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YCHS Contributes to an Inventory of New Deal Projects

By Dennis Dingemans & B.J. Ford

Your historical society has responded wonderfully to a challenge to study and inventory New Deal projects in our county. YCHS involvement began when board members B.J. Ford and Dennis Dingemans attended a workshop at UC Berkeley last November 10 where the California Historical Society described its “Living New Deal Project”. Project leader Gray Brechin is compiling a first-ever county-by-county map of things done with New Deal agency funding and also is seeking interviews and testimonials by people directly involved in New Deal projects from 1933 to 1941. Here is what we in Yolo County have done and found so far.

(1) YCHS authors and publications

Our first step in reconstructing Yolo County New Deal history was to review the great resource of published works by YCHS members. Joann Larkey and Shipley Walters, in their 1987 “Yolo County: Land of Changing Patterns” noted (p. 84) that the WPA had been active, spending \$65,000 in 1936-1937 alone in the county (for roads, sidewalks/curb/gutter, public buildings, and landscaping). Shipley Walters, in her 1992 book on Knights Landing, reported (p. 40) that WPA projects there included sidewalks, curbs, and a two-room addition to the school in 1936. Walters’ book on Woodland (1995) reports that a Post Office in 1935 and a City Hall in 1936 were built with WPA funds (p. 88). Larkey’s 1991 book on Winters identifies (p. 72) the WPA as a contributor to the \$20,000 spent 1936-1938 on the Putah Creek dam in Winters. Winters also got \$10,000 in 1933 for curbs/gutters, for a water system upgrade, and for rural conservation and irrigation improvements; the WPA in 1940 also helped clean up the town’s creek after flooding (p. 72). In her writing on Davis (“Davisville ’68” and “Portraits of the Past”, 1969-1973) Larkey told of WPA funding for Central Park and for curbs/gutters and sidewalks in Davis. John Lofland’s books, “Old North Davis” (1999), “Davis 1910’s-1940s” (2000, with Phyllis Haig), and “Davis: Radical Changes, Deep Constants” (2004) provide photographs and additional details about these New Deal projects.

(2) YCHS Newsletter Survey Forms

The YCHS Newsletter for January and for February of 2009 appealed for society members to fill out a form reporting on New Deal projects that they knew of personally or in which members of their families participated. Six terrific contributions have arrived so far.

In the first, **Jane Sieferman** reports that the WPA laid cement sidewalks in Zamora (“from Union School north to US 99 and east around the block of homes”)

In the second, **Betty Mae Haines** tells of projects in the Capay Valley. “Many men were employed from Esparto to Rumsey. I knew many. I think my father may have

worked on it and maybe other family members. Anyone and everyone had a job.” Particularly, they worked on “the bridge above Rumsey on the way to Clear Lake” and “the Auditorium and adjacent wing including what was the Alice Marsh Hall cafeteria” in Esparto’s high school where “the class of 1944 was the first to graduate in the new auditorium, but there were no seats and only the cement tiers where seats much later were installed; the stage was bare, not even a curtain”.

In the third, **Nancy L. Hatcher McCullough** notes that “my grandfather, John Arthur Campbell was the superintendent of the WPA in Yolo County” for projects in “many small communities in Rural Yolo County”. “Dunnigan’s Old Town got sidewalks, curbs, and gutters” and “most are stamped WPA/1940” (on Main, First, Second, and Hayes). “Zamora and Knights Landing also have walks, curbs and gutters done by WPA, maybe Yolo, too”. Mrs. McCullough included a 6/29/1943 obituary from the WDD for her grandfather.

In the fourth, **Miriam Miller** reports that she was employed (at UCB and UCSF) by the National Youth Administration from August of 1936 to summer of 1940. She worked “10 hours per week earning 40 cents an hour” and “it kept me afloat!” She “worked in the Psych Department on a big calculator” and then worked “in Central Supply making gauze supplies and packaging autoclaving supplies”. Miriam also reports that she just checked out the Woodland Post Office building and found, hidden by the vegetation, the cornerstone inscriptions and, inside in the service counter room, the interior mural inscriptions which are consistent with WPA patterns.

In the fifth, **Marjorie Hansen** reports that she worked, from 1938 to 1940, at Oroville for the California State Relief Administration “overseeing WPA families”. “I was a stenographer who transcribed the case worker’s reports; I was paid \$100 a month, much higher than local legal secretaries”. “The office staff was nearly all local and the case workers were all college graduates from the Bay Area – out of work (during) a hard time for everyone.” “John Steinbeck spent time at the farm labor camp at Gridley researching for Grapes Of Wrath”.

In the sixth, **Lynn Campbell** shares what she learned from her careful review of the county’s “Historic Resources Survey” of 1986. The Tower Bridge linking Yolo and Sacramento counties was a New Deal project completed in 1934. The Esparto High School Auditorium (and home-making classrooms) project of 1939 is described in some detail, emphasizing its “WPA Moderne” architecture. Reported to be “the only two other WPA buildings in the (unincorporated) County” are the “Scout House in Knights Landing” and “Camp Haswell outside of Rumsey.”

(3) **Woodland Daily Democrat stories**

A third source of information about The New Deal in Yolo County comes from Larry Martinez who has been reading through the 1930s issues of the Woodland Daily Democrat and who has found eight newspaper articles so far. On 2-10-1934 the WDD reported that John O. Miller, Yolo County director of the CWA (Civil Works Administration), invited public entities to submit their projects for future funding. On 2-25-1934 the WDD reported that an existing job for “mosquito control project in the Davis

area” was suspended (one employee) due to temporary federal reductions in CWA funding. On 4-15-1935 “15 Yoloans Enroll for CCC Service” was the headline as the Civilian Conservation Corps began sending workers off to a CCC camp at Challenge; the county’s quota was for 36 workers but only 18 from the county applied, several of whom had previously been with the CCC. On 8-17-1935 the \$14,000 Putah Creek Dam project in Winters was reported to have gotten Asa G. Proctor of Woodland as its new engineer and WPA funding was being sought for the dam. On 11-29-1935 we read that a new armory in Woodland was being planned, a WPA project worth \$72,000. The 1-16-1936 issue reported that WPA-funded landscaping was transforming the “old city dump at the east end of Court Street” into a “new park for the City” and that “much interest is being shown in the proposed target range which will occupy part of the park”. On 1-18-1936 it was reported that 201 men “recruited from WPA rolls and CCC ranks” had served as emergency crews fixing potential levee breaks from above Colusa to below Knights Landing.

The most comprehensive summary of New Deal Projects which Larry Martinez found was published in the Woodland Daily Democrat on 4-24-36. Road improvements dominated the funding, getting \$33,000 (half of the \$65,000 total) for excavation, draining, grading, graveling (much near Winters, Woodland, Knights Landing, and Broderick). Work worth \$15,900 was expended on non-road projects including improving Woodland HS, building a Boy Scout Cabin at KL, landscaping in Davis, and upgrading other schools’ grounds. Tree and shrubbery planting at Dunnigan and the new pistol range at Woodland’s park were named. Drainage projects were on-going at Bryte’s levees and in the Yolo By-Pass. Yolo was part of a multi-county “fruit and nut tree survey” worth \$6,000 and a “sanitation project of latrine construction” worth \$31,000.

(4) City of Davis Records at UCD Library

The last of our four research efforts involves examination of the files on “New Deal Projects in Davis” that are stored in the UCD Library’s “Special Collections” unit. It provides from official City of Davis records many of the project documents. During February 1935 Davis got from SERA (Emergency Relief Administration) \$2074 for cutting down and root-grubbing 160 trees from streets and city parks. At the same time SERA officials in Sacramento denied a request for \$1900 to clean up 20 city-owned lots. SERA also denied (for being a piecemeal approach that wouldn’t improve drainage) the city’s application for installing widely-scattered curbs & gutters, although the WPA in 1937 approved \$26,000 for the more-comprehensive version of the paving project. That concrete, it was assured, was to use local gravel from Putah Creek. SERA in 3-1935 gave \$1621 to paint stripes on streets and paint water hydrants and gave \$490 to lower manhole covers. The new park (today’s Central Park) got \$8355 in 2-36 from WPA for landscaping and \$788 to build a concrete block bathroom. Although the \$41,000 Davis City Hall/Jail/Firehouse was completed in 1938/39, no evidence can be found that WPA paid for any of the construction, a joint venture of the city and the county.

More To Be Done – Contribute Your Efforts

The Yolo County Historical Society's contributions to this inventory of New Deal projects have just begun, and this is a preliminary report. Please fill out the survey form in your Newsletter if you know of a project or a participant from the era. You can volunteer to check with cities and government offices and archives in the county to see what their records reveal. Crawl around buildings, like Miriam Miller has done, to discover WPA or other labels on their cornerstones. Contribute your thoughts directly, if you wish, to Dennis Dingemans who is writing up these results to send to the California Historical Society: at 530-753-5959 or to djdingemans@ucdavis.edu. The YCHS feels this is an exciting project – fully deserving our best efforts and a potential credit to the many “WPA sleuths” we have here in Yolo County.

<http://ychs.org/publications/newDeal.html>