and additions to Cudahy, Milwaukee Riverside, Shorewood and Wauwatosa high schools. The PWA financed capital improvement projects handled by private contractors and employing non-relief workers.

## Clean drinking water

The largest Public Works Administration project in Wisconsin was construction of the City of Milwaukee Linnwood water filtration plant, a \$4.6 million construction project employing about 1,700 men for a year. Union contractors with PWA support also built the Jones Island sewerage plant extension and new sewer connections; water mains and sewers in Fox Point; the River Hills sewerage system; and a concrete roof over the Kilbourn Park reservoir.

## Adult education

The Wisconsin State Board received permission from federal WPA officials to expand its existing course work in adult education, and particularly high school subjects (e.g., history, economics, English, literature, mathematics, chemistry, physics, foreign languages) targeted to factory workers, scout and recreation leaders, WPA workers and other adults. Adult education and vocational classes were developed in over 300 municipalities throughout the state, with strong emphasis placed on expanding opportunities for adult education into unserved rural areas. In 1936 about 700 WPA teachers were employed and 50,000 adults enrolled in classes; in 1937 over 800 teachers provided classes for 65,000 students.

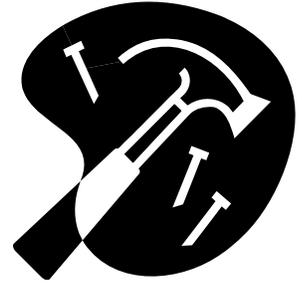


## Nursery schools

WPA nursery schools in Milwaukee County were operated, according to a 1940 open house brochure “to develop the physical and mental well-being of pre-school children from needy and under-privileged families, and to assist parents in nutritional, physical, educational and social needs of their pre-school children.”

# Capital improvements

In 1936 the **city of Milwaukee** created jobs for 8,192 WPA workers in capital Improvement projects including street construction and repair, landscaping, repair and construction of facilities in the city's parks, work on the Lincoln Creek Parkway, improvements of school buildings and facilities, construction of sewer and water mains, construction and improvements of city playgrounds, work to reduce flooding at Lincoln Park on the Milwaukee River, installation of the fire and police alarm system, modernizing street lighting and traffic signals, construction and improvements of bridges and public buildings, painting and remodeling the Milwaukee Vocational Schools, and alterations to two fire houses. By April 1940, WPA workers in **Milwaukee County** had constructed 84 public buildings, 884 miles of streets and highways, 31 bridges and viaducts, 206 miles of sidewalks, 187 miles of curbs, lighting for 215 miles of streets, and reconstructed 478 buildings.



## “White collar” WPA work

(excerpted from a Milwaukee WPA open house brochure, May 1940)

**Tax Descriptions:** Correcting real estate descriptions appearing on tax rolls, and furnishing each assessor with adequate maps showing correct boundaries of all real estate parcels within each district.

**Grantor-Grantee Index:** Recording the ownership history of each parcel of land in Milwaukee County, beginning with the time of original government grants compiled in a single, running record chronologically.

**Court Records:** Systematizing records to reduce cost and time in handling of court cases.

**Braille:** Transcribing works of literature under the supervision of blind supervisors.

**Writers:** Preparing histories and guide books for Milwaukee, West Allis and Shorewood, and biographies of Milwaukee men and women for the State Encyclopedia of Biographies.

**Newspapers:** Microphotographing and indexing rapidly deteriorating newspapers.

**Vital Statistics:** Unifying birth certificates.

**Council Proceedings Index:** Developing ready reference and cross-indexes to all subject matter in the council minutes.

**Traffic Surveys:** Gathering data to help prevent accidents, congestion, parking and bad pedestrian practices.



## Educational toys and much more . . .

One of the most successful and highly publicized WPA projects in Milwaukee provided light manufacturing work for unskilled workers, mainly women, in production of dolls, toys, quilts, draperies, furniture, book binding, weaving, and textile printing. New dolls and toys were tested in local kindergartens and nurseries before beginning mass production.

At its peak, the project employed 1,350 workers in three floors of a factory building at 1215 N. Market Street and made its products available to orphanages, schools, nurseries, and hospitals.





## Toy loan libraries

A Milwaukee County WPA toy loan project collected 75,000 toys, games, dolls, tricycles, bikes, and roller skates (donated by local residents) and repaired them in a workshop on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the courthouse. The project operated 20 branch toy lending "libraries," with a record 32,000 children (ages 2-16 and of all income levels) registered to borrow toys.

## New housing

WPA workers cleared sites for 750 homes in the **Village of Greendale**, an experimental "garden" community built from 1935 to 1938 on a 3,400 acre tract southwest of Milwaukee. The WPA's labor intensive work using horses, carts and plows contrasted with the modern technology used by skilled craftsmen employed under the Resettlement Administration. The RA built an electric rail line to bring skilled Milwaukee tradesmen to the Greendale site.

The city placed 2,891 workers on WPA projects building the infrastructure needed for a federal housing project constructed by the Public Works Administration. After abandoning plans to conduct a slum clearance program in the sixth ward, a 42-acre parcel was purchased on the outskirts of Milwaukee for 518 **Parklawn apartments**. The rural site required extension of sewer and water mains, streets, curbs and gutters, street lighting, police and fire alarm units, and a bridge across Lincoln Creek at North 43rd Street -- all projects constructed by WPA workers. Workers also built a six acre playground and recreational area for the families.

Greendale "originals" in 2010



## Support for defense

By 1940 many WPA projects in Milwaukee supported the nation's defense needs. Relief workers constructed airport runways, a hanger-administration building and a combined airport passenger and mail terminal. The WPA also built an addition to the Wisconsin National Guard Armory in Whitefish Bay, an armory on the South Side and Milwaukee vocational school. To help train workers for defense industries, in Fall of 1940 the Milwaukee Vocational School added courses Monday through Friday nights, with one six-hour shift starting at 9 p.m. and a second shift starting at 3 a.m. Here, unemployed workers in WPA training attended 10-week, 300-hour refresher courses in mechanics, welding, metalwork, automotive repair, foundry work, engines and other industrial skills. In addition, vocational school instructors provided in-house training to new workers at 27 war production plants located in Milwaukee County.



*Prepared by Lois Quinn, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute (November 2010). For information on other relief projects and documentation of sources, see **Jobs for Workers on Relief in Milwaukee County: 1930-1994** by Quinn, John Pawasarat, and Laura Serebin, posted online at [www.eti.uwm.edu/reprints/WPAHist.pdf](http://www.eti.uwm.edu/reprints/WPAHist.pdf).*