



From the lost to the greatest generation : eastern Montana youth in the 1930s
by Amy Lynn McKinney

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History
Montana State University

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Abstract:

The Great Depression has been a widely researched and studied era in American history. One issue that gripped many government leaders and adults during the 1930s was the plight of youth. They feared the stressful economic conditions would produce a generation who did not understand a work ethic or would get in trouble by turning to radical groups such as fascism, socialism, and communism, a life of crime, or the social ills of society. In order to help the future leaders of America, something had to be done to restore and renew youth's faith in democracy and capitalism. The national government established the Civilian Conservation Corp and the National Youth Administration to furnish youth with employment and education. In addition to work and school, adults needed to provide youth with wholesome, family-oriented recreation that would establish a better connection to their communities, the building blocks of democracy. Recreation, therefore, also became a weapon to keep youths out of trouble.

Studying three communities in eastern Montana, Billings, Sidney, and Plentywood, shows how the national, state, and local governments as well as parents, teachers, and civic leaders fought to save the youth of the country. Newspapers and oral histories bring out the voices of the youth and adults of the day and how they viewed the efforts and programs. Government documents as well as studies by groups such as the American Youth Commission also provide insight on what many viewed as the problems facing youth and how to help them.

Due to the extreme conditions of the years surrounding the Great Depression, writer Maxine Davis called this group of youth the "lost" generation in 1936. Today, reflecting on the accomplishments and humble nature those who grew up during the depression and fought in World War II, many call them the "greatest" generation.

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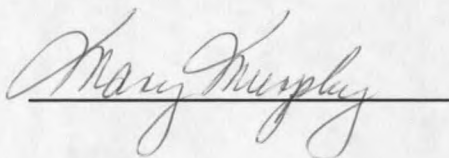
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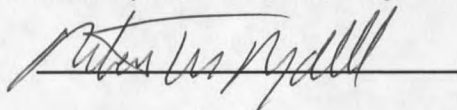
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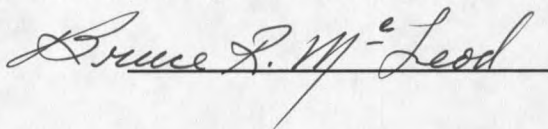
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ABSTRACT

The Great Depression has been a widely researched and studied era in American history. One issue that gripped many government leaders and adults during the 1930s was the plight of youth. They feared the stressful economic conditions would produce a generation who did not understand a work ethic or would get in trouble by turning to radical groups such as fascism, socialism, and communism, a life of crime, or the social ills of society. In order to help the future leaders of America, something had to be done to restore and renew youth's faith in democracy and capitalism. The national government established the Civilian Conservation Corp and the National Youth Administration to furnish youth with employment and education. In addition to work and school, adults needed to provide youth with wholesome, family-oriented recreation that would establish a better connection to their communities, the building blocks of democracy. Recreation, therefore, also became a weapon to keep youths out of trouble.

Studying three communities in eastern Montana, Billings, Sidney, and Plentywood, shows how the national, state, and local governments as well as parents, teachers, and civic leaders fought to save the youth of the country. Newspapers and oral histories bring out the voices of the youth and adults of the day and how they viewed the efforts and programs. Government documents as well as studies by groups such as the American Youth Commission also provide insight on what many viewed as the problems facing youth and how to help them.

Due to the extreme conditions of the years surrounding the Great Depression, writer Maxine Davis called this group of youth the "lost" generation in 1936. Today, reflecting on the accomplishments and humble nature those who grew up during the depression and fought in World War II, many call them the "greatest" generation.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Certain periods of history have a lasting impact on society. The Great Depression of the 1930s was one of them. Across the nation, Americans felt the weight of the depression. Unemployment skyrocketed and a sense of despair swept the country. Faith in the American government wavered as more people lost their jobs, homes, and dignity. As the depression continued to ravage the country, concerns about the future grew stronger. Many people raised a special concern about America's most precious resource—its youth. If young people lost faith in their country, the democratic way of life might crumble. In 1940 Dr. C. Leslie Clifford, a professor at the Billings Polytechnic Institute voiced this concern, "If democracy in the United States is to survive it must meet the challenge of youth who seek a chance to work and become a vital part of the economic and social life of the nation."¹ Something had to be done to put the idle youth to work, increase their chances of education, provide them with recreation, and restore and renew their faith in America.

¹ "Youth Outlook is Reviewed," *Billings Gazette*, 8 March 1940, p. 6.

Chairman of the National Advisory Committee of the National Youth

Administration, Charles W. Taussig, expressed the need to help the youth of the nation in order to preserve democracy when he stated:

Now, if ever, we must invoke our cardinal principles of free thought, free speech, and free education. Under the proper direction and leadership, our youth can and will develop a more definite and hopeful philosophy of life. Unless we educate the youth of today intelligently in a modern Democracy, democratic government is doomed. Who can view the political, social, and economic changes in the world without looking to our own Democracy, even with its acknowledged shortcomings, as a haven of hope? To reinforce and perfect our system of government, we will require a leadership and an electorate far more intelligent and responsive than we have had in the past. We must remember that in less than a decade the group which we now designate as "youth" will control the destiny of this Nation.²

Taussig explained the unique circumstance of the young generation who saw "the rest of the world torn by wars and revolutions," and "age-old governments crack up and . . . replaced by a variety of dictatorships." He claimed they did not know the "norms" by which adults judged the world. In fact, Taussig believed they knew "only chaos."³ Writer Maxine Davis in her book *The Lost Generation* explained the unique circumstances of youth when she stated that "the depression years have left us with a generation robbed of time and opportunity just as the Great War left the world its heritage of a lost generation." It would be this generation of youth born at the end of World War I and raised during the

² Betty and Earnest K. Lindley, *A New Deal for Youth: The Story of the NYA* (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), viii.

³ Lindley, vii.



Figure 1. Map of Montana. Reprinted from Michael P. Malone, Richard Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, Revised ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 251.

tumultuous years of the depression, who would go on to fight World War II, earning the title of the "greatest generation."⁴

This thesis studies youth aged sixteen to twenty-four in three eastern Montana towns in order to discover how the national and local government, local organizations, commercial groups, and youths themselves combated the depression and tried to save the future. Keeping youth out of trouble proved of key importance in saving democracy. The superintendent of Billings schools demonstrated this concern when he emphasized the "importance of the youth movement as a means of reducing crime and establishing a secure future for America."⁵ Many people feared youth would abandon capitalism and turn to radical ideologies such as fascism, communism, or socialism. In order to restore and renew their faith in democracy, America's future leaders needed jobs and the ability to stay in school. Another concern was providing young people with wholesome, family-oriented recreation to direct them away from the social ills of society such as drinking, vagrancy, crime, and immoral behavior. Recreation, therefore, was another weapon used to keep youth on the path of democracy.

The first community in this study is Billings. Located in south central Montana it was the largest community in eastern Montana during the depression. Young people there, although they struggled to find employment as did youths in Sidney and Plentywood, enjoyed a wider variety of vocational training as well as

⁴ Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 55; Gary Best Dean, *The Nickel and Dime Decade: American Popular Culture During the 1930s* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 117; Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), xix.

⁵ "Talk on Youth Given at Club," *Billings Gazette*, 6 April 1937, p. 5.

recreational activities. Sidney, a small town in the northeastern portion of the state, was a unique locale given its apparent economic stability during the depression years. Irrigation and the Holly Sugar factory kept the economy afloat during the 1930s and many called Sidney "depression proof." Plentywood, about ninety miles north of Sidney, without irrigation and a sugar factory, fought foreclosures and dust storms while also dealing with political divisions within the community.

By the 1930s Billings had become a leading agricultural, commercial, and shipping center for the state. Settlers arrived in the area during the late 1870s to enjoy the rich farmland. Many of these people lived in Coulson, a community about two miles from where Billings would eventually be founded. A great influx of people flooded the area with the coming of the Northern Pacific Railroad in the 1880s. Railroad president Frederick Billings founded the townsite in 1882 along the Yellowstone River and the town exploded over the next three years, earning the title, "The Magic City."⁶ Land agents experienced few problems selling lots to excited settlers and the Billings Townsite Company sold all of its two sections in a matter of months. As activity shifted to Billings, people left Coulson and only twenty years after the founding of its sister city, the community no longer existed.

Ranching was a key component to the Billings economy as it became the "metropolis of Montana stock raising country" and "the largest inland wool market in the world." Billings pioneer cowboy and stockman Teddy "Blue" Abbott called

⁶ Myrtle E. Cooper, *From Tent Town to City: A Chronological History of Billings, Montana, 1882-1935* (Billings: by the author, 1981), 1, 3.

Billings "a real cow town."⁷ Farming, although ignored by ranchers and the railroad, became invaluable to the area. Key to agricultural development was the building of an irrigation system. The newly developed farmland produced high quality crops and added to the prosperity of the Billings community.⁸

Billings proved to be more than a mere railroad boomtown. Although the community experienced a population slump after the initial influx of people, settlers continued to move to the area. By 1900 over three thousand people lived in Billings. With the building of the Great Western sugar factory in 1906, the Billings population jumped to over ten thousand people by 1910. Not even the drought of the 1920s could keep people out of Billings and by 1930 the Magic City boasted over sixteen thousand residents.⁹

Located in northeastern Montana bordered by North Dakota to the east, Sidney lies in the Lower Yellowstone River Valley, "appearing like an oasis of cottonwoods just east of dry, open prairies and desolate badlands."¹⁰ During the 1880s the first permanent settlers took up residence in the valley. The community established a post office in 1888 and selected the name Eureka for the locale. When Justice of the Peace Hiram Otis discovered that name was already taken, he suggested Sidney after Sidney Walters, the six-year-old son of family friends. Walters and Otis often went fishing together, and Otis grew very

⁷ Cooper, 60.

⁸ Ibid., 63-64.

⁹ Waldo Orlando Kliever, "Foundations of Billings, Montana" (M. A. thesis, Seattle: University of Washington, 1938), 152.

¹⁰ Laurie Mercier, "Memories of Sidney and Lower Yellowstone," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 35 (Autumn 1995): 78.

fond of the boy. The community accepted the choice and Otis named the town, which was incorporated in 1911.¹¹

Life in Richland County has always been agricultural. Farmers grew crops such as wheat, corn, oats, barley, flax, beans, and alfalfa. The main crop, however, proved to be sugar beets.¹² The Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project provided a key to Sidney's stability. Residents had tried to obtain irrigation for the valley since they settled there, but remained unsuccessful until the Reclamation Act of 1902, which provided for the development of arid land west of the 98th Meridian.¹³ Two years later on 10 May 1904, the irrigation project was approved and more people moved to the valley. By the end of the 1910s, Sidney's population had grown from 345 to 1,400. While others suffered from drought, irrigation and diversified farming "saved many established ranchers and farmers in the valley and kept optimism alive in the town of Sidney."¹⁴

Due to a lack of knowledge of irrigated farming and resistance to change from ranching to more diversified farming, the Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project got off to a slow start and only began to flourish during the 1920s. One reason that the irrigated community began to grow and prosper was the construction of the Holly Sugar plant in 1925. A sugar beet factory in the valley

¹¹ *Courage Enough: Mon-Dak Family Histories, Richland County, Montana*, Bicentennial ed. (Sidney, MT: Mon-Dak Family Histories Office, 1978), 809-810.

¹² Works Progress Administration, Collection 2336, Box 11, File 16, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, The Libraries, Montana State University—Bozeman. (hereafter cited as WPA).

¹³ *Our Golden Jubilee, 1911-1961: Lower Yellowstone Valley, Sidney, MT* (Sidney, MT: Eagle Publishers, 1961), 18.

¹⁴ Mercier, 78.

provided a great financial benefit and convenience to the farmers as well as jobs to people in the community. Irrigation and Holly Sugar helped Sidney's economic stability. In 1933 the *Sidney Herald* asserted that Holly Sugar was "the basis for the industrial soundness of this valley."¹⁵ While many people left eastern Montana during the 1920s and 1930s, Sidney's population almost doubled from 1,400 in 1920 to 3,000 by 1940.¹⁶

Plentywood has a unique and colorful history. Located in the northeastern corner of Montana, Sheridan County is bordered by North Dakota to the east and Canada to the north. The naming of the locale also has a curious history. Although three legends exist for the name, the most popular account is the story of the notorious outlaw and cattle company foreman Dutch Henry. The story explains that one day in 1898 Dutch Henry wanted to stop for lunch at a spot about six miles west of where Plentywood now stands. The cook objected to stopping because there was no wood. Seeing a stack of wood someone else had gathered for the winter, Dutch Henry remarked, "Plenty wood here," and the name stuck. When the time came to petition for a post office for the community in 1901, local rancher G. N. Ator suggested Plentywood and the people approved.¹⁷ The town was later incorporated on 9 October 1912.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Our Golden Jubilee*, 18; "We Are Fortunate," *Sidney Herald*, 30 March 1933, p. 2.

¹⁶ Mercier, 79.

¹⁷ WPA Collection 2336, Box 123, File 2.

¹⁸ WPA Collection 2336, Box 12, File 4.



Hey Cook ! There's plenty wood.

Figure 2. Illustration of Dutch Henry and the naming of Plentywood. Reprinted from Magnus Aasheim, comp., *Sheridan's Daybreak: A Story of Sheridan County and Its Pioneers* (Great Falls, MT: Blue Print and Letters Company, 1970), 585.

The economy of Plentywood has always centered on agriculture. Dryland farmers in the area have relied on the Big Muddy River, supplemented by rainfall, to water their crops, which included wheat, oats, barley, flax, rye, corn, and hay. Local lignite mines supplied cheap fuel for the people of the community.¹⁹ The first settlers to the area, however, were ranchers, followed by homesteading farmers from the Midwestern states, mainly Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Scandinavians rushed to the area and by 1920, 560 Danes and 698 Norwegians had settled in Sheridan County. Lutheran ministers, land companies, and cultural nationalists recruited Scandinavians to the area. By 1920 Emil Ferdinand Madsen founded the Danish colony of Dagmar in eastern Sheridan County.²⁰

Many of the new settlers learned of the prospects of the area by reading the 1915 promotional pamphlet "The Call of the West: Some Solid Facts About Sheridan County." L. S. Olsen, the "Pioneer Land man of Sheridan County" and author of the pamphlet, declared that the area presented the "last opportunity to the landless to receive a donation at the hands of the munificent nation."²¹ Thousands poured into the area and by 1920 the county housed 13,847 people and Plentywood, the largest town in the county, boasted of 888 inhabitants.²²

¹⁹ Gerald Zahavi, "Who's Going to Dance With Somebody Who Calls You a Mainstreeter?: Communism, Culture, and Community in Sheridan County, Montana, 1918-1934," *Great Plains Quarterly* 16 (Fall 1996): 252.

²⁰ Zahavi, 252-253.

²¹ L.S. Olsen, "The Call of the West' Some Solid Facts About Sheridan County, Montana." Pamphlet [1915], Pamphlet Collection, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana, 2.

²² Olsen, 252; Verlaine Stoner McDonald, "Red Waves of Grain: An Analysis of Radical Farm Movement Rhetoric in Montana, 1918-1937" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1994), 40-41.

Olsen, Madsen, and other promoters could not control nature and the weather, however. Following the settlers came "periodic droughts, grass fires, wind storms, and grasshopper plagues" which insured that the "pastoral beauty of the region would not be disturbed by over-development or over-population."²³

Plentywood also has a long history of lawlessness and outlaw tales. Its close proximity to the Canadian border and relative isolation made Sheridan County a popular haven for many outlaws. The hills surrounding Plentywood provided hideouts and sanctuary for many thieves. The unwritten code of the time, "My house is yours until you have passed," also opened homes to many outlaws. Stolen cars covered with straw and whiskey hijackers filled the hills during prohibition.²⁴

Sheridan County likewise has a distinctive political history as the region has "long been a center of Montana socialism and progressive thinking in general."²⁵ Works Progress Administration (WPA) field worker J. A. Stahlby reported in 1936 that the

county has always been moderately leftist. In 1912, while still a part of Valley County, it voted for the Bull Moose, and soon after its creation it began to have active socialist groups among its citizens. During the trying years of war and drouth [sic] the tendency grew until it became the outstanding characteristic of the county's social development.²⁶

From 1918 to 1920 the Socialists gained power, culminating with the election of Socialist sheriff Oscar Collins in 1920. As the Socialist and Nonpartisan League

²³ Zahavi, 254.

²⁴ Magnus Aasheim, comp., *Sheridan's Daybreak: A Story of Sheridan County and Its Pioneers* (Great Falls, MT: Blue Print and Letters Company, 1970), 587, 589.

²⁵ Zahavi, 254.

²⁶ WPA Collection 2336, Box 123, File 2.

movement grew, two left-wing papers emerged in Sheridan County. Due to their poor quality and financial instability, local radicals asked the national Socialist office to send them an experienced editor. The office complied and in 1918 they sent Charles "Red Flag" Taylor to head the *Producers News*, beginning his "long and controversial career in Plentywood and in Montana." As strong as socialism, and later communism, was in the area, "mainstreeters" of Plentywood were hostile to the movement. Support for the movement, therefore, came from the countryside.²⁷

Many issues surrounded the need to focus on youth during the depression. The economic hardships of the decade created a large population of idle youth who were not working and could not afford or did not want to remain in school. Their plight led many to turn to crime or vagrancy. Influential leaders like Eleanor Roosevelt feared a generation that did not understand a work ethic and many adults began demanding programs to help the future leaders of the country. The federal government established two organizations especially for youth, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the National Youth Administration (NYA). Each agency wanted to put youths to work as well as provide them with vocational training. Education was another central goal of both the CCC and the NYA. As vital as work and education were for the future of the youths, adults also realized the importance of recreation. Government and community organizations banded together to ensure play time for young adults.

²⁷ Zahavi, 255. For a more complete history of the radical movement in Sheridan County, see articles by Gerald Zahavi, Verlaine Stoner McDonald, Charles Vindex, and William Pratt.

so they could develop social skills as well as learn proper use of leisure time.

Through recreation, youth could gain a better connection to their community, and build a stronger foundation of democracy.

The hardships of the depression taught youth humble sacrifice and frugality, but many did not consider their efforts special. As Montana native George "Scotty" Gray explained "we never realized we were poor in those days—everybody was poor together . . ." ²⁸ Adults understood that this generation was the one on "whose shoulders will fall . . . the responsibility of government, community and life," and that it would have to overcome the single worst crisis for capitalism in order to preserve democracy. ²⁹ The efforts of the government, local communities, and youths themselves during the depression years helped establish a proud, hardworking, and courageous young population who fought the odds to become the "greatest" generation.

²⁸ George "Scotty" Gray, interview by Doni Phillips, 8 August 1988, OH 1134, transcript, "New Deal in Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

²⁹ "Faith in Youth," *Plentywood Herald*, 18 September 1941, p. 2.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PLIGHT OF YOUTH

On 4 March 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered his first inaugural address in Washington, D. C. As he stood before a nation devastated by the depression, he proclaimed that "this great nation will endure as it has endured; will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."¹ The young people of the nation desperately needed the help of the federal government and leaders in their states and communities to overcome the hardships of the depression. They wanted work and the feeling of independence, but given the economic difficulties of the 1930s, they needed outside help.

For the twenty-one million young people during the 1930s, the depression proved especially difficult. Four million youths between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four were out-of-school and out-of-work. According to Maxine Davis in her book, *The Lost Generation*, the youth of the time were

products of a psychopathic period. Boys and girls who came of voting age in 1935 were born in 1914. Their earliest memories are of mob murder and war hysteria. Their next, the cynical reaction to war's sentimentality and war's futility. Their adolescence

¹ Ben D. Zevin, ed., *Nothing to Fear: The Selected Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1932-1945* (New York: Popular Library, 1961), 27.

was divided between the crass materialism of the jazz 1920s and the shock of the economic collapse. In effect, they went to high school in limousines and washed dishes in college.²

This generation would go on to have what Roosevelt called a "rendezvous with destiny," during World War II and earn the sobriquet "the greatest generation."

These young adults "came of age in the Great Depression, when economic despair hovered over the land like a plague. . . . They had learned to accept a future that played out one day at a time."³ Saving this generation would become a major fight.

Americans believed the family "reposed the heart of the nation's system of values and norms. Through it American socialized its young and perpetuated the democratic way of life." Many believed that "every wound the depression inflicted upon the family aroused a heightening of social concerns."⁴ Many adults feared that youth would lose faith in the democratic system due to economic hardships and turn to less desirable economic and political systems. In order to prevent any major radical youth movements and to keep them out of trouble, government and community leaders across the nation made special efforts to help restore youth's faith not only in their country, but in themselves as well. The people of the United States who "believed its youth embodied the future now anxiously watched its next generation slouching idly on street corners, . . . or, worse,

² Gary Best Dean, *The Nickel and Dime Decade: American Popular Culture During the 1930s* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 117.

³ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), xix.

⁴ John F. Bauman and Thomas H. Coode, *In the Eye of the Great Depression: New Deal Reporters and the Agony of the American People* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988), 69.

Our Greatest Defense Industry

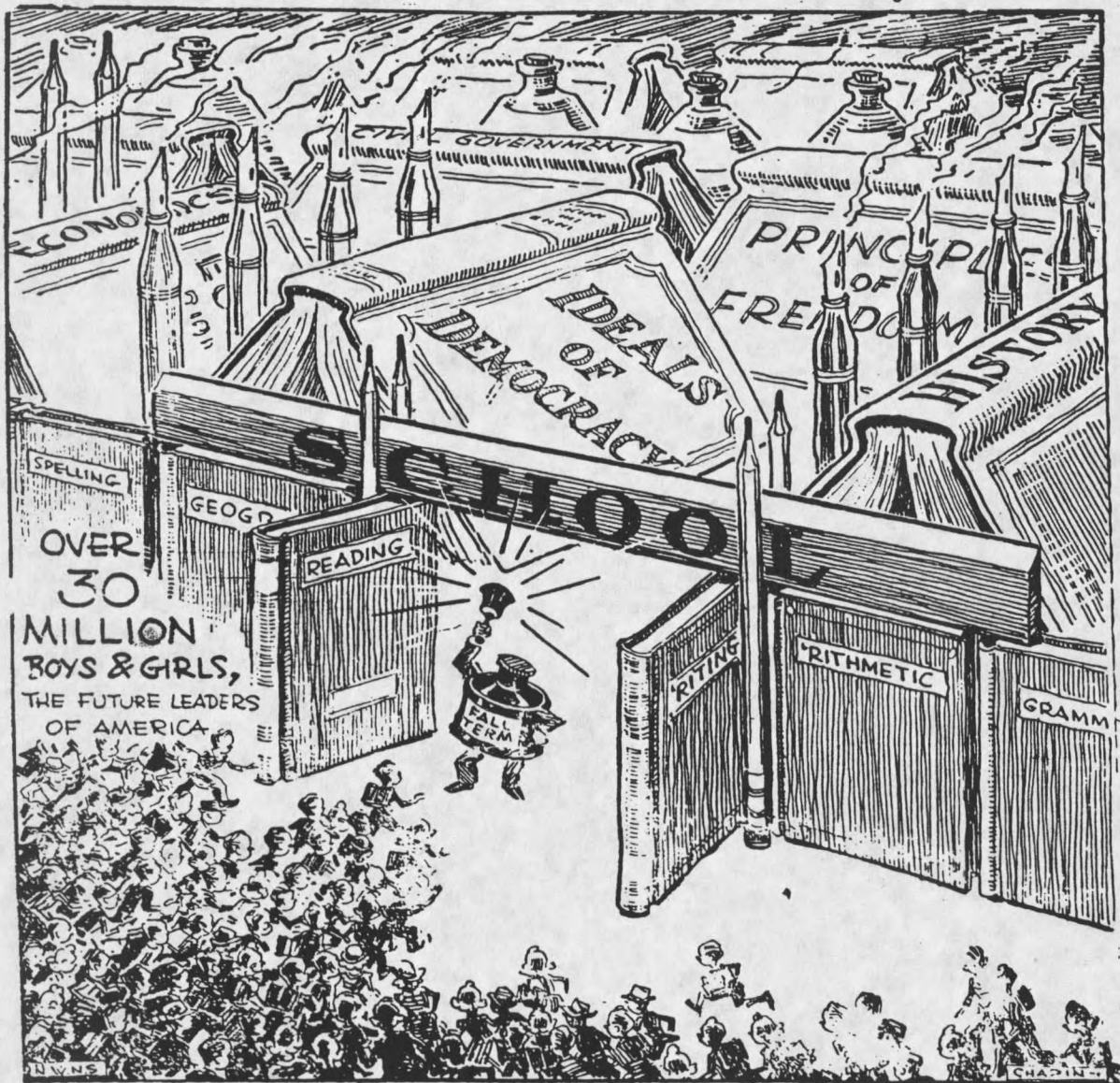


Figure 3. Providing an education for youth of the nation was of extreme importance in preserving democracy. Reprinted from *Plentywood Herald*, 28 August 1942, p. 2.

doing nothing." Reporter Wayne Parrish commented that youth of the day felt "cut off from the future."⁵ Aubrey Williams lamented that youngsters were

... being denied a chance to make their way in the world during the very years when their enthusiasm, energy and desire to learn would make them highly useful to themselves and to society. The best of them should be in training to be great leaders of their generation, the others to be capable followers. This great opportunity in human conservation is in danger of being lost.⁶

In Montana the depression had actually started with a period of drought from 1917 to 1919 that began in northern Montana on the Hi-Line. By 1918, the entire eastern two-thirds of the state suffered from its effects. In addition, the end of World War I reduced many European markets, causing a decrease in farm prices. Wheat production and prices dropped dramatically.⁷ The 1920s continued to be trying times for Montanans. Between 1919 and 1925, nearly two million acres of farmland terminated production and farmers deserted approximately 20 percent, or about 11,000, of Montana farms.⁸ Almost 60,000 people left Montana during the "Roaring Twenties," making it the only state to lose population by the close of the decade.⁹ The "Dirty Thirties" were not much

⁵ Brauman and Coode, 82-83.

⁶ Aubrey Williams, "A Crisis for Our Youth: A Task for the Nation," in *The New Deal*, ed. Carl N. Degler (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 113.

⁷ By 1920 crop yield dropped from 25 bushels per acre to a mere 2.4. In August of the same year, wheat sold for \$2.40 per bushel; by October the price had fallen to \$1.25. Michael P. Malone, Richard Roeder, and William Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, Revised ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 292.

⁸ Michael P. Malone "The Montana New Dealers," in *The New Deal*, vol. 2, *The State and Local Levels*, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 242.

⁹ After the drought years, farm foreclosures rapidly increased and reached a peak of 5,173 in 1923. Between 1901 and 1937, banks reported over 3,800 farm bankruptcies and 56 percent or 2,189 of them occurred between 1921 to 1925. Another 817 farms went bankrupt between 1926 and 1930. R. R. Renne, *Montana Farm Foreclosures*, Bulletin No. 368 (Bozeman, MT: Montana State College Agricultural Experiment Station, February 1939), 10; R. R. Renne, *Montana Farm Bankruptcies*, Bulletin No. 360 (Bozeman, MT: Montana State College Agriculture

better for the people of Eastern Montana. According to the 1940 census report, fourteen of the eighteen counties in the eastern part of the state lost population during the depression decade.¹⁰

The nation joined Montana's hardships at the beginning of the 1930s. Herbert Hoover sat in the Oval Office at the onset of the Great Depression. Even though the people of the United States desperately needed help, Hoover did not believe in direct federal relief because he feared it would hurt private industries and greatly add to an unbalanced budget. Most of all, however, Hoover believed that federal assistance would diminish the American sense of "self-reliance, sturdiness, and independence."¹¹ Convinced that no matter how bad the depression seemed, it would soon end through traditional means, Hoover accomplished little. He believed that the best course of action involved relying on local assistance and volunteers. Federal intervention, he insisted, would only hurt this process.¹²

Hoover's approach obviously did not work. Unemployment skyrocketed from three percent in 1929 to twenty-five percent in 1933. With the loss of jobs came a loss of pride. Many Americans began to feel inadequate because they could not find work to support their families. Heads of families, once proud that

Experiment Station, June 1938), 17; Richard D. Seibert, "New Deal Expenditures in Montana, 1933-1939" (M. S. thesis, Logan: Utah State University, 1970), 2.

¹⁰ Scott C. Loken, "Montana During World War II" (M. S. thesis, Missoula: University of Montana, 1993), 80.

¹¹ Walter LeFeber, Richard Polenberg, and Nancy Woloch, *The American Century: A History of the United States Since the 1890s*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 172.

¹² LeFeber, Polenberg, and Woloch, 171; John M. Allswang, *The New Deal and American Politics: A Study in Political Change, Critical Episodes in American Politics*, ed. Robert A. Divine (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 10.

they could take care of their children and spouses, now depended on charity to feed them. Farmers previously responsible for the production of the nation's food, cut back to raise prices.¹³ Even the noble veterans of World War I resorted to selling pencils and apples on the streets to survive. One of the most popular songs of the depression reflected this transformation. E. Y. Harburg wrote the lyrics to the 1932 song, *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?* made famous by singer Rudy Vallee:

Once in Khaki suits
 Gee, we looked swell,
 Full of that Yankee Doodle-de-dum.
 Half a million boots went sloggin' through Hell,
 I was the kid with the drum.
 Say, don't you remember, they called me Al—
 It was Al all the time.
 Say, don't you remember I'm your pal—
 Brother, can you spare a dime?¹⁴

As the depression deepened, more people blamed President Hoover for their hardships. Americans showed their growing animosity; they called newspapers "Hoover blankets," and "Hoover flags" represented the inside-out empty pockets of Americans who had no jobs, no money, and no hope.¹⁵ Modeled after Psalm 23, *The 1932nd Psalm* represented the growing animosity towards the president: "Hoover is my Shepherd, I am in want, He maketh me lie down on park benches, He leadeth me by still factories, He restoreth my doubt in

¹³ William Loren Katz, *An Album of the Great Depression* (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1978), 23.

¹⁴ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 20.

¹⁵ LeFeber, Polenberg, and Woloch, 170.

the Republican Party. . . ."¹⁶ Again, music of the day reflected the growing resentment for the President:

Today we're living in a shanty,
Today we're scrounging for a meal,
Today I'm stealing coal for fires,
Who knew I could steal?

I used to winter in the tropics,
I spent my summers at the shore,
I used to throw away the papers,
I don't any more.

We'd like to thank you, Herbert Hoover,
For really showing us the way!
We'd like to thank you, Herbert Hoover,
You made us what we are today! . . .

In every pot he'd say "a chicken,"
But Herbert Hoover he forgot!
Not only don't we have the chicken,
We ain't got the pot! . . .

Come down and share some Christmas dinner,
Be sure to bring the missus, too,
We've got no turkey for our stuffing,
Why don't we stuff you.

We'd like to thank you, Herbert Hoover,
For really showing us the way.
You dirty rat, you Bureaucrat,
You made us what we are today.¹⁷

Hoover, however, refused to hear the shouts for federal aid. He even boasted that "no one has starved." Yet the facts contested his boast. In 1932 in Detroit, Michigan, alone, three people died each day from starvation. In addition, for the

¹⁶ Andrew Cayton, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Allan M. Winkler, *Pathways to the Present: America in the Twentieth Century* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 458.

¹⁷ Michael E. Parrish, *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 239-240.

year 1933, the New York Welfare Council reported twenty-nine deaths from starvation in New York City.¹⁸ About one-fifth of the youth in New York City suffered from malnutrition and the rate rose as high as 90 percent in the poorer regions of Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.¹⁹

Hoover was not the only person blamed for the economic hardships of the depression. Businessmen, especially bankers, were also scapegoats for the conditions of the 1930s. Unflattering jokes and angry slurs about bankers were common during the early years of the depression. A journalist from the London newspaper *The Economist* noted in 1933 that "the most interesting and significant feature [that he noted was that] the change in the objects of popular hero-worship. [The] presiding deities" of the 1920s, the financiers and bankers, had "crumbled to the dust in the vast majority of American minds. To be a banker in the U.S. today is about as unpleasant as it is to be a Jew in Germany or an Outcaste in India."²⁰

By the end of 1932, the United States economy found itself in a shambles. The national income dropped from \$88 billion in 1929 to \$40 billion in 1932. Over 5,000 banks failed in those three years, taking with them over \$2 billion in deposits. Approximately 75,000 jobs disappeared every week for nearly three years.²¹ The town of Scobey, Montana, had boasted of being the nation's largest

¹⁸ Caroline Bird, *The Invisible Scar* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), 27, 35.

¹⁹ Robert Cohen, *"Dear Mrs. Roosevelt": Cries for Help from the Depression Generation, and the American Youth Crisis of the 1930s* (University of Georgia, 1996) Online: www.newdeal.feri.org/eleanor/cohen.htm 21 December 1999.

²⁰ Best, 3.

²¹ LeFeber, Polenberg, and Woloch, 172; T. H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1933), 55.

primary wheat shipping center prior to the depression. By 1933, 3,500 of the 5,000 inhabitant of Daniels County received federal relief. During the first two years of the New Deal, a quarter of all Montanans received some form of federal aid.²² Montanans, along with other Americans, grew increasingly critical of the lack of support from the federal government. The United States needed a change. Franklin D. Roosevelt provided it. In a speech before the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois, in July 1932, FDR promised, "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people. . . . Give me your help, not to win votes, but to win this crusade to restore America to its own people."²³ Unlike his predecessor, FDR believed in the federal government's responsibility to see that each person possessed the "right to make a comfortable living."²⁴

The American people responded to FDR's call in the 1932 election. Roosevelt defeated Hoover in a landslide.²⁵ In Montana, all fifty-six counties except Sweet Grass voted for FDR, giving Roosevelt 126,493 votes to Hoover's

²² In Montana, wheat worth \$100 in 1920 dropped to \$19.23 by 1932. Workers lost 8,636 jobs in Montana manufacturing industries between 1929 and 1933. Malone, "The Montana New Dealers," 242-243; Malone, Roeder, and Lang, 292.

²³ Zevin, 25.

²⁴ LeFerber, Polenber, and Woloch, 179.

²⁵ FDR carried forty-two of the forty-eight states by winning fifty-seven percent of the popular vote. In the Electoral College, FDR won 472 votes to 59. The Democrats took control of both houses of Congress in 1932, winning seventy-one percent in the House and sixty-two percent in the Senate. Democrats won twenty-seven of the thirty-three gubernatorial races. By the 1936 election, FDR won wide support with the people of the United States. Roosevelt defeated Alfred M. Landon with even greater numbers than Hoover, winning forty-six of the forty-eight states. FDR received 523 electoral votes to Landon's eight. Allswang, 29; Robert A. Divine et al, *America Past and Present*, Brief 2d ed., vol. 2 *From 1865* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 452.

77,039.²⁶ In Richland County, which had voted Republican in the past three presidential elections, 57 percent of the voters supported Roosevelt. FDR won a 45 percent plurality in Sheridan County, defeating the radical third party that had dominated politics there during the 1920s. A little over 50 percent of voters in Yellowstone County supported FDR. By the 1936 election, Montanans pledged their support for the New Deal by voting for Democrats in every major political office in the state. Every single county voted Democrat, a first in the history of the state. In Richland, Sheridan, and Yellowstone Counties, FDR increased his margin of victory, winning 68 percent, 79 percent, and 61 percent, respectively, of the vote. Roosevelt's tremendous popularity in Montana allowed Democrats to dominate from 1933 to 1941. At no other time prior to this had one political party dominated so completely in Montana.²⁷

By the time Roosevelt took office, the plight of the American people had grown worse. In 1933 the national unemployment rate reached twenty-five percent, and another twenty-five percent suffered from underemployment.²⁸ That year an observer from England described the effects of the Great Depression:

In the depth of the American winter, on a day when a stabbing icy wind pierced the thickest of overcoat, I saw the unemployed living on wastelands, in shacks put together from old boxes (wood and tin), bits of old motor cars, bits of corrugated iron, bits of cloth. I saw them lining up nearly three sides of a block waiting in a queue for soup. I saw them

²⁶ Michael P. Malone, "Montana Politics and the New Deal," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 21 (Winter 1971), 3.

²⁷ Ellis Waldron and Paul B. Wilson, *Atlas of Montana Elections, 1889-1976* (Missoula: University of Montana Publications in History, 1978), 100, 101, 115, 116, 128, 129, 143, 144; Seibert, 8; Malone, Roeder, and Lang, 303.

²⁸ Divine, 439.

scrounging over refuse heaps like flies crawling over a dung hill. Even in India I had not seen destitution more horrible or humiliating.²⁹

In response to such destitution, President Roosevelt resolved to provide direct federal relief to alleviate the effects of the depression and so began his "New Deal" programs. For Roosevelt the New Deal was more than just a campaign slogan. It represented a restoration of the people's confidence in the government and its commitment to them. The Roosevelt administration focused on public assistance with special attention to the youth of the nation, making the younger generation believe FDR and the New Deal supported them.³⁰

Youth suffered the highest unemployment rate of any other group. Director of the American Youth Commission, Homer Rainey, estimated that during the early 1930s "40 percent of the youth (16-24) in the whole country are neither gainfully employed nor in school."³¹ Commonly, the younger a person was, the higher the rate of unemployment. According to the Maryland Youth survey in 1936, youths between the ages of 16 and 17 experienced an average of 53 percent unemployment, while those between the ages of 23 and 24

²⁹ Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 24.

³⁰ The New Deal put people back to work and provided them with an opportunity to regain their dignity. Montana greatly benefited from the New Deal programs. From 1933 to 1939, Montana received almost \$400 million, amounting to a per capita expenditure of \$710. As a result, Montana ranked second in the nation behind Nevada for per capita investment by the federal government. Malone, "The Montana New Dealers," 246.

³¹ Cohen; American Youth Commission, *Youth and the Future* (Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1942), 11, 12. The American Council on Education created the American Youth Commission in 1935 to sponsor surveys, investigations, and publications on issues such as education, employment, vocational guidance, health education, and recreation for youth. The Commission functioned until 1942. M. M. Chambers, *Youth-Serving Organizations: National Nongovernmental Associations* 3d edition (Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1948), 1.

suffered from 20 percent unemployment.³² The 1937 unemployment census reported that youths between 15 and 24 represented 27 percent of all unemployed and partly unemployed people in Montana. Of the 830 totally and partly unemployed people in Richland County, 267 were between the ages of 15 and 24. In Sheridan County 220 youths out of the 623 unemployed people for the area were looking for work. While in Yellowstone County, out of the 2,951 unemployed, 856 were youths.³³ Concerns about the unemployed youth losing confidence in the democratic system increased and more efforts were made to help them.

A quarter of a million unemployed youths turned to the railroads to search for work and adventure during the Great Depression. Many left home seeking a better life while others were forced to leave because their families could not afford to keep them at home. These young people hopped the freight trains and crisscrossed the country, usually following the harvest for work. They hoped to find employment and opportunity on the road.

Life on the rails proved dangerous for many who were injured trying to jump the train, arrested by railroad agents, or police officers for vagrancy. Most did not find work and had to rely on missions and the charity of people for food. Many spent time in make shift camps along the railroads called jungles. One youth who traveled the rails recalled mirrors and shaving razors hanging from the

³² *Youth and the Future*, 12.

³³ Census of Partial Employment, Unemployment, and Occupations, *Final Report on Total and Partial Unemployment, 1937 Volume II Reports by States Iowa—New York* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1938), 474, 476, 477.

trees near the camps. Life on the rails proved very difficult and sometimes humiliating, and many experienced loneliness and feelings of despair. A poem entitled "Prayer of Bitter Men," written by an eighteen-year-old boy, voiced the feelings of hopelessness of the vagabond youth:

We are the men who ride the swaying freights
 We are the men whom life has beaten down,
 Leaving for Death nought by the final pain
 Of degradation. Men who stand in line
 An hour, for a bowl of watered soup,
 Grudgingly given, savagely received.
 We are the Ishmaels, outcasts of the earth
 Who shrink before the sordidness of Life
 And cringe before the filthiness of Death.³⁴

To many, their journeys on the road marked the end of their childhood and provided them with a deeper understanding of the world around them. Every youth's life changed as a result of their travels on the rails.³⁵

Several youths in Montana recall hoboes riding the trains through town.

Luella Dore of Sidney remembers

seeing the freight trains coming into town with men riding on the box cars, sometimes on the flat cars, riding from place to place with only a little bundle of personal things wrapped inside. Sometimes they would get off the train, if it stayed very long, and they would cook over a camp fire along the side of the tracks. It didn't matter where they came from, they were "Railroad Bums."³⁶

Fay Chandler of Plentywood recalls trains full of hoboes and that the local cafes did not have enough space to feed them all. Local referred to them as "wobblies," harkening back to radical, often itinerant workers of the World War I

³⁴ Bauman and Coode, 85.

³⁵ Michael Uys and Lexy Lovell, *Riding the Rails*, 72 min. Out of the Blue Production, 1997, videocassette.

³⁶ Luella Dore, letter to author, 11 September 1994.

era.³⁷ Both Harold Mercer of Sidney and Joan Galles of Billings remember railroad transients coming to their homes for food. Mercer stated his mother always fed the bums who came through town and asked for food. Galles explained that the railroad bums somehow marked the houses where they could get a good meal. They always knocked on the back door of their house and her mother would give them some food.³⁸ One Plentywood youth, Irvin "Shorty" Timmerman, hopped freights and even knocked on doors asking for food. One meal he received was a mashed potato sandwich.³⁹ Stuart Conner, although he did not travel the country, did hop freight trains in back and forth between Livingston and Billings during the summer of 1941. Conner recalls other hoboes riding the rails, but also college students riding to and from school.⁴⁰

Concerns over juvenile crimes increased during the depression years. Boys committed the majority of crimes which were mainly against property, most commonly theft. The majority of youth crimes reported in eastern Montana followed this trend. Judges normally sent youths charged with crimes to the state industrial reform school in Miles City. In 1936 District Judge Robert C. Stong sentenced two boys who admitted to burglarizing several schools in Billings to

³⁷ Fay and Violet Cybulski Chandler, interview by Jackie Day, 15 May 1985, OH 870, transcript, "Small Town Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

³⁸ Harold Mercer, interview by Laurie Mercier, 28 May 1984, OH 778, transcript, "Small Town Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT; Joan and Dale Galles, interview by author, 5 January 2000, tape recording, Billings, MT.

³⁹ Irvin "Shorty" Timmerman, interview by Jackie Day, 17 May 1985, OH 879, transcript, "Small Town Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

⁴⁰ Stuart Conner, interview by Betty Lu Conner, 21 January 1979, transcript, Western Heritage Center, Billings, MT.

Miles City. The boys stole items such as pens, pencils, colored crayons, and a notebook.⁴¹ Juveniles as young as 12 and 14 were sent to the reform school in 1937 for a local "crime wave" that consisted of "five burglaries and three automobiles thefts for 'joy rides.'"⁴² Other crimes included stealing car tires and wheels, chickens, pocketknives, guns, money, gas, cigarettes, and food.⁴³ Some thieves committed a string of burglaries. In 1933 police officers finally recovered "a substantial portion of the loot" stolen from homes in what they called a burglary "epidemic." Police set a trap to capture the burglars responsible for the string of eight robberies. They arrested the 19 and 20-year-old burglars as a result of the stakeout.⁴⁴ Besides theft, other crimes reported included forgery, illegal killing of pheasants, and vandalism. One case of destruction of property occurred when some boys broke a windshield of a driving truck by hurling a cantaloupe into it.⁴⁵

Although most crimes youths committed were not violent, several did occur. One young bandit used a gun to rob a taxicab driver of \$1.25.⁴⁶ Four Civilian Conservation Corps youths from the Ballatine camp outside of Billings

⁴¹ "Sends Two Boys to Miles City," *Billings Gazette*, 6 February 1936, p. 3.

⁴² "Commit Youths to Miles City," *Billings Gazette*, 18 March 1937, p. 5.

⁴³ "Youth Receives Sentence Here," *Billings Gazette*, 22 February 1939, p. 3; "Two Youths Arraigned in Chicken Theft Case," *Billings Gazette*, 20 December 1939, p. 10; "Officer to Charge Youths With Theft," *Billings Gazette*, 8 May 1940, p. 8; "Youth is Held as Suspect in Local Holdups," *Billings Gazette*, 9 December 1936, p. 1-2; "Youths Held in Burglary," *Billings Gazette*, 26 November 1937, p. 5.

⁴⁴ "Pair is Caught Upon Entering Shaw Residence," *Billings Gazette*, 25 September 1933, p. 1-2.

⁴⁵ "Youth Admits Forgery Count," *Billings Gazette*, 19 June 1935, p. 3; "Youth Wounded During Chase," *Billings Gazette*, 7 September 1935, p. 1-2; "Youth Admits Hurling Melon," *Billings Gazette*, 27 September 1935, p. 15.

⁴⁶ "Taxicab Driver Disarms Bandit," *Billings Gazette*, 2 July 1931, p. 3.

were arrested for stabbing Deputy Sheriff Roy Luttes. The CCC camper who stabbed Luttes was convicted of second degree assault and served three years in the state prison at Deer Lodge.⁴⁷ In 1938 a 22-year-old male was found guilty for the second time of "committing a statutory offense against a minor girl."⁴⁸ Two 21-year-old youths even faced murder charges in 1937. Robert Patton and John Kortje were charged with the robbery-slaying of 51-year-old Andrew Sandin, who was beaten to death. Patton shifted blame on Kortje and told police that "John was hitting (Andy) with a rock when I came up." The three had been drinking all afternoon and Sandin accused Patton of stealing his pocketbook. They all left the bar together, but Patton said he went to see if his sister who lived nearby was home. When he returned, Kortje was striking Sandin with the rock.⁴⁹

Although more youths stayed in high school during the depression years, college was still too expensive for most. Those out of high school and not in college wanted to find work. Unfortunately, youths needed vocational training and working experience. They were competing with the millions of out-of-work men who were given preference because of their experience and position as heads of households. Youths learned to take whatever job they could and hoped to earn at least enough to live.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ "Jail CCC Youths in Stabbing Fray," *Billings Gazette*, 4 October 1935, p. 1-2; "CCC Youth Gets Prison Term in Stabbing Case," *Billings Gazette*, 10 October 1935, p. 1, 3.

⁴⁸ "Youth Found Guilty of Second Offense," *Billings Gazette*, 7 December 1938, p. 5.

⁴⁹ "Youths to Face Murder Charge in Sandin Case," *Billings Gazette*, 1 July 1937, p. 1, 3.

⁵⁰ Educational Policies Commission, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Youth Administration, and the Public Schools* (Washington, D. C.: National Education Association of the United States and the American Association of School Administrators, 1941), 9-10.

When asked to identify the most serious problem of their generation, youths named lack of economic security. Education, vocational guidance and placement services were essential to get youths back on the road to self-sufficiency. They did not want hand-outs, nor did adults want them to lose their sense of self-reliance. Adults were willing to provide youths with opportunities, but maintained that youths themselves had to continue the process of pursuing their education and finding employment.⁵¹

Many believed adults owed a special effort to help youth during the troubling times of the depression to help keep them out of trouble. The American Youth Commission, which the American Council on Education created, acknowledged that "since most adults are no longer in a position individually to prove self-employment, much less to provide employment for their children, the age-old responsibility for assuring youth a start in life has become largely a social responsibility."⁵² Eleanor Roosevelt believed this as well. She feared adults had let youths down by not providing them with career opportunities and proper education. In 1934 she stated, "I have moments of real terror . . . when I think we may be losing this generation. We have got to bring these young people into the active life of the community and make them feel that they are necessary."⁵³ In order to preserve the American way of life, youth had to regain their confidence in the democratic system. It was the responsibility of "every community and

⁵¹ Howard M. Bell, *Youth Tell Their Story: A Study of the Conditions and Attitudes of Young People in Maryland Between the Ages of 16 and 24* (Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1938), 251.

⁵² *Youth and the Future*, 23.

⁵³ Cohen.

every person concerned with the guidance of youth . . . to help boys and girls to catch and hold the vision of a finer American culture, and to fire them with a will to play their parts in an indomitable advance toward it."⁵⁴

As the depression worsened, concerns grew about the plight of youth. National and community leaders began discussing the possibilities and realized that a special effort was needed to keep youth on the path of democracy. As a result, FDR created two programs geared towards young people, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the National Youth Administration (NYA). Youth earned a paycheck, not a handout when employed with these two agencies. Through these programs, the government provided thousands of youths with the opportunity to continue their education, gain vocational guidance and work experience, and earn some money.

⁵⁴ *Youth and the Future*, 222.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEW DEAL AND YOUTH: THE CCC AND THE NYA

As unemployment skyrocketed across the nation, youth joined the millions of older men and women searching for work. Approximately four million young men and women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four were out-of-school and out-of-work, representing about one-third of the total unemployed in the country.¹ President Roosevelt and the national government created two New Deal programs, the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration to provide special help for America's young people. The CCC dispersed young men to camps across the nation wanting them to gain a better understanding of their state and nation as a whole. The goal was for the campers to learn about other areas and people which made up the national identity. The NYA focused on local kids who wanted to stay at home and either finish school or find work. Like the rest of the New Deal programs, the CCC and NYA provided employment, not handouts. The programs provided young people with the opportunity not only to work, but also to learn a trade as well as improve

¹ Montana National Youth Administration, *Montana National Youth Administration: Accomplishments and Expenditures, July 1, 1935 to December 31, 1938* (Butte?: Montana National Youth Administration, 1939), n.p. (hereafter cited as *Accomplishments and Expenditures*).

their education. Enrollment in the CCC also offered young men the opportunity to understand the American identity and reaffirmed the idea of democracy.

The Civilian Conservation Corps proved the most accepted of FDR's programs. Roosevelt created the CCC on 5 April 1933 by Executive Order 6101 and within three months 250,000 young men worked in camps across the United States.² According to a pamphlet distributed by the Emergency Conservation agency entitled "What About the CCC?" the purposes of the relief measure aimed to

relieve distress through the employment of idle young men on constructive conservation projects, to aid in the rehabilitation of young men, and to assist in the national efforts toward economic recovery. The project is essentially one of restoring the confidence of young men in themselves, building them up physically, making them more useful citizens, and of carrying on a sound conservation program which conserves and expands our timber resources, increases recreational opportunities, and reduces the annual forest fire toll.³

The corps hired young single men of "good character" between the ages eighteen to twenty-five (later expanded to seventeen to twenty-eight) in the junior corps.⁴ In addition to the junior corps, the CCC also enrolled veterans. To be

² The CCC was originally called Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) and Roosevelt appointed Robert Fechner as head of the program. T. H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 130; Walter LeFeber, Richard Polenberg, and Nancy Woloch, *The American Century: A History of the United States since the 1890s*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 186.

³ *What About the CCC?* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1937), 2.

⁴ The quota for enrollees from each state was determined by population. The junior campers comprised seventy-five percent of total enrollment in the CCC. These enrollees helped with reforestation projects, built bridges, constructed roads, provided drought relief and flood control, and worked on many other jobs that benefited the public. Some gave the CCC the nickname "Roosevelt's Tree Army" because they believed that its main job involved only planting trees. United States Department of Labor Office of the Secretary, *Handbook for Agencies Selecting Men for Emergency Conservation Work* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1934), 3. RS 283, Box 22, File 9, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT; John Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study*

eligible, the veteran must have received an honorable discharge from the military, give three-fourths of his pay to his dependents, and be in good physical health. Veterans were assigned their own companies and made up ten percent of total CCC enrollment.⁵ A man enrolled for twelve months (later increased to twenty-eight) and received a salary of thirty dollars a month, twenty-five dollars of that was sent home to his family.⁶ The project provided young men with a chance to work and to improve themselves. The *Sidney Herald* stated that "... Civilian Conservation Corps men have returned to their homes definitely benefited physically and mentally; their outlook toward the future is brighter; their sense of self-reliance and their ability to adjust themselves to economic conditions is stronger."⁷

Opportunities existed for the men to attend classes held at the camps and the CCC awarded 25,000 eighth-grade diplomas and 5,000 high school diplomas. During the 1938 to 1939 fiscal year, almost 8,500 enrollees learned to read and write and another 763 earned college scholarships.⁸ CCC camper Joe

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967), 26, 27, 121; Ray Hoyt, *Your CCC: A Handbook for Enrollees* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, n.d.), 30.

⁵ "Call is Issued for Veteran CCC Youths in State," *Plentywood Herald*, 14 January 1937, p. 4; Hoyt, 59. The responsibilities of the CCC were divided between four government agencies. They included the Department of Labor, the War Department, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of the Interior. The Department of Labor controlled the first phase of CCC enrollment by determining quotas and selecting the youth for the camps. The War Department headed the initial transporting and training for the CCC campers. Outfitted in old army clothes, the men trained for about two weeks. The training, however, was not military in scope. The Department of Agriculture determined camp locations and work projects for the CCC. Finally, the Department of the Interior supervised CCC work in the national parks and monuments. *What About the CCC?* 3-4.

⁶ Salmond, 17; "CCC Most Approved Of All Relief Projects," *Sidney Herald*, 16 May 1935, p. 6-B; "Sixty Men is Sheridan's CCC Quota," *Plentywood Herald*, 23 May 1935, p. 1, 8.

⁷ "CCC Most Approved Of All Relief Projects," *Sidney Herald*, 16 May 1935, p. 6-B.

⁸ Salmond, 167-168.

Knutson, stationed at the Squaw Creek camp in Montana, earned his high school equivalency by taking classes at the college in Bozeman. The camp bussed the boys into town every night so they could attend classes. Knutson remembers that "lots of enrollees took classes because many couldn't afford to finish school."⁹

The camp supervisors also wanted to improve the physical and mental well-being of the campers. Before being accepted into the CCC, each boy had to pass a physical. Once he reached a camp, he received medical and dental care and was not allowed to work if he was sick or injured. Each camp housed an infirmary and doctor who provided care and health education to the enrollees. Supervisors also stressed safety and held weekly meetings in an effort to keep the boys safety-conscious while they worked.¹⁰ Providing the campers with three square meals a day also ensured physical strength. The food was not fancy, but it was nourishing, hot and plentiful. In 1938 records showed that every member of a camp gained anywhere from one to twenty-four pounds after they entered the CCC. The camps also encouraged spiritual health and a CCC chaplain visited three times a month or campers could attend church services in town. Camp supervisors wanted to ensure the objectives of the CCC to "train boys to be more employable, make better citizens, and [to conserve] . . . human and national resources."¹¹

⁹ Joe Knutson, interview by Doni Phillips, 9 July 1988, OH 1108, transcript, "New Deal in Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

¹⁰ Hoyt, 20, 22.

¹¹ "Propagation Of Waterfowl Is Goal At Lake," *Plentywood Herald*, 19 May 1938, p. 6, 7.

In order to efficiently house, feed, and transport workers as well as provide them with a sense of discipline, life in a CCC camp followed a strict schedule. Reveille sounded at 6:00 in the morning, giving the men half an hour to dress and prepare for physical training. After their 7:00 breakfast, campers had half an hour to clean the barracks in time for an inspection at 7:30. Joe Lovec, a Baker youth stationed at the Whitehall, Montana, camp commented that they "had to have the beds made right and be clean and everything had to be up to snuff," in order to pass inspection. After the men policed the grounds, they packed their lunch and left for their workstations. They headed back to camp at 4:00 and ate dinner at 5:30. The campers enjoyed free time from after dinner until lights out at 10:00 and many spent this time engaging in officer-taught classes.¹²

Other campers used their free time for recreation. Most camps built a recreation hall where the enrollees could participate in sporting activities, play pool or ping-pong, write letters, or present plays and musical concerts. Medicine Lake youth Knute Kampen enjoyed reading in the library, catching up on sports and news through state newspapers and national magazines as well as visiting with fellow campers. Men could also travel to town to attend a local dance or movie.¹³ The campers had national holidays and most weekends off, but occasionally the men worked on weekends if weather had delayed their projects

¹² Joe W. Lovec, interview by Doni Phillips, 21 July 1988, OH 1126, transcript, "New Deal in Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT; Salmond, 137-139.

¹³ Hoyt, 18-19; Knute Kampen, interview by Laurie Mercier, 9 July 1988, OH 1114, tape recording, "New Deal in Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, MT.

during the week. The campers usually enjoyed a night in town on Saturdays. The CCC did not allow personal cars at camp, but both George "Scotty" Gray and Joe Lovec recall some boys hid their cars in the woods outside of camp. Although most people welcomed the CCC boys into their communities, some problems did occur. Montana CCC enrollee Arthur Charkoff explained that "some of the fellows would go to town and get drunk and raise hell. . . ." He also believed many people might have worried about their daughters with the influx of young men into the community.¹⁴

The CCC maintained its popularity throughout its existence. Even those who opposed the New Deal often approved of the CCC. The *Literary Digest* expressed this sentiment when it claimed that "attacks on the New Deal, no matter how sweeping, rarely or never extend to the CCC." One reason was because the benefits proved "tangible, immediate, and obvious." The boys employed in the CCC camps worked hard maintaining and improving the national landscape. They toiled ". . . with their hands in the wilderness" and "recaptured for many people the spirit of a unique age now past whose memory was still all-

¹⁴ Lovec interview; George "Scotty" Gray, interview by Doni Phillips, 8 August 1988, OH 1134, transcript, "New Deal in Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT; Arthur Charkoff, interview by Mike Korn, 9 July 1988, OH 1123, transcript, "New Deal in Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT; Salmond, 137-141; Clarence J. Houchan, interview by Charles Evanson, 10 September 1985, tape recording, Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, MT. One interesting outcome of camp life in the CCC was the creation of their own language. Slang terms found in the camps were unique to the CCC. To ask for a cigarette a camper would say, "Hey, greaseball, got a stiffy?" He could also explain that "sawdust and a blanket will do" if all the other camper had was tobacco and paper. A soft drink was "slough water," a fish was a "submarine turkey," and a "sinbuster" was a clergyman. Salmond, 143-144; Leslie Alexander Lacy, *The Soil Soldiers: The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Great Depression* (Radnor, PN: Chilton Book Company, 1976), 192.

pervasive." Reflecting its feelings of semi-nostalgia, the McKeesport *News* stated that "theirs is the American way."¹⁵

Another reason for the CCC's popular acceptance stemmed from its economic support to the local communities. The camps spent almost half of the monthly expenditures, approximately \$1.5 million, for food for the 300,000 men in camps across the nation in the local community. Besides food, the CCC purchased many materials for the building and maintenance of the camps from the local areas. In the town of Plains, Montana, "this contribution was enough to remove the city entirely from depression standards." People also saw the benefits to the youths and a reduction in juvenile crime across the nation. A judge from Chicago reported a fifty percent reduction of youth crimes in that city. The CCC "took boys off the streets and inculcated in them a sense of values."¹⁶

The CCC was not, however, without its critics. The CCC's largest criticism stemmed from its connection to the military, and it was a misconception the agency fought to overcome throughout its existence. A 1933 pamphlet outlining the CCC entitled *President Roosevelt's Emergency Conservation Work Program*, wanted to make the military's role very clear:

It should clearly be understood that, despite the important part played by the Army, no man has been enrolled for Emergency Conservation Work has joined the Army. Nowhere is there an Army obligation for the enrolled man. Nowhere is there military drill, manual of arms, or military discipline.

And it is, of course, equally true that no man has been forced to enroll; no one has been drafted.¹⁷

¹⁵ Salmond 102, 107.

¹⁶ Salmond 110-112; Lacy, 90-91.

¹⁷ *President Roosevelt's Emergency Conservation Work Program* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1933), 5.

The military stigma caused many to rethink enrollment in the CCC. When Montana had difficulty filling its quota for CCC workers in 1937, Margaret Best, state director of selection, named three reasons for the lack of response. The number one reason was that "there has been considerable propaganda in some sections of the state that the CCC is a military organization and that the boys are being enrolled as potential soldiers. This is not true. . ."¹⁸ But no matter how many times the CCC and its supporters tried to explain the military's role in the agency, many still did not believe them. A 1938 editorial in the *Billings Gazette* entitled "Denial of Democracy" questioned the true intention of the CCC: "If we are to have mass military training, or universal service, let us have it as such, so we will know where we are going, and not slide it in under cover of a civilian works program. . . ."¹⁹ The debate continued until America's entry into World War II.

Despite the CCC's popularity with the public, desertions constituted a significant problem. Almost twenty percent of enrollees were either discharged for disciplinary reasons or deserted. In 1937 Secretary of War Frank C. Burnett sent a letter to all corps area commanders addressing this issue. Burnett credited homesickness as the main reason for desertions and instructed staff that "this feeling should be combated through general persuasion and frequent conversations on the part of both company officers and educational advisers with

¹⁸ "Appeal is Made for CCC Youths," *Billings Gazette*, 15 April 1937, p. 7.

¹⁹ "Denial of Democracy," *Plentywood Herald*, 14 July 1938, p. 2.

young enrollees."²⁰ Although critics blamed military influence for the desertion of enrollees, men left for a variety of reasons. In 1938 the Department of Labor investigated the causes for desertion and discerned reasons ranged from the enrollees getting married, wanting to be near their girlfriends, homesickness, not being able to adjust to barracks life, not liking the location or commanders in the camp, finding other employment, and believing there was too much danger in the camps. Joe Lovec explained that camp life was tough for many who had never been away from home before and that a few campers "went over the hill [deserted], they went home, [and] never did come back."²¹

Two other criticisms of the CCC included the small amount of money paid to the campers and the exclusion of women. To counter the former, the CCC explained that, although enrollees were only paid a dollar a day, they received many other benefits that compensated for the low wage. Everything was provided for the enrollees once they entered the camp: food, clothing, shelter, medical and dental care, and recreation. The administration argued that a youth entering the camp did not have to bring anything with him. He was even given a shaving and sewing kit. At the Whitehall camp, Joe Lovec remembered the equipment he received the first day when the CCC provided the boys with "clothes, shoes, [and] one of those crazy hats. They'd give you two pair of

²⁰ War Department: The Adjutant General's Office, Washington. 30 July 1937 letter, RS 283, Box 22, File 15. Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

²¹ George Philip Rawick, "The New Deal and Youth: The Civilian Conservation Corps, The National Youth Administration, and The American Youth Congress" (Ph.D. diss. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1957), 134-135; Lovec interview.

everything . . . so you'd have enough and whenever they'd wear out you could go back to the canteen and trade them in and get a new pair."²²

Many people also criticized the CCC for barring women. Critics asked, where was the "she-she-she?" Many did not realize, however, that the government did establish several resident camps for women modeled after the CCC, but on a much smaller scale. Influential women such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Hilda Worthington Smith heavily supported the resident camps. The states, not the federal government, funded the women's camps with Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) grants. The first camp was established in New York under the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA). From 1934 to 1937 almost 10,000 women enrolled for six to eight weeks in the one hundred centers across the nation. By the end of 1935 the camps came under the direction of the National Youth Administration, but the women's camps never gained the wide support the CCC enjoyed and they ceased operations in 1937.²³

Even with its critics, the CCC won wide support in Montana. The state relied heavily on the federal government during the depression years and accepted the additional aid the CCC provided. Montana averaged twenty-four camps throughout the CCC's existence, with as many as thirty-five camps in

²² "CCC Most Approved of All Relief Projects," *Sidney Herald*, 16 May 1935, p. 6-B; "Sixty Men is Sheridan's CCC Quota," *Plentywood Herald*, 23 May 1935, p. 1-2; Lovec interview.

²³ Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 111-114. For a more complete study of the women's camps see Joyce L. Kornbluh, "The She-She-She Camps: An Experiment in Living and Learning, 1934-1937," in *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Workers' Education for Women, 1914-1984*, ed. Joyce L. Kornbluh and Mary Frederickson (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 253-283.

1935.²⁴ The majority of the camps were located in national forests and concentrated on conservation. Other camps specialized in work in national and state parks, reclamation work, soil conservation, and wildlife conservation.²⁵ Even when the federal government cut the number of camps in the nation from 1,500 to 1,227 in 1940, Montana maintained thirty-two camps in 1941.²⁶ By the end of 1938, over 25,000 men had been employed in camps throughout the state. The Fort Missoula district, which included all of Montana, Yellowstone and Glacier Park, and parts of Idaho and Wyoming, had over 8,000 enrollees in 1935. The CCC spent almost six million dollars in Montana in 1938 alone.²⁷

The residents of Sheridan County recognized the benefits of the CCC program for their youth. As early as 1934, the community pushed for camps in the area.²⁸ It was not until May 1937, however, that construction began for a camp at Medicine Lake. The purpose of camp BF-2, under the direction of the Bureau of Game Refuge, was to work on the migratory waterfowl refuge.²⁹ Superintendent M. Harvey McKenzie, a long time resident of Medicine Lake, and

²⁴ Michael P. Malone, Richard Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, Revised ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 299; "CCC Regulations Extend Age Limits," *Plentywood Herald*, 9 May 1935, p. 1; "Urges Early Action By CCC Aspirants," *Billings Gazette*, 28 April 1935, p. 3.

²⁵ "CCC Increases Camps in State," *Billings Gazette*, 1 April 1937, p. 6; "29 CCC Camps Will Operate," *Billings Gazette*, 18 September 1939, p. 8.

²⁶ "CCC Will Cut Camps to 1,227," *Billings Gazette*, 12 March 1940, p. 1; "Montana to Have 32 CCC Camps," *Billings Gazette*, 30 April 1941, p. 8.

²⁷ Malone, Roeder, and Lang, 299; "8,000 Young Men Enlisted in CCC Camps in Fort Missoula District," *Plentywood Herald*, 11 July 1935, p. 6; Richard D. Seibert, "New Deal Expenditures in Montana, 1933-1939" (M. S. thesis Logan: Utah State University, 1970), 18.

²⁸ The Emergency Relief committee announced the possibility of two camps in Sheridan County in June of 1934. Proposed projects for the camps included coal mining, dam construction, or the building of parks. "County May Get Two CCC Camps," *Plentywood Herald*, 28 June 1934, p. 1.

²⁹ "Work Started on Lake Project by CCC Unit of 157," *Plentywood Herald*, 27 May 1937, p. 1.

Air View of Lake CCC Camp

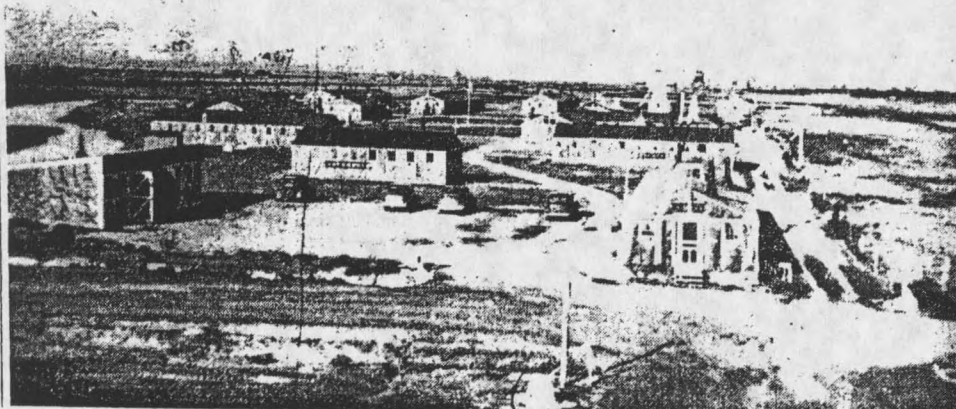


Figure 4. Aerial view of the CCC camp at Medicine Lake, circa 1940. Reprinted from *Plentywood Herald*, 29 February 1940, p. 1.

refuge manager Paul Kreager were in charge of the running of the camp.

Company 4750 from North Dakota was the main company stationed at the Medicine Lake camp, arriving on 21 May 1937.³⁰

Work at the camp centered on the propagation of waterfowl. Concerns over the extinction of ducks and geese prompted the restoration program. Under the direction of the Biological Survey leaders, the campers worked on a variety of projects, all geared toward the waterfowl refuge. One of the main projects was providing a secure environment for the birds to nest. Camp workers constructed nesting islands in the marsh by hauling dirt to create artificial islands. They made sure to provide water and land to conceal the nests. The campers kept careful records of the different birds and their nesting practices in order to improve the refuge to meet the needs of the waterfowl. They also constructed overflow spillways, bridges, and recreational areas, planted trees and shrubs, and sowed over eighty acres of aquatic food and cover plants. During the winter months the campers built shelters, camp buildings, and truck trails.³¹

As in other camps nationwide, the boys at Medicine Lake took advantage of the educational opportunities the CCC offered. In 1941, nine campers earned their eighth-grade diploma, eight graduated from high school, and another twenty-three campers earned high school credits during the school term. All youth at the camp received vocational training as well. Campers learned the "how and why" of their jobs in order to gain a better understanding of what they

³⁰ "Propagation Of Waterfowl Is Goal At Lake," *Plentywood Herald*, 19 May 1938, p. 6, 7.

³¹ "Propagation Of Waterfowl Is Goal At Lake," *Plentywood Herald*, 19 May 1938, p. 6, 7; "Medicine Lake CCC Camp Four Years Old," *Plentywood Herald*, 16 May 1941, p. 2.

were trying to accomplish. They could receive vocational instruction to improve their skills in areas such as truck driving, clerical work, blacksmith work, radio equipment operation, and baking. In 1941 twenty-two campers earned proficiency certificates and sixteen were awarded unit certificates. In order to earn the proficiency certificates, CCC boys had to demonstrate excellence in a certain job or skill for an extended period of time. Enrollees were required to complete a three-month course in subjects such as carpentry, mapping, surveying, and auto mechanics to earn a unit certificate.³²

Life in the Medicine Lake camp was not all about work. Recreation proved an important aspect of camp activity. The camp had a library, photography equipment, a wood-working shop and a recreation hall equipped with pool, ping-pong, and card tables. The Exchange, the camp store, stocked anything from toilet articles to candy and soft drinks. The camp used store profits for "camp improvement, athletic equipment, and anything that directly benefits the boys." For those interested in journalism, the camp printed a monthly paper, *The Golden Chevron*, "written by the boys and for the boys." The education department supervised the paper, but the campers wrote the stories covering the main happenings of the camp. Advertising from the local community and profits from the Exchange funded the paper.³³ The Medicine Lake camp followed the national trend with sports proving the most popular and widespread activity. Campers participated in sports such as basketball and swimming and also

³² "Medicine Lake CCC Camp Four Years Old," *Plentywood Herald*, 16 May 1941, p. 6.

³³ "Medicine Lake CCC Camp Has Long List of Accomplishments," *Plentywood Herald*, 2 May 1940, p. 2.

played in CCC tournaments. In 1938 the Medicine Lake "Green Waves" defeated the Sidney team to earn a spot at the CCC state track tournament and later won the 1940 CCC tournament.³⁴

The Medicine Lake camp, as did CCC camps across the nation, invited the surrounding communities to tour the grounds during the annual Open House celebrated on the anniversary of the founding of the CCC. Over six hundred people attended the 1939 Open House. The guests inspected the Biological survey buildings, looked at a photograph display of work the campers completed, and a painted miniature of the refuge featuring work accomplished since the founding of the camp. They also toured the living quarters, mess hall, and recreation hall. During the 1940 Open House, guests and campers alike enjoyed a boxing match before the day ended with a flag ceremony. Each guest received an anniversary edition of *The Golden Chevron* to commemorate the day.³⁵

After four years of service to the area, the government ordered the closing of the Medicine Lake camp in 1941. According to the *Plentywood Herald*, the "order to abandon the Lake camp is in keeping with a nation-wide reduction campaign on CCC camp[s]. Enrollments have dropped in the nation and many units have been discharged within the past few months." Members of the Sheridan County community protested the closing of the camp, claiming that if the CCC disbanded the camp, it was unlikely the work they started would ever be

³⁴ "Propagation Of Waterfowl Is Goal At Lake," *Plentywood Herald*, 19 May 1938, p. 6, 7; "CCC Club Plays in Tournament," *Plentywood Herald*, 3 February 1938, p. 6; "Green Wave Wins CCC Camp Tournament," *Plentywood Herald*, 21 March 1940, p. 8.

³⁵ "Open House' is Well Received," *Plentywood Herald*, 27 April 1939, p. 3; "Open House at CCC Camp is Sunday, May 5," *Plentywood Herald*, 2 May 1940, p. 1.

completed. The protests failed to convince the government to keep the camp open and it was scheduled to close on 15 October 1941.³⁶

Work to establish a camp in Richland County began in September 1934 when Montana Senator Burton K. Wheeler sent a telegram to "call up Fechner of CCC and ask him if it is possible to get a winter camp established at Sidney, Montana."³⁷ Axel Persson, manager of the Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project, provided another lobbyist for securing a camp for the area, and on 1 July 1935 the government established CCC camp BR-30 six miles north of Sidney at Ridgelawn.³⁸ The "BR" stood for Bureau of Reclamation, which distinguished the camp for reclamation work. Representatives from both Sidney and Fairview pledged their support. The *Fairview News* ran an article when the camp first opened in 1935 that extended an invitation to "all the CCC boys and officers to visit in Fairview whenever possible. The people of the community will be pleased to give . . . all the possible assistance in their work as well as to show them a good time during their stay in the valley."³⁹

³⁶ "Lake Camp in Jeopardy is Statement," *Plentywood Herald*, 2 October 1941, p. 1.

³⁷ "Sidney May Get CCC Camp; Local Group Interest Sen. Wheeler," *Sidney Herald*, 27 September 1934, p. 1.

³⁸ *Focus on Our Roots: Story of Sidney and Surrounding Area* (Sidney, MT: Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, 1988), 63 "CCC Camp Site Located at Ridgelawn," *Sidney Herald*, 30 May 1935, p. 1. During World War II the abandoned barracks of the CCC Ridgelawn camp along with the fairgrounds were used to hold German prisoners of war. The German POWs were used as labor for the sugar-beet harvest thinning and topping the beets. "German POW Will Arrive Friday for Beet Harvest Work," *Sidney Herald*, 27 September 1945. For a more complete history of Camp Ridgelawn, see paper by Robert G. Koch.

³⁹ "CCC Boys Are at Ridgelawn Site," *Fairview News*, 24 October 1935, p. 1.



Figure 5. Entrance to the CCC camp at Ridgelawn. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

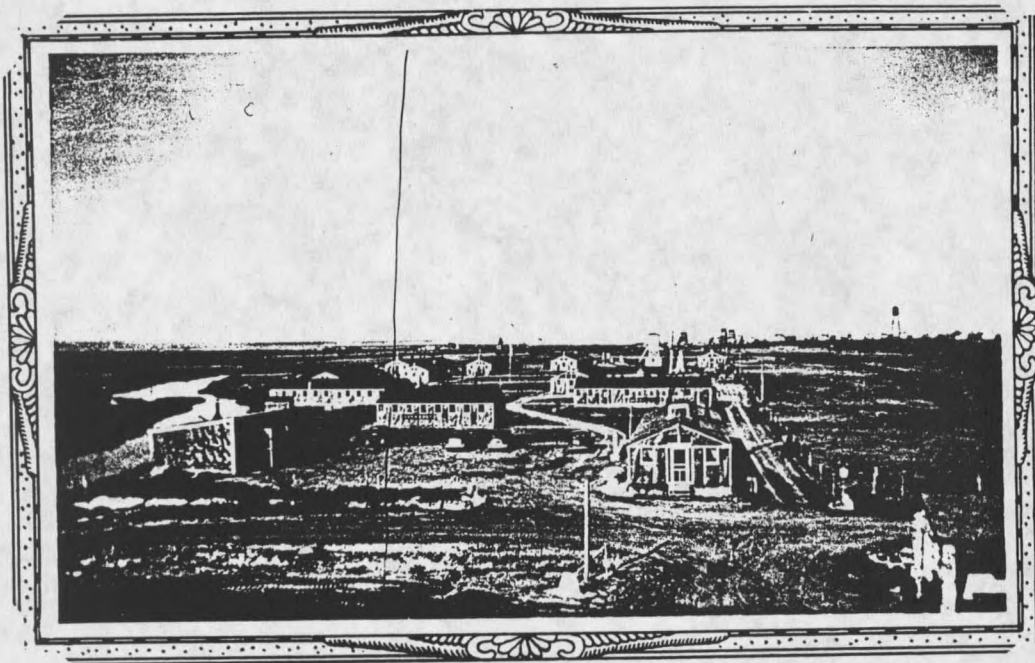


Figure 6. Aerial view of CCC Camp Ridgelawn. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

Company 1214 comprised the first unit of campers stationed at Camp Ridgelawn. The roster of 220 men, all from New Jersey and New York, arrived in October 1935 and rotated out of the camp after six months. Another company from New York, Company 3230, transferred out of the camp after only a few weeks. The local newspaper claimed that the East Coast boys had a difficult time adapting to the type of irrigation work executed at the camp.⁴⁰ The Sidney residents contended that the new company from North Dakota understood more about the work they needed to complete as well as the weather of Eastern Montana. Harold Mercer, a Sidney youth, commented that the CCC workers from the East Coast caused some problems in the community. They scared people as they walked down the streets with a domineering attitude and also upset the community members when they gained the attention of several of the young ladies in the area.⁴¹

Boys in the camp learned a variety of skills while working in the camp that many used to obtain jobs once they left the CCC. One important project for the camp was the rock-rip-rapping throughout the Lower Yellowstone, which involved placing rocks along the irrigation system to prevent erosion. CCC workers also cleared brush and weeds out of key channels, allowing a more accessible flow of water to farmers. Another project consisted of growing strawberry clover to seep alkaline conditions. In addition they reinforced bridges throughout the area and

⁴⁰ "CCC Contingent Arrives Sunday On Special Train," *Sidney Herald*, 24 October 1935, p. 1; "CCC Change Here Again This Week; New Outfit Coming," *Sidney Herald*, 7 May 1936, p. 1.

⁴¹ Harold Mercer, interview by author, 15 October 1993, tape recording, Sidney, MT; "CCC Outfit to Be Sent Back East Is Report," *Sidney Herald*, 2 January 1936, p. 1.



Figure 7. Men from Civilian Conservation Corps camp BR-30 rock rip-rapping main canal. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

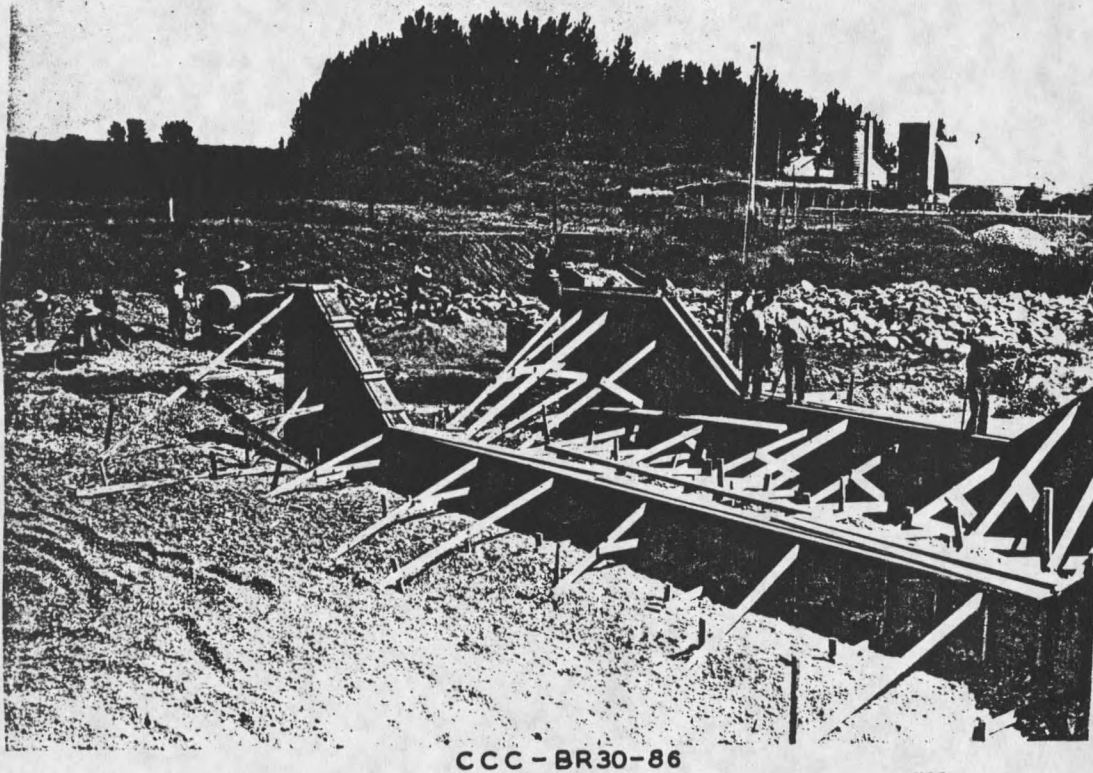


Figure 8. Crews from CCC camp BR-30 working on the Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

constructed a rock base for the Intake Dam.⁴² Campers also learned how to lay willow mattresses in the Yellowstone River by weighting the mats with "rock for the specific purpose of sinking it to the bottom and rising [the] level of the river shores to prevent the current of the river from eroding the banks and causing breaks in the canal nearby."⁴³ In July 1936, the CCC workers helped to repair a break in a canal near Savage (20 miles south of Sidney). They had the canal in working condition within 36 hours, before flooding destroyed valuable farmland. Ridgelawn boys also received fire training and in 1940 contained a prairie fire along Fox Creek before it caused any extended damage.⁴⁴

CCC boys learned their skills well and in 1938 the federal government awarded Camp Ridgelawn the highest departmental commendation for its accomplishments. Commissioner John C. Page announced that the camp's "splendid record [proved] . . . indicative of intelligent cooperation on the part of the entire camp personnel." In addition Camp Ridgelawn ranked third in the nation for its safety record in 1938 and proved to be one of the most " . . . efficiently ordered camps of the kind in operation anywhere in the country at large."⁴⁵ The camp's near perfect record ended with its only fatal accident in

⁴² The campers completed nearly seven hundred yards of reinforced rock-rip-raps at various spots along the irrigation system. "Good Work Is Done By CCC in L. Y. Project," *Sidney Herald*, 8 October 1936, p. 1; "CCC Launches New Program In This Valley," *Sidney Herald*, 30 June 1938, p. 1, 8.

⁴³ "Important Work Being Done by CCC," *Sidney Herald*, 2 March 1939, p. 1, 4; "Bureau of Reclamation ECW News Notes," *Sidney Herald*, 1 April 1937, p. 1

⁴⁴ "CCC Responds to Call; Move 8000 Yds. Dirt," *Sidney Herald*, 23 July 1936, p. 1; "CCC Boys Put Out Fox Creek Prairie Fire Last Week," *Sidney Herald*, 26 September 1940, p. 1.

⁴⁵ "Ridgelawn CCC Camp Rated Among Best," *Sidney Herald*, 12 January 1939, p. 1.

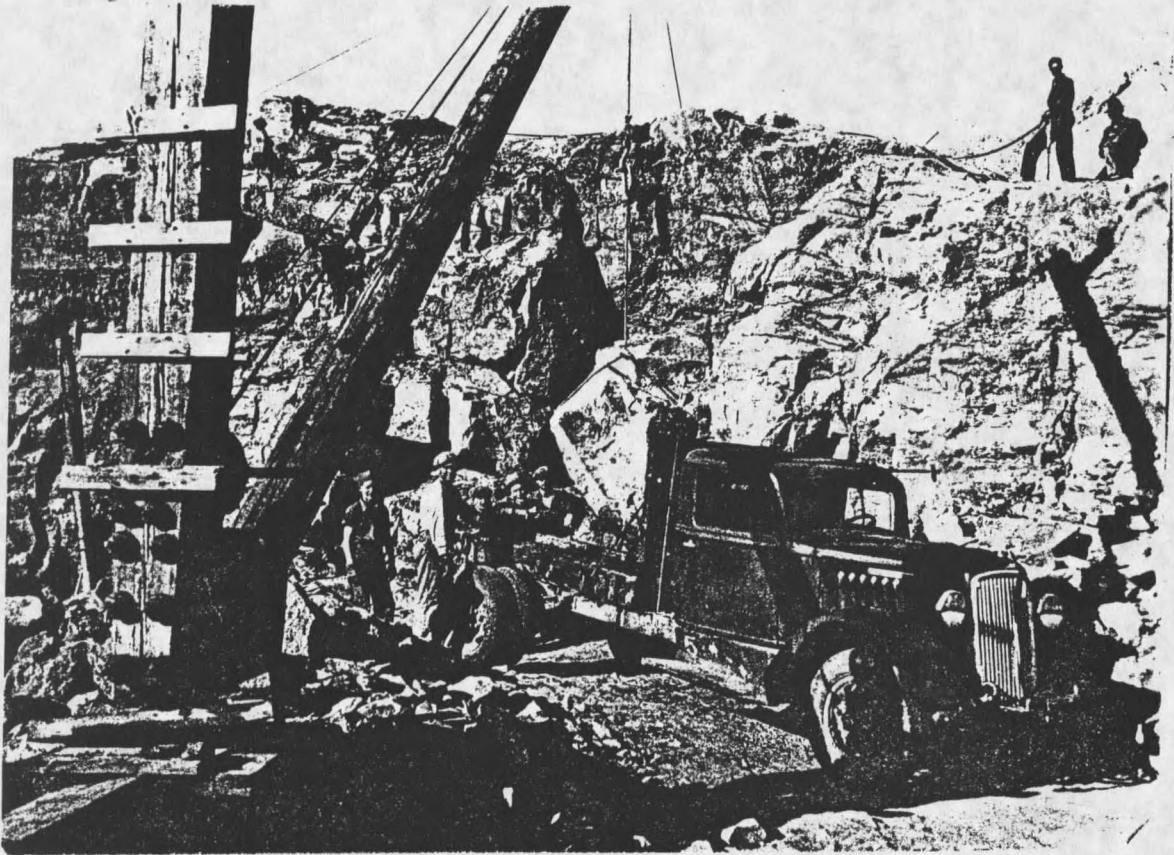


Figure 9. CCC workers loading rock at quarry, Intake, Montana. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

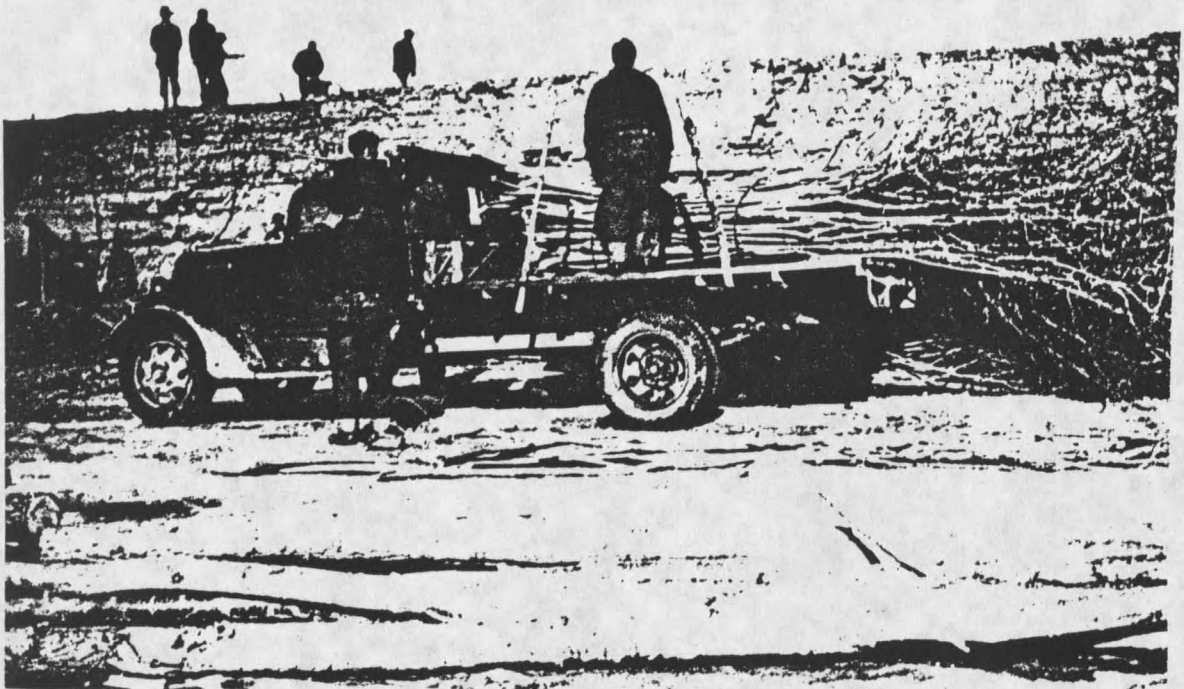


Figure 10. CCC workers hauling willows to make willow mattresses. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

November 1939, when Paul T. Hanson, a nineteen-year-old from Regan, North Dakota, drowned. The truck he was driving was loaded with rocks and "evidently the weight of the load, as Hanson applied the brakes in backing down the slope, carried the truck over the bank," completely submerging it.⁴⁶

Many appreciated the benefits the CCC offered the boys of the Ridgelawn camp. People believed the training and life in the camps prepared the young men for jobs once they left the CCC. Like the Medicine Lake camp, the boys received vocational training and could continue their education in over thirty-five classes. Ralph Criger, educational supervisor for the camp, announced in 1937 that one CCC camper would graduate from Sidney High School and had gained permission to attend commencement exercises. In 1939 seven CCC boys graduated and another seven earned high school credits.⁴⁷

Recreation played an important role for the boys at Ridgelawn. The recreation hall provided a central outlet for entertainment for the campers. At the hall they could play pool, cribbage, chess, read, fence, or buy goods at the canteen. Sidney and Fairview businessmen donated much of the equipment for the hall. Likewise, in March 1936 businessmen and the American Legion sponsored a dance to raise money for a library for the camp and in 1940 the Legion auxiliary voted to sponsor the library.⁴⁸ The boys reciprocated and often sponsored successful dances for the residents from the surrounding area. The

⁴⁶ "CCC Youth Meets Death By Drowning," *Sidney Herald*, 30 November 1939, p. 1.

⁴⁷ "CCC Boy Graduates With Sidney Hi Class; Senior Year at Camp," *Sidney Herald*, 10 June 1937, insert; "1500 Attend Sidney CCC Open House," *Sidney Herald*, 20 April 1939, p. 1.

⁴⁸ "Ridgelawn CCC Camp News Notes," *Sidney Herald*, 19 March 1936, p. 8; "American Legion Auxiliary to Sponsor CCC Camp Library," *Sidney Herald*, 19 September 1940, p. 2A.

campers also amused people with plays. One such play, performed in 1936, caricatured life in the Ridgelawn camp.⁴⁹ Sports again proved the most popular pastime activity for the campers. A few of the boys participated in a 1936 boxing tournament held in Fairview. CCC campers Joe Conegeo and Ivory White, both from New York, boxed and won their rounds in the tournament. Many joined athletic teams and participated in CCC tournaments for baseball, basketball, and kittenball.⁵⁰

The CCC worked closely with the Sidney and Fairview community and wanted to keep them informed of what was happening at the camp. Like other CCC camps across the United States, the Ridgelawn camp hosted an Open House every year. Each year around fifteen hundred guests from the Sidney region toured the camp.⁵¹ The CCC also sponsored a free movie at the Roxy Theater in Fairview in November 1937, showing the work that the camp had accomplished in the area.⁵²

Despite its impressive accomplishments, the camp at Ridgelawn received orders to dismantle in June 1941. The men transferred to Terry (65 miles south

⁴⁹ "Ridgelawn CCC Camp News Notes," *Sidney Herald*, 13 February 1936, p. 8; *Focus on Our Roots*, 63.

⁵⁰ Kittenball was the original name given to softball. "Menzie's Will Have CCC Hoop Squad," *Fairview News*, 21 November 1935, p. 1; "Fairview Fight Card Draws Big Attendance," *Sidney Herald*, 9 January 1936, p. 1; "Sidney Defeats CCC 9 to 6 Here Monday," *Sidney Herald*, 2 June 1938, p. 4; "CCC Kittenball Tournament Here Saturday, Sunday," *Sidney Herald*, 22 August 1940, p. 1.

⁵¹ "Ridgelawn CCC Camp Has Over 1500 at Open House Last Sunday," *Sidney Herald*, 8 April 1937, p. 1; "1500 Attend Sidney CCC Open House," *Sidney Herald*, 20 April 1939, p. 1.

⁵² "CCC Will Show Free Film at Roxy Saturday Morning; Public Invited," *Sidney Herald*, 4 November 1937, p. 1.



Figure 11. CCC Company 2761 basketball champions, 1940 and 1941. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

of Sidney) to work on the Buffalo Rapids irrigation project.⁵³ Just as in Plentywood, the people of the Sidney area fought to keep the camp open, protesting that enough work remained to keep the camp open for at least another five or six years, and removal now would seriously impede the reclamation project. Without the work the CCC workers provided, the irrigation project would have cost the community \$10,000 to \$15,000 each year for supplies and labor, a cost the Lower Yellowstone irrigation project could not have afforded. Despite the requests and pleas of the people of the area, Camp BR-30 officially closed on 30 June 1941, ending six years of invaluable service to the people of the lower Yellowstone Valley.⁵⁴

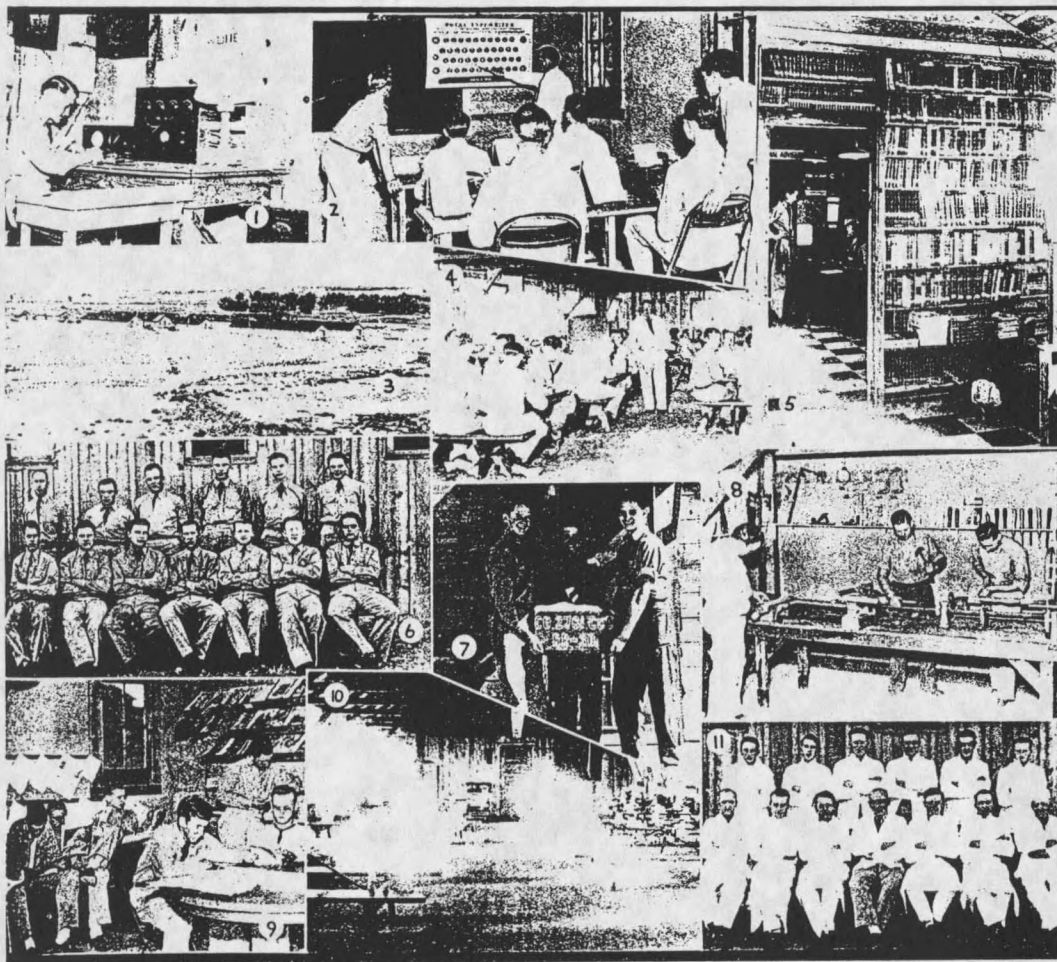
The nearest CCC camp to Billings was located about twenty miles to the northeast outside of Ballatine. Although most of the work at the camp concentrated on the area surrounding Ballatine, Billings still received some benefits. Probably the largest direct aid for the Billings community from the CCC camp occurred after the 1937 flood. A devastated community readily accepted help from over fifty Ballatine CCC youths. The campers repaired the Billings Bench Water association's syphon that was completely destroyed by the flooding of Alkali Creek along with helping repair other irrigation projects.⁵⁵

The campers at Ballatine often invited the Billings community to camp events. The annual Open House always provided an opportunity for the boys of

⁵³ "Sidney CCC Unit Goes to Buffalo Rapids," *Sidney Herald*, 30 October 1941, p. 1.

⁵⁴ "CCC Camp Needed Here, Persson Says," *Sidney Herald*, 12 June 1941, p. 1; "CCC Camp Here Ordered Disbanded; Project Work Closed," *Sidney Herald*, 12 June 1941, p. 1.

⁵⁵ "Billings Flood Loss Set at \$2,000,000," *Billings Gazette*, 16 June 1937, p. 1.



- | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. The radio room. | 5. The library. | 8. The workshop. |
| 2. Typewriting class. | 6. The Company Overhead. | 9. The reading room. |
| 3. General view of the camp. | 7. Three happy enrollees. | 10. Interior view of mess hall. |
| 4. Mess time. | | 11. Cooks and K. P.'s. |

Figure 12. Company 2761 at the CCC camp at Ridgelawn. Reprinted from *Official Annual Civilian Conservation Corps: North Dakota District CCC Seventh Corps Area* (Baton Rouge, LA: Direct Advertising Company, 1937), 53.

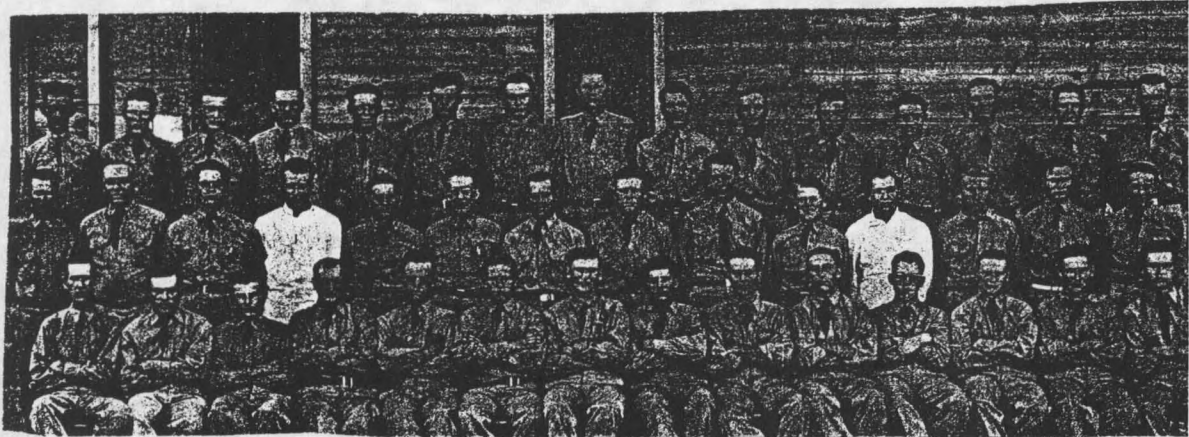
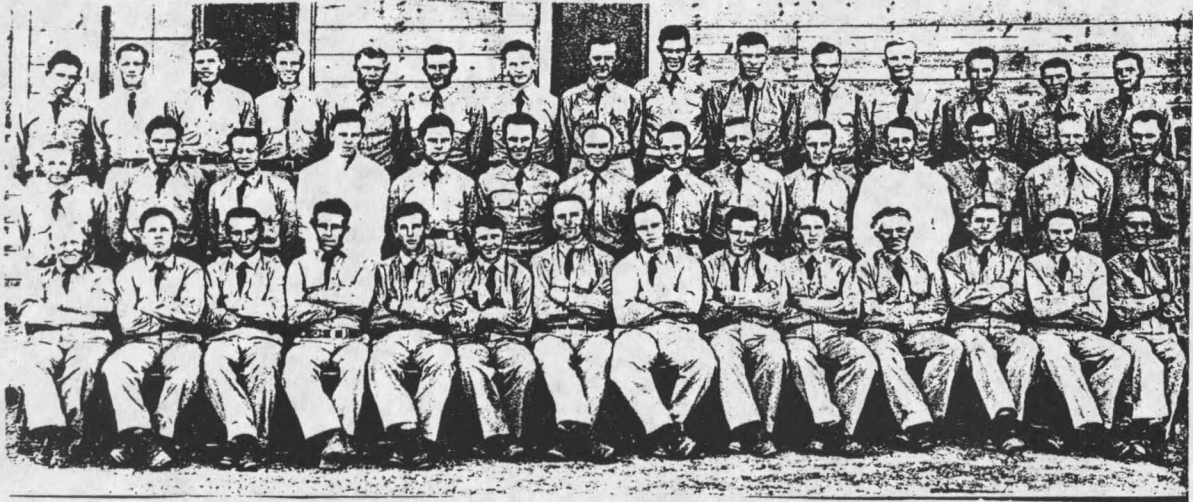


Figure 13. Members of Company 2761 at BR-30. Reprinted from *Official Annual Civilian Conservation Corps: North Dakota District CCC Seventh Corps Area* (Baton Rouge, LA: Direct Advertising Company, 1937), 53.

Company 2503 to inform the people of Billings about their accomplishments. After demonstrating drills and explaining camp procedures, visitors at the 1941 Open House enjoyed playing tug-of-war and participating in outdoor activities such as a foot race. The event ended with a program and dance.⁵⁶ The Ballatine CCC campers participated in many Billings activities as well. The camp joined the Yellowstone County softball league. The team played against other CCC camps as well as local teams from the community.⁵⁷

The Billings community also employed local youths through the CCC on a city park project. In 1933 Billings mayor Fred L. Tilton applied for funding after receiving a telegram from Senator Burton K. Wheeler which explained that "men can be employed \$30 per month and board on park projects in state or city parks but that so far no projects have been submitted from Montana. Suggest if you have worthwhile projects of this kind and deem it advisable you wire or telephone director immediately. . . . No cost to city, county, or state." The *Billings Gazette* reported that twenty men would be employed on the project, including the landscaping of Pioneer Park. The project would bring in a monthly pay roll of \$6000.⁵⁸

The CCC played a significant role for the youth of eastern Montana. Many young men restored their health, faith in themselves and their country, learned valuable job skills, earned an education, and gained a new perspective on the world around them. They had to learn to work and live with others as well as

⁵⁶ "CCC Camp Plans Program Sunday," *Billings Gazette*, 30 March 1941, p. 3.

⁵⁷ "Local Teams Win in Softball Playoff," *Billings Gazette*, 11 June 1941, p. 9.

⁵⁸ "Mayor Applies for CCC Fund," *Billings Gazette*, 13 November 1933, p. 7.

improving themselves. The benefits the boys received from the experience far outweighed any negative views of the camp.

Although the CCC was widely successful, it did not reach all unemployed youth. Thomas Minehan wrote in his 1934 book, *Boy and Girl Tramps of America*, that the "Civilian Conservation Corps has done little to check the exodus of children. It enlists only boys and not all of them. . . . What we need is a new Child Conservation Corps, which will have as its purpose the sowing of not our forests a hundred years from today, but of our boys and girls growing into the men and women of tomorrow."⁵⁹ Young people themselves also voiced concern about their future. Corliss Little, a young woman from Missoula, Montana, complained that "the world they [youth] have prepared for greets them with a 'not wanted' sign," expressing a need to provide a wider base of young people with employment.⁶⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt pushed for another program for youth, arguing

We are going to have a generation of people who do not know how to work . . . and who ignore our old standards of morals and ethics because they cannot live up to them. Economic conditions are different but human nature remains the same and an embittered, unfulfilled and disappointed generation will be more dangerous to our future happiness than any loss in material possessions.⁶¹

Little echoed Eleanor Roosevelt. In a speech presented at the 1937 Guidance Placement Conference in Helena, Little stated that ". . . the greatest consequence is the fact that young people are failing to develop desirable habits

⁵⁹ Watkins, *The Great Depression*, 258.

⁶⁰ Montana Youth Administration, *Report on the Guidance Placement Conference* (Helena, MT: n. p., 1937), 10.

⁶¹ T. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999), 268.

of work; are failing to acquire skills and experiences on which to build sound careers; [and] are being so demoralized that they conclude the world has no place for them." She expressed the concerns of many adults when she concluded that many youth were "in danger of becoming the prey of evil influences which may lead them into crime." Little also explained the impact of unemployment on the young people of the nation:

In the economic dislocation as of the past six years they have become "surplus population." But youth is not surplus as are cotton, wheat, or pigs. They cannot be held in reserve nor put in cold storage. Nor can young people remain forever idle. How to utilize instead of wasting their high-tide of energies, how to help them to an intelligent and satisfying adjustment to life is a major problem to be solved by this Nation in the immediate future.⁶²

Something more had to be done to help the millions of youth who were losing faith not only in their country, but in themselves as well.

The government listened to the pleas and on 26 June 1935 FDR, through Executive Order 7086, created the National Youth Administration as a part of the Works Progress Administration.⁶³ When Roosevelt established the NYA, he stressed its importance to the future of the nation:

I have determined that we shall do something for the Nation's unemployed youth, because we can ill afford to lose the skill and energy of these young men and women. They must have their chance in school, their turn as apprentices, and their opportunity for jobs—a chance to work and earn for themselves.⁶⁴

⁶² *Report on the Guidance and Placement Conference*, 11-12.

⁶³ Richard A. Reiman, *The New Deal and American Youth: Ideas and Ideals in a Depression Decade* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 121; *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, n.p.

⁶⁴ Betty and Earnest K. Lindley, *A New Deal for Youth: The Story of the NYA* (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), 3-4.

Roosevelt appointed Aubrey Williams, Henry Hopkins's chief assistant, to head the NYA, which he led until the end of the program in 1943. Fifty million dollars appropriated out of the WPA relief money, most of which was set aside for wages for the youth, funded the agency.⁶⁵ The NYA wanted to do more than keep youth in school and provide them with employment. Federal and state directors realized youth needed more than something to keep them busy. As stated in the 1 March 1941 issue of *State Flashes*, a NYA newsletter:

A young person needs more equipment for life than the ability to work. He must also acquire a love of country and a willingness to serve and to defend it well. An understanding of the perplexing problems which face our nation, cultural resources which enable youth to use his leisure wisely, preparation for family life, and the ability to get along with others are all necessities to be acquired in the transition from youth to adulthood.⁶⁶

Through the three-fold goals of the agency that included providing aid to those in school from high school to graduate programs; a work program for youth who were not in school; and a guidance program to help youth find jobs for which they were best suited, Williams and Hopkins hoped to preserve democratic values.⁶⁷ They wanted youngsters to "understand and appreciate the principles of American democracy." The Ohio directors agreed and stated that the NYA's "... first responsibility is to provide immediate constructive outlets for the energy and hope that is being frustrated by idleness; to face frankly and most energetically some of the needs of youth because, if this is not done, democracy

⁶⁵ Watkins, *The Great Depression*, 258.

⁶⁶ *State Flashes*, 1 March 1941, p. 10. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

⁶⁷ *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, forward.

itself will be lost."⁶⁸ Taussig voiced a need to teach boys and girls democratic history. He feared that "years of idleness and cynicism would become ripe for domestic demagogues arising in depression America." He believed it was the duty of the American people to provide youth with both "patriotic instruction and a social niche."⁶⁹

Like their parents and other adults, youth wanted the independence and feeling of self-worth that accompanied a paycheck. One boy expressed what his employment with the NYA meant to him:

Maybe you don't know what it's like to come home and have everyone looking at you, and you know they're thinking, even if they don't say it, "He didn't find a job." It gets terrible you just don't want to come home. . . . But a guy's gotta eat some place and you gotta sleep some place. . . . I tell you, the first time I walked in the front door with my paycheck, I was somebody!⁷⁰

NYA students earned money by working for an hour after school performing jobs such as maintaining the school grounds, assisting teachers and secretaries with paperwork, and repairing school property. Out-of-school youngsters worked on community directed projects including supervising playgrounds, building and repairing furniture, collecting library books, and helping with city beautification.

NYA leaders realized the program would not succeed without the full support of the community. Therefore, they established committees in every town under the direction of the county director in order to help provide programs that would best benefit the youth and people of the town. In 1936 NYA district

⁶⁸ *State Flashes*, 15 April 1941, p. 1. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

⁶⁹ Reiman, 97-98, 132-133.

⁷⁰ Lindley, 21.

supervisor Mina S. Lampell of Billings traveled to Sidney to organize a committee "... composed of representatives from business, educational, farming, labor, and professional groups." The committee, as with similar committees throughout the state, would then be responsible to "recommend and approve projects."⁷¹ State director J. B. Love explained the provision when he stated that:

the proportion of money spent in a given community by [the] NYA is usually in direct ratio to the youth load and the interest shown by citizens in development of their community activities and the welfare of their young people. The continuation of our work program and the inauguration of new projects depends entirely on the interest of a community, which must sponsor every project before it can be approved.⁷²

Like other New Deal programs, the NYA could not help every youth who needed employment. J. B. Love expressed the financial limitations of the NYA when he stressed that "we are not able to assist nearly as many as need it, but what little we have to offer is of vital importance to those receiving it."⁷³ Limited funding meant certain qualifications had to be met in order for youths to enroll in the NYA. Only youths between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five and either "a member of a family whose income is insufficient to provide the basic requirements of all members of the family, including the youth member, ... or without family connections and his income is insufficient to provide his basic

⁷¹ "National Youth Adm. District Head Confers Here on That Program," *Sidney Herald*, 6 February 1936, p. 4; "Advisory Board Being Named for NYA Workers," *Plentywood Herald*, 6 January 1938, p. 1.

⁷² "Montana NYA to Continue Work Program, Through State This Summer, Reports Director Love," *Sidney Herald*, 29 July 1937, p. 6; "NYA Continues Work Projects," *Billings Gazette*, 25 June 1937, p. 8.

⁷³ "NYA in Montana Expands Rolls," *Billings Gazette*, 25 December 1936, p. 7.

requirements" were eligible.⁷⁴ Youths also had to be registered with the National Reemployment service and could not be designated as the head of the family.⁷⁵

Over two million youths took part in the NYA school work program from 1935 to 1943. The more successful of the NYA programs, it kept youths in school and allowed them to continue their education. The amount of money they received each month was small, but it was enough to give youths, and even younger brothers and sisters, a chance to stay in school, one of the program's main goals.⁷⁶ NYA chroniclers Betty and Earnest Lindley explained the student aid designated for those in college:

The college aid plan, inherited from FERA, formed the nucleus of the first division of the NYA programs. Student aid was expanded in two directions: to include a few graduate students and a large number of needy high school students. Three other main divisions were set up: part-time work for out-of-school and out-of-work youth in families on relief, related training and encouragement of constructive leisure-time activity for these youth, and vocational guidance and placement for all unemployed youth.⁷⁷

Not all youths the school work program helped had to be from relief families. The colleges and schools maintained responsibility for selecting youth they believed would benefit from the program. High school students needed to keep up their attendance and be doing "satisfactory work in their studies," passing at least three-fourths of their classes.⁷⁸ Students applied directly to the

⁷⁴ Education Policies Commission, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, The National Youth Administration, and the Public Schools* (Washington D. C.: National Education Association of the United States and the American Association of School Administrators, 1941), 22.

⁷⁵ "NYA Meeting is Scheduled," *Plentywood Herald*, 3 October 1937, p. 12; "Regional Youth Meet at Sidney October 9," *Sidney Herald*, 26 September 1935.

⁷⁶ Watkins, *The Great Depression*, 259.

⁷⁷ Lindley, 15.

⁷⁸ "NYA Gives Aid to Needy Students Again This Year; Applications Required," *Sidney Herald*, 18 August 1938, p. 1; *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, n.p.; Lindley, 159.

head of the school and both high school and college students had to prove that they would not be able to continue their education without government support and that they were of good character. It was necessary for college students to take three-fourths the normal schedule and maintain a C average to be qualified for the NYA.⁷⁹

The federal government spent over a quarter of a million dollars in Montana to support the NYA from its inception in 1935 to June 1936. By 1938 over \$1.7 million had been spent in Montana, and of that almost \$700,000 was used for the student aid program.⁸⁰ From 1935 to 1939 approximately 40 percent of the NYA budget for Montana went to school and college aid. Since the NYA did not have to house and feed participants, funds could be used to help more students. The NYA helped over one thousand Montana high school and college students continue their education in 1935. At the end of the 1937 school year, the number had increased to four thousand.⁸¹ In Sheridan County from 1935 to 1938, 692 students received NYA aid to stay in school. Of the 692, 583 were high school students and 109 were college students. During that four year period, Sheridan County students received almost \$30,000.⁸²

⁷⁹ "NYA Aid May Go to 67 Student," *Billings Gazette*, 8 September 1935, p. 5; "NYA Head Asks Further Speed," *Billings Gazette*, 22 September 1935, p. 1-2; *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, n.p.

⁸⁰ "National Youth Administration Has Spent Over Quarter Million Dollars in Montana," *Billings Gazette*, 13 April 1936, p. 8; "NYA Gives State Over \$1,700,000," *Billings Gazette*, 18 September 1938, p. 5.

⁸¹ "NYA Aids 1,000 State Students," *Billings Gazette*, 6 November 1935, p. 7; "Montana NYA to Continued Work Program, Through State This Summer, Reports Director Love," *Sidney Herald*, 29 July 1937, p. 6; "NYA Continues Work Projects," *Billings Gazette*, 25 June 1937, p. 8.

⁸² For those students living outside of town, a state transportation fund helped make sure they had enough money to get to school. In Plentywood, students living more than three miles from the nearest high school received around \$9 to \$10 a school year to help with their

In October of 1935 the first group of thirteen students in Sidney qualified for NYA assistance. These students received the standard minimum of \$3 and maximum of \$6 a month for their work. Although the amount seemed small, in most cases, "the aid extended spells the difference between school and no school for these thirteen students." NYA students received their first paycheck in November of 1935.⁸³ Wages NYA youth earned were "... intended to help the youth improve his personal employability rather than to subsidize the state or local relief budgets. The NYA emphasizes the vocational and industrial training that will fit youths for better jobs, and is not primarily a relief agency." By 1938 the number of students receiving NYA aid increased to forty.⁸⁴ One Sidney youth, Elizabeth Phelps, remembers her sister was able to finish her senior year due to her job with the NYA. The extra money earned also helped Elizabeth. For Christmas in 1936 her sister bought her a pair of snow pants with five dollars she had saved from her NYA job.⁸⁵

Typical of the NYA program, students in Richland County earned their wages by working one hour a day around the school building. The *Sidney Herald* reported that "these boys and girls have shown their willingness to help themselves by doing their work promptly and thoroughly. Some do

transportation costs. "427 High School Pupils Aided by NYA in Sheridan," *Plentywood Herald*, 21 May 1936, p. 1; *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, n.p.

⁸³ "National Youth Adm. Aids Sidney Students," *Sidney Herald*, 17 October 1935, p. 1; "First NYA Checks Received in Sidney," *Sidney Herald*, 21 November 1935, p. 1.

⁸⁴ "Wages Paid Youths on NYA Not Part of Relief, Ruling Says," *Billings Gazette*, 1 December 1939, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Phelps, interview by John Terreo, 16 November 1988, OH 1140, transcript, "New Deal in Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, MT.

hectographing and help prepare seat work for children in the primary grades, some repair books in the library, while other[s] do repair work in the manual training shop and about the building."⁸⁶ Between 1935 and 1938, 213 high school students and 50 college students received NYA aid in Richland County. Yellowstone County had a total of 434 students working for the NYA during the same time period. Of the 434, 260 were high school students and 174 were college students. Their combined aid was just over \$20,000.⁸⁷

At the university level, the college officials selected the students and projects. During its first year the NYA aided over 110,000 graduate and undergraduate students across the nation. The committee at Montana State University in Missoula approved projects based on their educational and social value as well as projects that were of a "routine nature that would be done otherwise at regular university expense."⁸⁸ Missoula reported in 1937 that one out of every five students at Montana State University worked on NYA projects between November and December 1936. The standard pay was \$15 for undergraduate and \$30 for graduate students a month. The 386 students employed by the NYA generally worked on gender specific projects. While female students performed mainly clerical work, male students did research, worked as laboratory aids, and performed janitorial work. The work program

⁸⁶ "NYA Gives Aid to Needy Students Again This Year; Applications Required," *Sidney Herald*, 18 August 1938, p. 1; "First NYA Checks Received in Sidney," *Sidney Herald*, 21 November 1935, p. 1.

⁸⁷ *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, n.p.

⁸⁸ "NYA Gives Montana Students at "U" Work Aid for Third Year," *Billings Gazette*, 1 October 1936, p. 3.

established at Missoula won great praise from state directors for its efforts not only to help students but the university as well. Three projects that received great acclaim were the forestry nursery project, the study of the economic production of Montana, and a historical records survey.⁸⁹

Not all youths in need attended school, and in order to help them, the NYA also offered an out-of-school work program. The work program was divided into four projects: "projects for youth community development and recreational leadership, projects for rural youth development, public service projects, and research projects."⁹⁰ NYA supervisors wanted youths they trained to find a skill they enjoyed and excelled at. Youths were given the opportunity to try different jobs in order to obtain "... a better knowledge of their own aptitudes and abilities. After having worked at several different types of jobs these young people are in a position to make a more considered choice of a vocation in line with their talents."⁹¹ Supervisors also wanted to give youths a realistic view of the job market. They trained the youths to excel in their skills, but did not give them false hope that they would be guaranteed a job once they left the NYA. One state director explained the NYA's policy about youths and jobs:

We can't and we don't tell NYA youth that if they only work hard enough and have good intentions they'll be sure to find jobs. That simply isn't true today. What we do tell them is that we believe the more skilled they are the better their chances will be to get jobs. If a girl, for example, can type only 30 words a minute, we tell her that 50 is necessary before she can

⁸⁹ "NYA Helps Montana University Students," *Billings Gazette*, 28 January 1937, p. 7; "225 Students Employed on University NYA," *Sidney Herald* 18 November 1937, p. 2-B.

⁹⁰ "NYA Will Spend Thousands Here," *Plentywood Herald*, 9 January 1936, p. 1; "1936 Youth Aid Plan is Mapped," *Billings Gazette*, 5 January 1936, p. 3.

⁹¹ "Richland Co. Youth To Benefit from NYA Work Program," *Sidney Herald*, 14 September 1939, p. 8.

compete with many others who are looking for the same kind of work she wants.⁹²

NYA supervisors also wanted to assure that the young people understood the work they were doing. NYA leaders made sure the projects "related training in connection with the actual work experience so that the theoretical as well as the practical side is well learned by the youth, and the experience thus gained will later on help the youth in obtaining jobs and becoming self-sustaining."⁹³

The out-of-school work program provided an important aspect of the Montana NYA program and benefited the entire community as well. In Sheridan County from 1935-1938, 294 youths earned a NYA pay check. Projects they completed gave them employment and improved the civic life of the community as well. One project NYA workers completed was planting 200 American elm trees in the town of Plentywood. Another large project included a machine shop where 16 boys received "first hand mechanical instruction."⁹⁴ To promote community recreation, NYA youths built a toboggan slide, ice skating rink, tennis court, and football field. The people of Sheridan County recognized and appreciated the work NYA youths provided. A 1939 article in the *Plentywood Herald* outlined the projects the youths completed. In addition to historical and biological surveys and an irrigation project, the article listed other NYA projects including "sewing projects, public service projects, such as secretarial work for

⁹² Lindley, 111.

⁹³ "National Youth Administration Programs In Richland County," *Sidney Herald*, 4 May 1939, p. 4.

⁹⁴ "Tree Planting by NYA Starts This Week In City," *Plentywood Herald*, 15 April 1917, p. 1; "NYA Projects are Resumed," *Plentywood Herald*, 25 July 1940, p. 1.

county and school officials, hot school lunch projects, skating rink and tennis court projects, landscaping and park improvement projects, which include an open air band stand."⁹⁵ Like the student projects, most of the work was gender specific as girls were assigned mainly domestic tasks while boys worked on projects that required physical strength and mechanical skills.

By the end of 1940, county director Chris Johanson announced the expansion of funding for the out-of-school work program in Sheridan County. Part of the increase in funding was to build a work shop and student resident training center in Medicine Lake.⁹⁶ The work shop was built from dismantled buildings from Fort Peck. As part of the NYA philosophy, the project furnished an educational as well as construction opportunity. The boys employed learned more about the construction of buildings by taking them apart as well as learning how to use jack hammers and air compressors. They were able to salvage 95 percent of the buildings they dismantled compared to only 60 percent of most demolition crews.⁹⁷

One of the largest NYA work projects in Plentywood was the carpenter shop that opened in 1938. The shop, housed in the old county jail, was under the supervision of Olaf Granvold. When the shop opened in August of 1938 it employed ten boys. Work completed included the construction of benches and

⁹⁵ "NYA Has Provided Jobs for Many Young People of Sheridan County," *Plentywood Herald*, 16 February 1939, p. 1, 8.

⁹⁶ "Appropriation Will Expand NYA Program," *Plentywood Herald*, 17 October 1940, p. 1, 5.

⁹⁷ *State Flashes*, 1 May 1941, p. 5. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

preparing platforms for power machinery. Later projects included the repairing of courthouse furniture that would have been thrown away otherwise.⁹⁸ By the end of the year, eighteen boys were working at the carpentry shop. In order to understand the "fundamentals of the construction of a building," NYA boys built a model house complete with furniture.⁹⁹

The carpenter shop, like the rest of the NYA projects, was also intended to help the community. In 1939 shop supervisor Granvold announced that adults and other youths of Plentywood could use the shop free of charge. Those using the building were also given assistance in their various projects, but they were responsible for any broken machinery or tools. Granvold also said that "woodcrafters must furnish their own lumber, nails, screws, glue, sandpaper, or other materials."¹⁰⁰ NYA youth were often encouraged to use NYA work shops in their free time to make their own products or to practice a skill. Betty and Earnest Lindley commented that:

On many projects we visited, boys and girls stay overtime or come back during their spare time to obtain more knowledge and additional practice in the work they are doing. On their own time boys in workshops frequently make furniture for their homes, and girls on sewing projects bring materials to make clothes for themselves and their families. . . . Supervisors encourage NYA youth to use the facilities of workrooms and assist them in making articles for their own use. In several sewing rooms and workshops we saw small libraries of books and bulletins on subjects related to the work the young people were doing. The supervisors reported that this informative material circulated widely among the girls.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ "Carpenter Shop Now Operating," *Plentywood Herald*, 11 August 1938, p. 1; "NYA Shop in City Active," *Plentywood Herald*, 1 February 1940, p. 1, 8.

⁹⁹ "48 NYA Youths Employed Here," *Plentywood Herald*, 15 December 1938, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ "NYA Carpenter Shop Open to Public on April 17, Announces Supervisor Here," *Plentywood Herald*, 13 April 1939, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Lindley, 68-69.

Sidney also supported an out-of-school work program. The *Sidney Herald* reported that because "... the projects have been locally sponsored by cities, counties, villages, school districts, and other government subdivisions indicate they are regarded as useful and desirable."¹⁰² Between 1935 and 1938, NYA work projects employed 185 youths. By 1940 eighty-three youngsters were on the payroll. In addition to the work program, forty-one boys and girls were assigned to the NYA Resident Training centers. Some interesting projects in Richland County included an artifact and fossil project and helping take the census of the city.¹⁰³ By the beginning of 1937, the sewing project employed four girls. People throughout the community donated used clothing for the NYA workers to repair and then distribute to the needy of the community. Another community geared project included the skating rink, which employed six youths who not only worked on the rink and adjoining warming and rest rooms, but also helped supervise play on the rink. They assisted "the younger children in getting their skates on, seeing that all children on the rink are given fair play, and being prepared with first aid kits to care for any minor injuries sustained on the ice."¹⁰⁴ The NYA also built other recreation facilities such as an athletic field, golf course, and horseshoe courts.

¹⁰² "Richland Co. Youth To Benefit from NYA Work Program," *Sidney Herald*, 14 September 1939, p. 8.

¹⁰³ "NYA Work Program Survey Reveals Interesting Facts," *Sidney Herald*, 14 March 1940, p. 2-B; "National Youth Adm. Starts County Projects," *Sidney Herald*, 19 March 1936, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ "NYA Projects Started; More to Be Started, Supervisor Brown Says," *Sidney Herald*, 14 January 1937, p. 1.

Another NYA project, working with the city council, included the marking of city streets and numbering the houses in town. The council assured the residents of Sidney that the numbers would be "of very attractive type. Aluminum numbers set in a background of black baked enamel. They will not detract from the appearance of any home but rather will add materially."¹⁰⁵ Street numbers replaced the traditional street names of founders and pioneers, making directions in town easier. The *Sidney Herald* reported that "farmers and others who use the roads will be pleased, and especially those farmers located at corners who have been subjected to constant inquiry of the way by motorists confused through the absence of such direction markers." The Sidney Woman's Club sponsored the cemetery project in which NYA youths placed white crosses to "... mark the graves in the cemetery which have not been previously marked and add greatly to the appearance of the cemetery."¹⁰⁶

The Kiwanis club sponsored the rural and city beautification project. Various community groups such as the Boy Scouts and Holly Sugar Company joined NYA crews to plant flowers throughout the valley. The Kiwanis club provided the seeds. The town supported the project and saw the benefits rural beautification could bring the community. The *Sidney Herald* reported that "already several outside communities and towns are planning pilgrimages to this valley during the summer to enjoy it all at the height of the flowering season.

¹⁰⁵ "News from Office of NYA Supervisor," *Sidney Herald*, 21 January 1937, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ "NYA Making Road Signs to Be Put Up Thruout County," *Sidney Herald*, 8 April 1937, p. 6; "County Supervisor Reports On NYA Project Progress," *Sidney Herald*, 20 May 1937, p. 1.

Tourists will be attracted here when the word goes out to see the most beautiful valley center in the entire northwest."¹⁰⁷

Another Richland County project was located in Fairview. Sponsored by the county and Fairview school district, the NYA established a wood-working shop. The fully equipped shop was "as modern as any in this end of the state." The twenty NYA boys employed at the shop built and repaired furniture, toys, road signs, and any article made of wood. Any non-profit public organization could have materials made at the shop. The only cost to the group was the price of the materials. The boys employed at the shop were "... not on a unit of production basis, the only requirement being that work be carefully done with a minimum of waste."¹⁰⁸

The most anticipated NYA project was the building of the youth center in 1941. Sigurd I. Selden, NYA area director, announced the approval of the center in February 1941. The NYA newsletter for Montana, *State Flashes*, reported on the construction of the youth center and the difficulty in finding building material and commented on Selden's dedication to the center. The paper reported that "since lumber in Sidney is scarce and expensive, one of the county commissioners informed us that people in the vicinity didn't leave home Sunday

¹⁰⁷ "Rural Beautification Program Progressing With NYA In Action," *Sidney Herald*, 21 April 1938, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ "NYA Wood Working Shop at Fairview Well Equipped," *Sidney Herald*, 6 January 1939, p. 9.

for fear Area Director Sigurd Seldon [sic] would have their house as lumber for the Yough [sic] Center."¹⁰⁹

One of the main purposes of the one-story building was to serve as a dormitory for twenty boys and twenty girls who were in the out-of-school work program. Also included in the center was a kitchen and dining hall and wood and craft shops as well as a community recreation hall. The *Sidney Herald* reported that if "greater local financial support can be obtained the recreation hall will be enlarged enough to play basketball." The Sidney center was one of the three youth centers in Montana.¹¹⁰

By the time the center was completed, its original purpose had been enlarged. After America's entry into World War II in December 1941, the focus of the projects of the NYA shifted and the center shops were used for a metal and wood working project for defense.¹¹¹ The Sidney Youth Advisory Committee met in March of 1942 to discuss future uses of the youth center. The committee members agreed that the center "should be open for entertainment purposes to the community and not only to the NYA." Furnishing entertainment for everyone in the community was a major concern so that "... the youth would enjoy the amusements furnished by the NYA rather than going to undesirable places of amusement."¹¹² During the 1942 sugar beet harvest, farmers were in great need

¹⁰⁹ *State Flashes*, 15 March 1941, p. 7. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

¹¹⁰ "Youth Center In Sidney Soon To Be Constructed," *Sidney Herald*, 13 February 1941, p. 1; *State Flashes*, 1 April 1941, p. 3. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

¹¹¹ "NYA Youth Center Will Be Completed," *Sidney Herald*, 25 December 1941, p. 1.

¹¹² "Report on Youth Advisory Committee Meeting Here," *Sidney Herald*, 12 March 1942, p. 1.

of labor. The center housed Montana State College students from Bozeman who were released from their studies to help with the harvest. The board of county commissioners was in charge of the building and used the center as they saw fit to meet the needs of the community.¹¹³

Billings also supported the work program and between 1935 and 1938 the NYA employed almost 400 youths from the community.¹¹⁴ The NYA youth participated in the building of several recreational facilities in the area including ice skating areas, school playgrounds, and athletic fields. The school improvement project employed several NYA boys in lumbering, repairing, and improving school grounds. In December 1938 the NYA youths joined with WPA workers to repair and build toys for the needy children of the community.¹¹⁵ NYA youths also painted street names on curbs and built street and traffic signs for the city. One of the largest work programs in Billings was the library project in which ten youngsters, mainly girls, collected and repaired books and magazines within their community.¹¹⁶ The 15 April 1941 issue of *State Flashes* placed the soil conservation shop located in Billings on the cover, because the experience boys gained in operating heavy machinery at the shop was deemed important for national defense.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ "NYA Building Proves Big Asset To County Now," *Sidney Herald*, 29 October 1942, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, n.p.

¹¹⁵ "Young People To Get Work," *Billings Gazette*, 12 January 1936, p. 5; "WPA and NYA Aid Santa Claus," *Billings Gazette*, 25 December 1938, p. 7.

¹¹⁶ *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, 93-97.

¹¹⁷ *State Flashes* 15 April 1941. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

The Billings NYA youth also organized a radio club. NYA stations formed across the nation to aid in emergencies and national defense. The call letters W7IMK designated the NYA station. The youth ran net drills in the radio room weekly similar to the American Radio Relay League and Army Net. The group later received "ultra high frequency mobile trans-receivers" that were installed in cars for the NYA.¹¹⁸

Finding private employment was a major goal of NYA youths. In 1939, 205 youths left the NYA in Yellowstone County, sixty-four of whom left for private employment. By June 1940, five Sheridan County NYA girls found employment in office and secretarial work.¹¹⁹ In eight northeastern counties in Montana during the month of May 1941, seventy-two youths left the NYA. Ninety percent of them "had secured private employment." Four were from Sidney. During the same year, almost 350,000 youths left the NYA for private employment across the nation. Many of them "... were placed in jobs in national defense industries for which they were given specific preparation by the NYA."¹²⁰

The out-of-school work program also provided vocational guidance to NYA youth. NYA leaders realized that even with the job training boys and girls received, they still needed help in the job search once they left NYA employment.

¹¹⁸ *State Flashes*, 1 April 1941, p. 3. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.; *State Flashes*, 1 March 1941, p. 3. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

¹¹⁹ "NYA Activities Are Reported," *Billings Gazette*, 23 November 1939, p. 3; "NYA Official Visits In County Friday," *Plentywood Herald*, 3 October 1940, p. 5.

¹²⁰ "Four Local NYA Trainees Placed In Private Employment," *Sidney Herald*, 5 June 1941, p. 1; "NYA Trainees Placed In Jobs In Private Industry," *Sidney Herald*, 11 December 1941, p. 2.

In 1936 the NYA established guidance and placement bureaus across the nation. During the first two and a half years of its existence, the Junior Division offices helped 118,597 youths find jobs in private employment.¹²¹ The NYA offered vocational assistance in four ways: "(a) job training through work projects, (b) group vocational guidance and counseling, (c) distribution of industrial studies and occupational briefs, and (d) placement."¹²² The NYA worked closely with state employment services to help youth find jobs and by 1938, thirty-two states, including Montana, opened a total of seventy-eight Junior Divisions. By August 1938, the number increased to eighty-seven. Services provided by the Junior Divisions and public employment offices were "available to all youth, regardless of their relief status."¹²³

The first Junior Division in Montana, in cooperation with the state employment service, opened an office in Billings in November 1938. Charles P. Guilbault, manager of the local office, explained the objectives of the office by stating that:

This division will not attempt in any way to supplant adult workers, with those registered in the junior branch, but rather to help these young people prepare themselves for the occupation or profession in which they show the greatest interest and aptitude. . . . It is recognized that there are many jobs which older workers find it economically impossible to accept and it is with those positions that youth finds its opportunity to get work experience.¹²⁴

¹²¹ *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, forward, n.p.

¹²² *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, n.p.

¹²³ Lindley, 115; *Accomplishments and Expenditures*, n.p.

¹²⁴ "Youth Service is Opened Here," *Billings Gazette*, 9 November 1938, p. 5.

Another Junior Placement and Guidance office opened in Great Falls. The offices specialized in the needs of youth between the ages of 16 and 24 and, like the national program, were open to everyone.

The work program provided needed jobs for the youths of eastern Montana as well as benefiting the communities in which they worked. The NYA made thousands of toys, articles of clothing, and hospital supplies, repaired furniture and expanded public services. The main goal remained, however, to preserve the youth of the nation. Betty and Earnest Lindley explained that although the products and services the NYA provided were extremely valuable, "they are unimportant in comparison with the incalculable return to the nation in the conservation and improvement of its human assets."¹²⁵

In addition to the school-aid and out-of-school work programs, the NYA also established five resident training centers in Montana. The first camp opened in Laurel in the fall of 1938 and housed between seventy and eighty boys from eastern Montana. The students resided at Riverside Park and worked on projects for seventy hours a month and attended classes for sixty hours. Courses taught at the camp included "cabinet carpentry, cabinetry, welding, farm mechanics, auto mechanics, mechanical drawing, agriculture and related subjects, cooking and baking, clerical training and general academic work."¹²⁶ Enrollment for the camp lasted at least three months. Each camper was

¹²⁵ Lindley, 213-214.

¹²⁶ "State's First National Youth Resident Training School Scheduled," *Billings Gazette*, 18 August 1938, p. 3; "NYA Training School Will Accept Enrollees Through October 15," *Billings Gazette*, 7 September 1938, p. 3.

expected to help pay the cost for the maintenance of the camp such as food, light, and heat expenses. Campers were paid approximately \$26 a month. After paying for living expenses, youths kept between five and seven dollars.¹²⁷ By 1939 four other camps opened in Montana. Two more camps for boys opened in Miles City and Kalispell and two camps for girls in Red Lodge and Lewistown. Eligibility for the resident training camps was the same as NYA regulations for school aid and the out-of-school work program. The camps were normally filled to capacity during the winter months, but had to fill vacancies left in the summer months by youths who were needed at home to help with farming.¹²⁸

After finishing high school in Miles City in 1939, Elliot Miller enrolled in the NYA camp located at Fort Keogh outside of Miles City. The camp was located at the old army barracks and housed eighty-five boys. Most of the boys enrolled at Fort Keogh were from southeastern Montana. Although housed at an army facility, the camp was not military-oriented. They enrolled for at least three months and earned \$36 a month, \$28 going to pay for camp expenses. According to Miller, the remaining six to eight dollars "didn't allow for much poker playing." The boys received little equipment when they entered the camp. No uniforms were issued, but Miller said he received a pair of 1917 army boots. He stated that "if you were lucky enough to find somebody to trade with, you could" find shoes that fit.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ "NYA Boys Training Camp at Laurel, Mont.," *Sidney Herald*, 1 September 1938, p. 5.

¹²⁸ "NYA Camps Have 140 Vacancies," *Billings Gazette*, 18 May 1939, p. 5.

¹²⁹ Ella and Elliot Miller, interview by Doni Phillips, 22 July 1988, OH 1128, transcript, "New Deal in Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

Work at the camp was year round. During the spring and summer months, campers built corrals, repaired buildings, built and repaired fences, fed livestock, hauled hay, and kept the roads clear to the fort. Each camper was also assigned a month of kitchen duty and had to set and clear the tables. A large amount of work centered around the camp's horse breeding program. Miller worked with Dr. McKenzie, a doctor from Great Britain and learned the anatomy of the horse and a little about veterinary work since the doctor explained what he was doing to the campers. However, Miller remarked that the doctor's efforts to describe the procedures "didn't matter to us because we weren't going to be doing it anyway, but it was interesting to know what he was trying to accomplish."

Miller explained that a typical day started when "... some big lug would come up and yell at you to get up, eat breakfast ... and if there was a difference in your assignment for that day, you'd get it as you went out the cook shack door—the superintendent was there and handed out assignments." Job assignments usually changed every two weeks. Miller normally worked with Dr. McKenzie in the horse barns and his work included "hitching up a team of horses to get a load of hay, exercising the stallions, cleaning the barns and repair work." The campers would then meet for lunch at the camp mess hall and although the food was simple, there was "plenty to eat."¹³⁰

Like the CCC, campers at the resident centers usually had the evenings for recreation. Sports were a popular past time as they played ping-pong,

¹³⁰ Miller interview.

baseball, boxed, and roller skated. Wrestling, however, was not allowed. The camp had a boxing instructor, but he did not last long. According to Miller, "one of the boys from Anaconda [Montana] knocked out the boxing instructor. The instructor didn't return to the camp after that incident." The campers could catch a ride to Miles City about twice a week or they could walk. Miles City had a roller skating rink at that time. The camp also had its own orchestra and recreation hall and held a dance for the surrounding area. Miller remarked that the people from Miles City "were not very interested in a bunch of ruffians so there wasn't much of a turn-out for the dance." Pranks such as short-sheeting the beds were another popular past time.¹³¹

Another goal of the NYA centered on providing recreation for all youth of the community. The American Youth Commission urged an increase in planned recreation, noting,

A small number of alert communities have demonstrated, that even when employment opportunities are limited, a vigorous community recreation program with active youth participation can do much to enhance employability, develop community provide, and instill a patriotic sense of loyalty to American institutions.¹³²

The NYA supported community youth centers and many, like the one in Sidney, were built by NYA workers. The youth center provided a place for the entire community to come together for social purposes. Many communities across the nation supported the youth centers and contributed money to assure their

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² *State Flashes*, 1 March 1941, p. 8. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

success. The centers were important because they drew "many groups of youth of the community" and prevented "the isolation of unemployed youth."

NYA leaders wanted the recreational aspect of the program to encompass the entire community. Betty and Earnest Lindley explain that "clubs or athletic teams made up exclusively of NYA boys or girls are discouraged; they are not a group apart; they belong to the integrated life of their own communities."¹³³ NYA youth in Billings were involved in city recreational activities and they joined the local softball league. In 1941 NYA youth in Billings presented the play *The Lamp Went Out* to an audience of one hundred people.¹³⁴ NYA youths also assisted in recreation programs in their communities, providing supervision at playgrounds and other recreation facilities giving children a "chance for healthy play."¹³⁵

The NYA provided a much needed outlet for the youth of Montana and the nation. Thousands of youth were able to stay in school, learn a trade, obtain vocational guidance, and help their families make ends meet. The monetary gain was not much, but the educational, vocational, and psychological advantages were immeasurable. Once again youth could gain some control over their lives. They could see the benefits of the jobs they performed in their communities. When asked what the most important product of the NYA program was, Aubrey Williams simply replied, "The youth themselves."¹³⁶

¹³³ Lindley, 61.

¹³⁴ "NYA Retains Softball Lead," *Billings Gazette*, 22 July 1939, p. 7; "Bankers Beat NYA, 7 to 5," *Billings Gazette*, 23 August 1939, p. 8; "100 Attend Play By NYA Members," *Billings Gazette*, 15 March 1941, p. 3.

¹³⁵ Lindley, 49.

¹³⁶ *State Flashes*, 1 May 1941, p. 3. SC 2045, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

The CCC and NYA provided youths with employment, educational opportunities, and vocational guidance. Young men in the CCC learned valuable skills that trained them for employment in the private work force. Campers also had the opportunity to travel to areas outside of their hometown, giving them a chance to understand other people and see new places. They left the camps physically and mentally stronger and more confident in their country and themselves. The NYA extended the chance for employment for both boys and girls, allowing thousands to stay in school and thousands more to gain work experience and training. Through the two agencies, the federal government showed its commitment to youth, and the future leaders of the nation regained their self-respect.

CHAPTER FOUR

PLAY TIME: YOUTH AND RECREATION

Even with the efforts of the government to find employment for the youth of the country, millions had an abundance of time on their hands and idle youth became a national concern. The American Youth Commission stated that if youth were "... eager to use their time in the development and use of creative skill, in active sports and games, in social activities that can unite a whole community, and in all the various forms of mutual assistance, ... their civilization will have a tone of vigorous optimism even under conditions of adversity."¹

Providing recreation proved just as important as providing jobs in order to help the youth of the nation stay out of trouble. Events that provided wholesome leisure also served as a way to connect youth to their family, community, and nation as a whole. Strong communities were essential because they were the building blocks of democracy. Wholesome, family-oriented recreation, therefore, was another weapon to keep youth connected to democracy.

The economic hardships of the depression years created limited resources for recreation and community activities. Despite the lack of money,

¹ American Youth Commission, *Youth and the Future* (Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1942), 152.

however, people found their own entertainment. Many socialized at their neighbors' houses and played cards, visited, or listened to the radio. Social activities, such as dances and picnics, provided a way for people to enjoy some relief from the depression by having a good time with friends and families.²

These activities united the entire community as both the young and old in the town gathered together and, if only for a couple hours, forgot their depression woes.

Recreation during the depression reflected economic hardships. People found they had more time than money and looked for cheap ways to entertain themselves. Fads swept the country that allowed people to fill the time, but did not cost much money. The early 1930s witnessed a jigsaw puzzle craze. People could buy the puzzles for as little as ten cents or could rent them. The *Plentywood Herald* had no difficulty keeping puzzles "rented out to ambitious jigsaw puzzle fans." At the height of the fad, from the fall of 1932 to the spring of 1933, Americans bought ten million puzzles per week. The *Plentywood Herald* reported that the members of the local community loved "the hunt for the elusive little pieces that go to make up the puzzles" and they "cause no end of excitement among the family circles in the evening."³ Psychologists believed the puzzles proved so popular because of people's need to finish something. During

² Harold and Olive Mercer, interview by author, 15 October 1993, tape recording, Sidney, MT; Synove Lalonde, interview by Laurie Mercier, 25 May 1984, OH 791, tape recording, "Small Town Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, MT.

³ "Plentywood Goes Jiggy Over Jig-Saw Puzzles," *Plentywood Herald*, 23 February 1933, p. 1.

a time "when so many problems seemed unsolvable, the jigsaw puzzle offered the opportunity for one to derive satisfaction of solving at least one small puzzle in a world of large and more difficult ones."⁴

Endurance tests became another major fad during the depression.

People would try to break records in just about anything, such as the most time spent sitting in a tree. The craze spread to sports in events such as bike races and Roller Derbys. Ten thousand spectators per day in 1936 attended the Chicago Roller Derby. The most popular of the endurance tests were the dance marathons and walkathons. During these events, contestants had to keep moving and stay upright. Some people entered the contests in hopes of finding a spouse, while others entered even if "there was nothing else in it, being fed and sheltered for 6 or 7 weeks was an inducement in jobless times." Many began criticizing the events, however, because they promoted "other people's agony," as many contestants suffered from exhaustion.⁵ In 1931 Billings outlawed dancing and walking marathons. The city council passed the ordinance to safeguard "public peace, health and safety" and proclaimed that such contests were "offensive to public morals." Violators faced a penalty of "not more than \$300 fine or 90 days in jail, or both."⁶

Some fads centered on the hopes of easy money, such as the chain letter craze of the mid-1930s. Jar gambling, lotteries, and sweepstakes were also

⁴ Gary Dean Best, *The Nickel and Dime Decade: American Popular Culture During the 1930s* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 20-21.

⁵ Best, 24-26.

⁶ "Marathon Ban is Passed by City Council," *Billings Gazette*, 8 July 1931, p. 1-2.

popular, but not as widespread as chain letters. People clung to the get-rich-quick idea and by investing only one dime per letter, dreamed of a rich payoff. One woman from California wanted the city council to declare it illegal to break a chain while another woman from Colorado wrote to the postmaster asking for names of people "interested in this chain letter business." A new post office regulation declaring chain letters "unmailable" directed the postmaster's reply. Many soon found other ways to distribute and locate names by opening chain letter offices. The first office in Great Falls, however, was closed down after only two hours. Police arrested the proprietor and confiscated customer agreements that promised they could expect a "return of 27 times the amount invested."⁷

Improving backyards and gardening also became popular pastimes and could offer basic necessities as well as unite the community through cooperation. In an attempt to raise spirits and to clean up the town, the Sidney Chamber of Commerce Civic Improvement committee sponsored a lawn and garden contest claiming that the "best appearing towns are feeling the depression the least."⁸ The Chamber of Commerce proclaimed that each person benefited from city beautification. Mayor Axel Nelson echoed the committee when he issued a proclamation urging the people of Sidney to join the contest. The mayor claimed that, "... more attractive home grounds increase real estate values, create a more beautiful city, and enhance municipal pride and civic loyalty." He also asked people to clean up alleys and vacant lots for health and safety reasons

⁷ "Chain Letter Office Closed," *Billings Gazette*, 23 May 1935, p. 5.

⁸ "Join the Yarn & Garden Contest," *Sidney Herald*, 20 April 1933, p. 2.



Figure 14. During the depression, the Sidney Chamber of Commerce launched a city-wide beautification campaign. This cartoon tried to encourage people to enter. Reprinted from *Sidney Herald*, 9 April 1936, p. 2B.

and encouraged families to beautify their own homes so children could use their backyards instead of the streets and alleys as playgrounds.⁹

Youth, influenced by the fads of the depression era, expressed strong opinions about recreational needs of their communities and stressed the need for more wholesome activities. When over nine thousand Maryland youths were polled during the mid 1930s, almost 30 percent saw the need for more parks and playgrounds in their communities, while 20 percent stressed the importance of community centers. Another 16 percent wanted swimming pools and 10 percent more movie halls.¹⁰ Youths also wanted safe and fun recreation outlets, as one young person requested, "community halls where young people can go, dance, play cards, or do the things they desire. When the community halls are built, then do away with the roadhouse. It will not do any good to close the roadhouses until the community provides something else to take its place. . . ." Others commented on the price of recreational activities and stressed that "nice dances cost too much." Above all young people wanted "*anything* that would keep them off the streets and out of trouble," showing they shared adults' concerns over less desirable forms of entertainment.¹¹

⁹ The entry form provided three different classes, depending on whether the family worked completely by themselves, hired only manual labor, or hired expert gardeners. The contest awarded prizes worth over \$150 donated by the local businesses in over thirty categories including the best appearing hedge; best new tree planting and arrangement; best rock garden; best rose garden; best largest and smallest neatest home grounds; best vegetable garden; and neatest driveway. "Proclamation," *Sidney Herald*, 2 April 1936, p. 1; "City-Wide Beautification Campaign Announced," *Sidney Herald*, 9 April 1936, p. 2B.

¹⁰ Howard M. Bell, *Youth Tell Their Story: A Study of the Conditions and Attitudes of Young People in Maryland Between the Ages of 16 and 24* (Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1938), 138.

¹¹ Bell, 187.

Various agencies and organizations attempted to provide youth with wholesome recreational activities. The federal government sponsored activities through the WPA recreation program that offered a variety of events such as plays and concerts as well as supporting recreation activities and centers. By 1940 the WPA employed 250 recreation workers in Montana in over one hundred communities across the state. The Billings community enthusiastically supported the WPA programs. From January 1 to July 1, 1940, almost forty thousand people from district five, which included Yellowstone and eleven surrounding counties, participated in the community service projects. In 1940 two thousand Billings youths took advantage of the recreational activities the WPA provided.¹²

Young people in Billings, Sidney, and Plentywood benefited from the WPA program and actively participated in its activities. Sidney leaders promised "an elaborate program of recreational activities . . . for the young folks of Sidney."¹³ Billings program director Walter E. Taylor announced that by 1937 the WPA provided piano, accordion and band instrument instruction to over five hundred people.¹⁴ In 1940 the WPA sponsored a playground program at South Park in Billings. Every youth in the community was eligible to participate in the activities that included "supervised games, storytelling, dramatics, arts and crafts, tournament games, rhythm bands, and harmonica instruction."¹⁵

¹² "Recreational Program of City Expands," *Billings Gazette*, 23 March 1941, 2d edition, p. 1

¹³ "Sidney to Benefit by WPA Recreational Program," *Sidney Herald*, 24 March 1938, p. 1; "WPA Recreational Work Gets Underway," *Sidney Herald*, 14 April 1938, p. 1.

¹⁴ "WPA Recreation Group Will Present Program," *Billings Gazette*, 17 February 1937, p. 12.

¹⁵ "WPA to Sponsor Park Playground Program," *Billings Gazette*, 16 June 1940, p. 3.

Sporting events provided the most opportunities for community youth in the WPA program. Eastern Montana youngsters could participate in swimming, baseball, softball, basketball, ping-pong, and volleyball. During the summer months in Sidney, the city block surrounding the swimming pool served as the hub for recreation activities. People could choose from games such as badminton, archery, croquet, horseshoes, and tennis. During the school year, older children in the Sidney community could play kittenball every night after school and for younger children, the program sponsored marble tournaments. In Billings the junior softball program converted "empty lots throughout the city . . . so that neighborhood teams could play without traveling across town."¹⁶

The WPA program also provided activities for the less sporting. In Plentywood, young people could dance four nights a week at the city auditorium.¹⁷ Youths in Billings also learned ballroom, tap, ballet and acrobatic dancing through the program. The summer recreation program in Sidney also sponsored a bicycle club as well as a bird-banding club and the water carnival provided enjoyment for people of all ages.¹⁸ During the winter of 1941 the former NYA shop in Plentywood was converted into a student recreation room equipped with "three ping pong tables, a ring tennis court, a shuffleboard court, and

¹⁶ "Recreational Program of City Expands," *Billings Gazette*, 23 March 1941, 2d edition, p. 1; "Sidney to Benefit by WPA Recreational Program," *Sidney Herald*, 24 March 1938, p. 1.

¹⁷ "WPA Recreation Program Slated," *Plentywood Herald*, 22 December 1938, p. 1; "City Sponsoring Entertainment at Civic Auditorium," *Plentywood Herald*, 5 October 1939, p. 1.

¹⁸ "Recreational Program of City Expands," *Billings Gazette*, 23 March 1941, 2d edition, p. 1; "Summer Recreation Program Gets Under Way," *Sidney Herald*, 16 June 1938, p. 8.

numerous other games. Checker tables, darts, quoits and table games will be made available for students."¹⁹

During the 1940 Midland Empire fair in Billings, the WPA education and recreation division displayed a model neighborhood playground that included a jungle gym, a wave slide, swings, seesaw, and a sandlot. The exhibit also contained a playground area for children and adults with sheltered areas to play during bad weather. The playground offered an athletic and sports area which provided a "softball field, double tennis court and spaces for basketball, volleyball, badminton, shuffle board, ping pong, horseshoe courts, handball and archery."²⁰

The WPA education and recreation division also opened a booth at the Richland County fair in 1939 to display its accomplishments. The booth showcased the "wheel of activities" in the community including baseball, basketball, boxing, dancing, handicraft, music, playground activities, and the local nursery school. The WPA recreation program represented "not only a broad response to the vast social needs created by depression emergencies but it also represents a development of normal public educational and recreational activities."²¹

¹⁹ "Recreational Program of City Expands," *Billings Gazette*, 23 March 1941, 2d edition, p. 1; "Student Rec Room Founded," *Plentywood Herald*, 4 December 1941, p. 5; "New Games in Rec Program," *Plentywood Herald*, 5 February 1942, p. 5.

²⁰ "Model Playground Exhibited by WPA," *Billings Gazette*, 13 August 1940, p. 3.

²¹ "Education and Recreation Division of WPA to Exhibit at Fair," *Sidney Herald*, 27 July 1939, p. 1.

Local governments also provided recreational opportunities for youth in hopes of keeping them away from crime and undesirable activities. Most city programs centered on providing outdoor recreational facilities such as swimming pools, parks, and skating rinks. The Billings and Sidney communities sponsored the building of new municipal swimming pools that provided entertainment as well as relief from the heat for youths. During just one day in July of 1933 an estimated seven hundred people visited the pool at South Park in Billings. The community outgrew the park pool and in 1939 after three years of construction, the city athletic commission completed the new Billings Athletic Park swimming pool. The modern oval pool could accommodate up to three thousand swimmers a day. Since admission charges were the pool's only source of revenue, each swimmer had to pay ten cents to enter the pool.²²

The original fundraiser for the Sidney pool, a benefit dance at Legion hall, took place in 1930, but construction did not begin until 1935. The pool finally opened to the public in July 1936 with "176 young people ranging from little tots to college and university students home on vacations, taking the first plunge in the christening." The Sidney pool admitted youths up through high school free of charge while adults paid ten cents a visit or purchased a season pass for one dollar.²³ School children could also take free swim lessons and by 1942 over five hundred youths had learned how to swim while more advanced swimmers

²² "Many Are Using Municipal Pool," *Billings Gazette*, 13 July 1933, p. 5; "New Swimming Pool to Open on Thursday," *Billings Gazette*, 23 August 1939, p. 1.

²³ "Swim Pool is Opened Here Wednesday," *Sidney Herald*, 16 July 1936, p. 1; "Local Swimming Pool Opens Tuesday, June 15," *Sidney Herald*, 10 June 1937, p. 1.

attended life-saving classes.²⁴ For community entertainment, the Sidney pool also hosted a water carnival featuring diving, swimming contests, and novel acts to "spice up the program." Carnival features included a youth "penny scramble," an "older folks" greased watermelon contest, a comedy duck hunt, beauty contest, water polo, and canoe tilting.²⁵

City parks provided another source of recreation and encouraged family and community gatherings. Civic and national leaders believed activities that connected youth to their communities promoted a stronger democracy. Billings sponsored the beautification and improvement of Pioneer Park as well as purchasing forty-six lots in 1936 in order to build a new park that featured a baseball field and tennis court.²⁶

Richland Park, located between Sidney and Fairview along the river, proved "a popular recreation center with increasing numbers of people finding it an ideal picnic and meeting spot for Sundays and also weekdays as their leisure permits."²⁷ Construction began on the park in 1939 after three years work of securing a suitable site. The Beautification committee of the Kiwanis club announced "with a great deal of pride and joy" in July 1939 that "they have realized the dream of a beautiful public park that will be a blessing not only to

²⁴ "MWA Will Give Benefit Dance for Swimming Pool," *Sidney Herald*, 27 March 1930, p. 1; "Local Swimming Pool To Open Sunday," *Sidney Herald*, 8 June 1939; "Swimming Pool Draws Hundreds Of Young People," *Sidney Herald*, 16 July 1942, p. 1.

²⁵ "Water Carnival to Be Held Sunday Afternoon To Be Exciting Event," *Sidney Herald*, 11 August 1938; "Sidney Water Carnival Here August 6th," *Sidney Herald*, 13 July 1939, p. 1.

²⁶ "City Park Board Votes \$2,000 To Complete Work," *Billings Gazette*, 5 November 1931, p. 1; "City Purchases 46 Lots As Site For New Park," *Billings Gazette*, 18 October 1936, p. 1.

²⁷ "Richland Park Popular New Outing Spot," *Sidney Herald*, 12 June 1940, p. 1.

Richland county but to any and all who wish to share and enjoy it."²⁸ The park committee supervised the improvement of the grounds and the installment of new facilities at the park. Included in the improvements were a kittenball diamond, swings, a well for drinking water, and seven new tables. People of the community widely used the park, promoting opportunities for both young and old to enjoy the recreation spot together. The *Sidney Herald* reported over one hundred cars at Richland Park during just one Sunday in June 1940. It was not until June 1941 that the county officially dedicated Richland Park with a full day of events. Bands, a baton drill, and a flag salute started the program followed by a dedicatory address by state Senator R. S. Nutt. Attendees could enjoy motor boat rides on the lake and the Boy Scouts provided concessions with half the proceeds going to the park.²⁹

Wildwood Park provided a main source of recreation for the people of Plentywood. Seeing a need for recreational activities for the youth of the area, Harry DeSilva opened the park in 1922. An avid swimmer, DeSilva built a swimming pool with a diving tower. The park also hosted water carnivals and swim meets. Wildwood increased in popularity when DeSilva added a slide to the pool and the "Windmill Concession Stand." Music was a main source of entertainment in Plentywood and DeSilva "built a band shell where the City Band

²⁸ "Richland Park Development Gets Started," *Sidney Herald*, 13 July 1939, p. 1.

²⁹ "Richland Park Announcement," *Sidney Herald* 18 July 1940, p. 1; "Richland Park Dedication Sunday Will Be Big Event," *Sidney Herald*, 19 June 1941, p. 1.

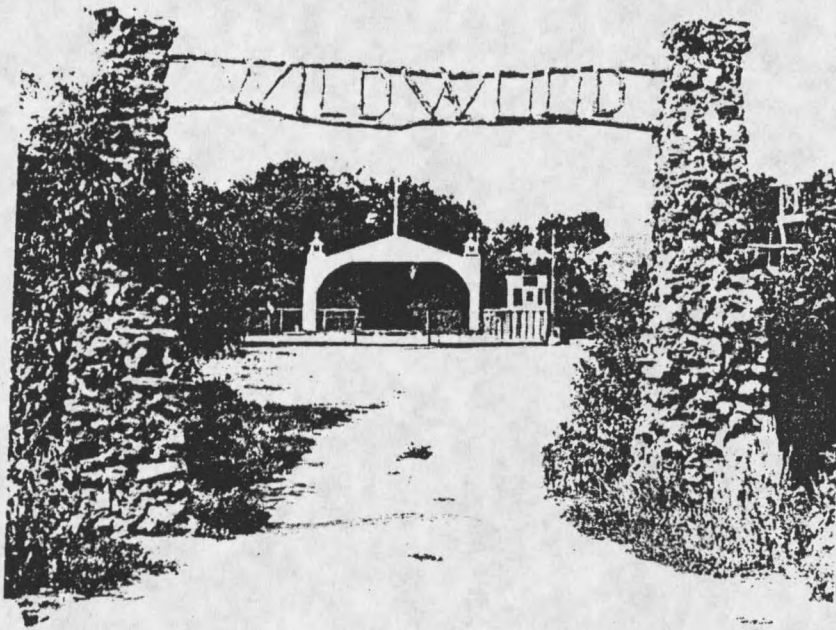


Figure 15. Entrance to Wildwood Park. Reprinted from *Plentywood Portrait: Toil Soil Oil* (Plentywood: Herald Printing, 1987), 271.

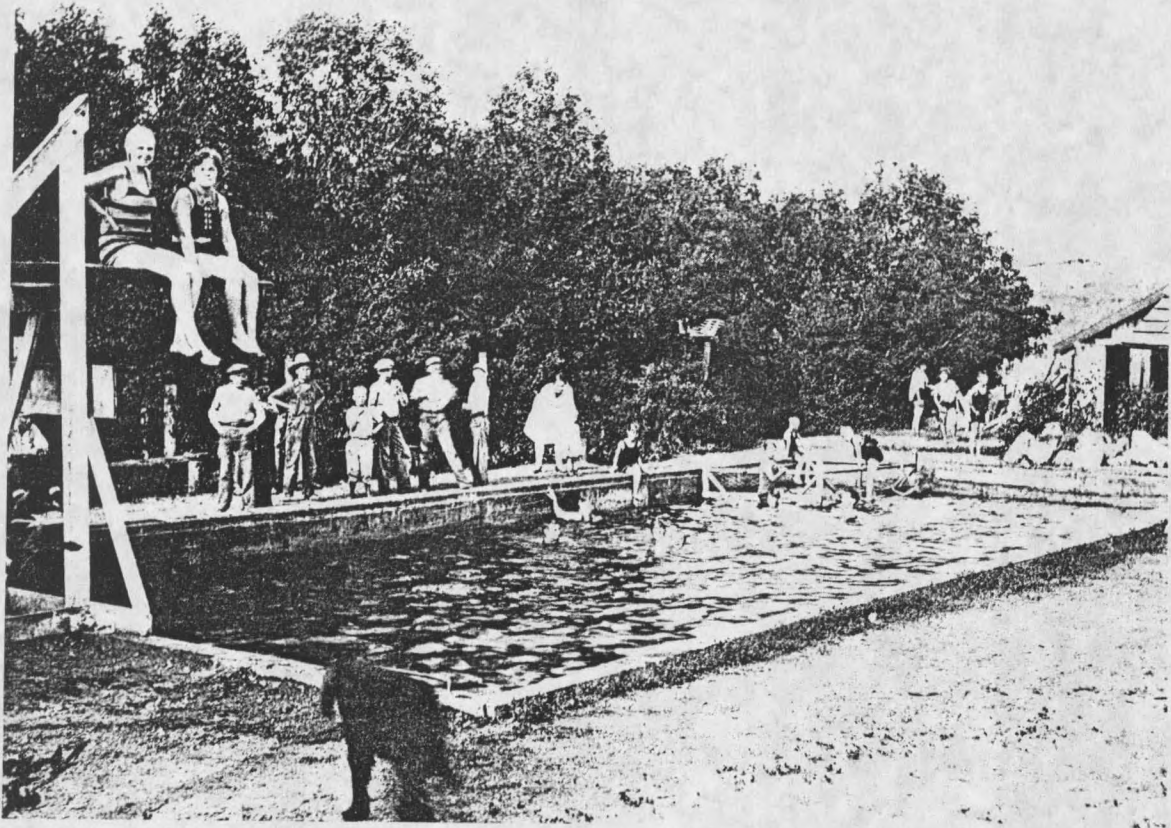


Figure 16. Wildwood Park Swimming Pool, circa 1927. Reprinted from *Plentywood Portrait: Toil Soil Oil* (Plentywood: Herald Printing, 1987), 271.

and other invited orchestras played for public entertainment" and later "a dance pavilion, made of flooring bolted in sections," was constructed for dances. A miniature golf course and picnic spots along scenic pathways added to the charm of Wildwood park.³⁰ In 1937 the city of Plentywood bought the park from DeSilva and continued the promotion of recreation for the community youth.³¹

Given the long period of cold weather in Montana, communities gave considerable attention to winter activities. Skating rinks provided entertainment for local youths. Billings park superintendent J. W. Lawson supervised the flooding of rinks in 1933 and explained that funds for maintaining skating rinks were augmented "because of the greatly increased interest taken by the young people of the city in skating and winter sports."³² Skating and hockey were popular winter activities in Plentywood as well and in 1939 the community built "a real skating rink—regulation size to permit hockey games" and the town soon hosted hockey games with Canadian teams.³³ The Sidney city park board maintained the local rink and provided a heated warming house next to it. During the winter of 1940 the community supported a city rink "located as near the center of town as possible," as well as flooding the high school football field and the Kiwanis rink south of town.³⁴

³⁰ Plentywood Diamond Jubilee Corporation, *Plentywood Portrait: Toil, Soil, Oil* (Plentywood: Herald Printing, 1987), 271; Harold DeSilva, interview by Jackie Day, 15 May 1985, OH 881, transcript, "Small Town Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

³¹ "City Considers the Purchase of Wildwood Park," *Plentywood Herald*, 8 April 1937, p. 1.

³² "Skating Gets New Lease of Life at City Ponds," *Billings Gazette*, 18 January 1933, p. 3.

³³ "Skating Rink Now Completed," *Plentywood Herald*, 17 December 1931, p. 1; "Big Skating Rink Planned," *Plentywood Herald*, 21 December 1939, p. 1.

³⁴ "Skating Popular Sport With Rinks In Fine Shape," *Sidney Herald*, 11 January 1940, p. 1.

Civic leaders also wanted youth to feel that they were an important component of the community and celebrated their contributions. Starting in 1936 Billings joined in the observance of National Boys and Girls Week. The Billings Youth council sponsored the event to stress the "activities of boys and girls and their importance in community life," again showing the need to connect youth with the rest of the community.³⁵ The eight-day celebration offered a variety of activities including a pet exhibition, a kite-flying contest, and a marble tournament. During the 1937 activities, the Fox and Babcock theaters sponsored movie parties for all boys and girls of Billings. The highlight of the week showcased youth in their own parade.³⁶ During the 1939 parade, over five thousand school children "donned the brightly colored yell caps of their schools and carried varicolored twisters and balloons" while others wore cowboy gear. Although most high school students wore more conventional clothes, they showed "no lack of enthusiasm as they paraded after their band."³⁷ Mayor C. J. Williams commented on the festivities by saying that he considered "Boys and Girls week one of the greatest movements in America today. More attention should be given to encouraging our citizens of tomorrow to greater interest and participation in civic activities."³⁸

³⁵ "Youth Week Set To Open Today," *Billings Gazette* 23 April 1938, p. 1.

³⁶ "City Observes National Boys and Girls Week," *Billings Gazette*, 26 April 1936, p. 1-2; "Youth Parades Here Friday In Demonstration," *Billings Gazette*, 1 May 1937, p. 1-2; "Boys and Girls Week Ends Here," *Billings Gazette*, 2 May 1936, p. 3.

³⁷ "Youth Parade Is Held Here," *Billings Gazette*, 3 May 1939, p. 3.

³⁸ "City Observes National Boys and Girls Week," *Billings Gazette* 26 April 1936, p. 1-2; "Youth Week To Open Saturday," *Billings Gazette*, 22 April 1937, p. 3.

Perhaps the most active organizations promoting wholesome play time for Billings youth were the Young Men's and Women's Christian Associations. The first YMCA, established in London during the mid-1800s, responded to the growth of industrialized cities that "created an environment which made necessary special efforts in behalf of young men." George Williams, founder of the YMCA, believed young men growing up during the industrial revolution needed spiritual and mental guidance. Not long after, a similar organization for woman was also established.³⁹ The Billings community founded the YWCA in 1907 in order to "open a rest home where girls and young women, who would have to live in dingy rooms and eat unnourishing food, are enabled on the small wages paid to women to procure in a rest home excellent board and good rooms and be surrounded with a homelike and Christian atmosphere."⁴⁰

During the hard times of the 1930s, the YWCA emphasized group activities for the youth of the community. In a 1930 speech to the Lions club, superintendent of schools A. T. Peterson proclaimed that the YMCA's "program of supervised play in a wholesome atmosphere" was instilling good habits through "proper use of leisure time."⁴¹ The YMCA and YWCA often worked together to provide entertainment and they held monthly mixers, usually at the Commercial Club, for all adult members of the two groups. Members of the Aa Ca Wa Ya club planned a "wiener roast" and outdoor entertainment by the Indian

³⁹ "Formation of American Young Men's Christian Association," *Billings Gazette*, 4 June 1939, second edition, p. 1, 6.

⁴⁰ Margaret Ping, *Looking Back—Moving Forward: The History of the Billings YWCA, 1907-1988* (Billings: by the author, 1991), 2.

⁴¹ "YMCA Value Told to Lions," *Billings Gazette*, 7 November 1930, p. 3.

Caves located ten miles east of Billings in May of 1934.⁴² In 1937 the YMCA started work to construct a new "three-story youth recreational and educational center" to replace their old building which they left in 1930. The new modern building included a gym, a swimming pool, handball courts, a game room, locker rooms, and exercise rooms.⁴³

The local schools also hosted social events as community members, educators, and parents encouraged participation in school activities. Like the YMCA and YWCA, they stressed the need for wholesome leisure activities for youth and believed school events had "a particular value in meeting the educational need for the right use of leisure time."⁴⁴ One of the most popular activities was the school play that offered entertainment for the community and the opportunity for students to shine on stage. Many times proceeds from the productions were used to purchase items or to sponsor groups. For example, in 1940 the Billings drama club performed the George Bernard Shaw play *Saint Joan* in order to raise money to buy sound recording equipment. Plentywood resident Chet Holje also stated that money from the school and community plays often went to aid in local projects.⁴⁵

⁴² "Y. W. To Hold Mixer, Dance," *Billings Gazette*, 7 October 1934, p. 5; "Aa Ca Wa Ya Club Plans to Conduct Picnic," *Billings Gazette*, 27 April 1934, p. 2.

⁴³ "Purchase Site For Building Of 'Y' In Spring," *Billings Gazette*, 28 October 1937, p. 1-2.

⁴⁴ "School Splinters," *Plentywood Herald*, 21 January 1932, p. 1.

⁴⁵ "Student Actors To Present Drama," *Billings Gazette*, 16 November 1940, p. 3; Chester "Chet" Holje, interview by Jackie Day, 16 May 1985, OH 874, tape recording, "Small Town Montana:" Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, MT.

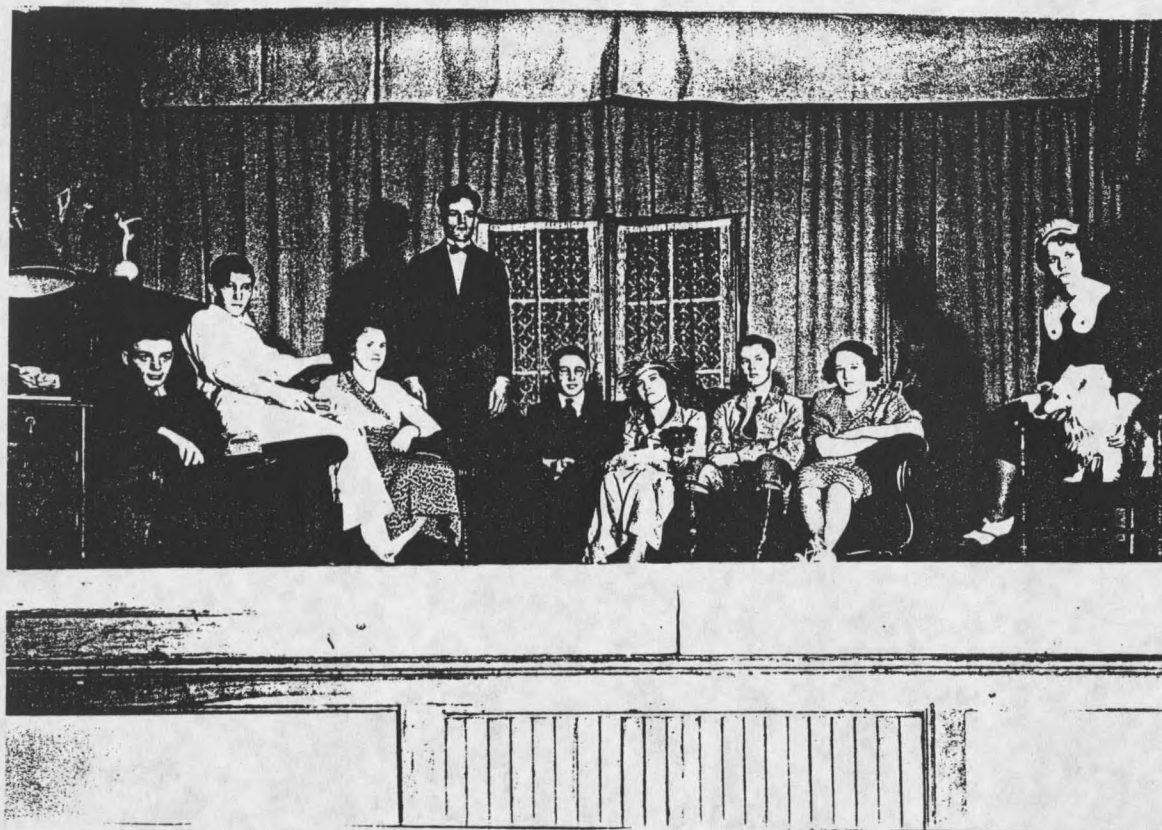


Figure 17. Cast for the 1933 Sidney Senior High School class play, "Peg 'O My Heart." Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

Almost five hundred people from the Plentywood community attended the 1930 production of *Mail Order Brides* and "no one went away disappointed." Skits such as an Amos and Andy impersonation entertained the audience between acts.⁴⁶ The Billings Babcock theater staged many high school operettas such as the 1935 production of *An Old Spanish Custom*, when ninety-eight students "clothed in trapping rivaling those of the original Broadway production" entertained crowds.⁴⁷ The Sidney junior class presented the three-act comedy *Skidding* in 1938 and "won the unstinted applause of a large audience for its natural life-life scenes and character interpretation."⁴⁸

Local schools also sponsored other activities. Both Sidney and Plentywood hosted carnivals. In 1929 the Plentywood high school entertained the community with a circus complete with "elephants, bears, ostriches, ponies, cats, monkeys, and clowns."⁴⁹ The annual carnival in Sidney offered novelty booths, games, elected a carnival queen, and held a dance. Each class presented a show in a competition for best feature of the night. For example, during the 1935 carnival, the freshmen performed a comedy skit, the sophomores displayed "a museum of thrill and marvels, based on the year 5000 a. d.," the juniors presented a baby show, and the senior class performed an act

⁴⁶ "Large Audience At Temple See Play Presented By H. S.," *Plentywood Herald*, 20 March 1930, p. 1. Plentywood thespians also performed plays such as the sentimental comedy *Only Me* and the farce-comedy *Who Wouldn't Be Crazy*.

⁴⁷ "H. S. Operetta Comes Tonight," *Billings Gazette*, 22 January 1935, p. 5; The following year audiences enjoyed the three-act comedy *Ladies of the Jury* at the Billings high school auditorium. "Class Presents Comedy Friday," *Billings Gazette*, 5 December 1936, p. 9.

⁴⁸ "'Skidding', High School Play, Wins Favor of Large Audience Friday," *Sidney Herald*, 3 March 1938, p. 1.

⁴⁹ "High School Carnival On Friday, Nov. 22," *Plentywood Herald*, 14 November 1929, p. 1; "H. S. Carnival Is Slated For Friday," *Sidney Herald* 7 November 1935, p. 1.

entitled *Cornfed Cutups*. Students also witnessed a demonstration of television at the Sidney high school in 1938. Both transmitting and receiving sets were operated as students watched broadcasts of scenes and people attending the demonstration.⁵⁰

The Sidney schools also continued the tradition of pie and box socials that brought the entire community together. Women of the area prepared and packed suppers in decorated boxes. The men then bid on the boxes, trying to guess which one belonged to their respective wives. The highest bidder not only won the supper, but also accepted the honor of eating with the woman who prepared it. It proved entertaining to see how many men ended up with someone other than their wives. For another event women tested their knowledge of their husbands, who stood behind a curtain with their pant legs rolled up. Wives then determined which legs belonged to their respective husbands, with sometimes surprising results.⁵¹

Holidays also provided opportunities for celebrations that tied young people to their communities. Bringing in the new year was a way to start anew and during the depression, perhaps marked hope for a better year to come. Both Sidney and Plentywood offered annual New Year's dances, but the largest festivities took place in Billings. The people of Billings "kicked the Old Year out in the alley and welcomed the New Year through the front door . . ." and were "glad enough to erase the last 365 days and [were] looking forward with hope to a new

⁵⁰ "Television to Be Demonstrated at Sidney Schools Next Monday," *Sidney Herald*, 15 September 1938, p. 1.

⁵¹ Luella Dore, letter to author, 11 September 1994.

chapter in the city's history."⁵² People held both private and public dances and the local theaters offered midnight shows. For one night at least the depression seemed to disappear, as dance halls were booked days in advance, local musicians were in high demand, and restaurant reservations were next to impossible to obtain. The festivities to usher in 1937 brought the "most hilarious and free-spending celebration the city has seen since the predepression days."⁵³

During a decade that fought to maintain confidence in the future of American democracy, the Fourth of July provided festivities to celebrate the nation's heritage and independence. Billings residents normally deserted the town during the holiday to attend rodeos in surrounding communities or retreated to the mountains to camp and fish. The *Billings Gazette* offered these suggestions for how to spend the holiday:

For the business tired people seeking excitement and a change of scenery, round-ups in Montana, Wyoming and South Dakota will provide action, thrills and color.

For the ardent angler, fast gushing brooks and clear-watered lakes will furnish a haven of retreat from the cares of the office desk.

For other outdoor lovers not enthusiastic for bronc busting nor adept in the use of the fish rod, points of scenic grandeur within reach of the family car will provide their holiday recreation.⁵⁴

More people than usual vacated the city in 1936 and 1937 in order to escape the "torrid heat" when temperatures reached over one hundred degrees.

⁵² "Billings Welcomes 1934 With Festival of Noise," *Billings Gazette*, 1 January 1934, p. 1-2.

⁵³ "Billings Gives Noisy Greeting To Infant 1936," *Billings Gazette*, 1 January 1936, p. 1; "New Year Gets Warm Welcome From Billings," *Billings Gazette*, 1 January 1937, p. 1, 6.

⁵⁴ "Local Residents Desert City for Fourth Holiday," *Billings Gazette*, 4 July 1933, p. 1-2; "Midland Empire Cities Plan Rodeos on July 4," *Billings Gazette*, 1 July 1934, p. 1-2.

Unlike Billings, Sidney offered a variety of activities for the Fourth holiday. Sidney celebrated Independence Day in 1930 with the "C. G. Flanders 20th Century Shows." Circus acrobats and the "world's greatest equilibristic act in the world" thrilled the crowd. Lieutenant Governor Frank Hazelbaker addressed the people at the celebration, after which the crowd dispersed to participate in the horseshoe or golf tournaments or to watch from the sidelines.⁵⁵ In the early 1930s, the rodeo provided the main attraction of the Fourth of July celebration and over seven thousand people attended the 1933 show. In 1935 holiday entertainment included two nights of dancing, baseball games, and Blue Bird Carnival shows.⁵⁶ Later in the decade, auto races replaced the rodeo as the main form of entertainment. Racers used the dirt track at the fair grounds, thrilling the fans who watched from the grandstands as well as from inside the track for the best view. In addition to the races, a carnival entertained "thousands of people from over a wide territory" with "rides galore for young and old."⁵⁷

Plentywood offered many different events to commemorate Independence Day during the depression years. The 1930 celebration included a parade, free movies at the Orpheum theater, baseball games, and track races.⁵⁸ Although Plentywood did not offer any events in 1933, other locales in the county did.

⁵⁵ *Sidney Herald*, 26 June 1930, p. 3

⁵⁶ "Rodeo Celebration July 3-4," *Sidney Herald*, 27 June 1935, p. 1.

⁵⁷ "4th Celebration is Big Success," *Sidney Herald*, 6 July 1933, p. 2; "Auto Races Here on July 5," *Sidney Herald*, 24 June 1937, p. 1; "Auto Racing To Feature Celebration," *Sidney Herald*, 25 June 1936, p. 1.

⁵⁸ "Many Enjoy Fourth July Celebration Held in Plentywood," *Plentywood Herald*, 10 July 1930, p. 1.

Westby held a "good old fashioned rodeo, baseball games, band concerts and dance." Hundreds of people flocked to Brush Lake to enjoy the refreshing waters and Scobey's celebration included auto races, horse races, and baseball games.⁵⁹ The following two years Plentywood sponsored large celebrations that jammed the city "with people making merry and enjoying the well directed program" that included a band concert, parade, free shows at the Orpheum, street races, baseball games, fireworks, and two dances. Over six thousand people gathered in Plentywood during the 1939 festivities to attend four days of horse races.⁶⁰

Community sponsored Halloween celebrations sought to divert youths from delinquency and pranks. The DeMolay sponsored a Halloween parade and festivities for over two thousand youngsters. After the parade, the ghosts and goblins met at the Public School stadium to watch a football contest between the Garfield junior high school and the B squad from the high school, followed by running races for all ages. Twenty-five young people won prizes for their costumes, and at the close of the event, each participant received apples and peanuts.⁶¹

Guarding against property damage was a main concern for Halloween night. Billings police issued a warning to youth that, although they did not "intend

⁵⁹ "4th of July Celebrations in Vicinity Attended by Throngs," *Plentywood Herald*, 6 July 1933, p. 1.

⁶⁰ "Huge Crowd Enjoys Celebration Here," *Plentywood Herald*, 5 July 1934, p. 1; "Stage Set for 4th Celebration Here," *Plentywood Herald*, 27 June 1935, p. 1; "Thousands in City For Big Celebration," *Plentywood Herald*, 6 July 1939, p. 1.

⁶¹ "Many Attend Halloween Fete," *Billings Gazette*, 1 November 1934, p. 11; "Annual Halloween Party is Scheduled for Youngsters of This City," *Billings Gazette*, 28 October 1937, p. 3.

to dampen the spirit or crush good clean Halloween fun," the "destruction of property and pranks endangering life and limb" would not be tolerated. Billings police officers sought to encourage youth to refrain from destructive pranks. In exchange for signing a pledge promising to confine activities to harmless activities, youngsters received free movie tickets.⁶² Plentywood also offered activities to lessen the risk of destruction of property. City officials proclaimed to the youngsters to "come and dance to your heart's content [sic]—the treat's on us."⁶³

The Christmas season in particular created a time of celebration for the community. Sidney overflowed with Christmas spirit throughout the hard times of the depression. Just months after the stock market crash, over seventy Christmas trees lit up the main street. The *Sidney Herald* commented on the spirit of the season by saying, "the weeks activities and enjoyment will be a bridge over which the people of this community will walk joyously into a new year that promises the realization of the greatest progress and prosperity this country has ever known."⁶⁴ That year the paper described Sidney as the "mecca for Christmas shopping" in eastern Montana.⁶⁵

Besides holidays, annual events also brought the community together and provided opportunities for celebrating citizens' accomplishments and talents. The Plentywood Lions Club hosted the first annual Northeastern Montana Band

⁶² "Billings Plans Halloween Observance Tuesday Night," *Billings Gazette*, 31 October 1939, p. 1.

⁶³ "Fairness Asked on Hallowe'en," *Plentywood Herald*, 26 October 1939, p. 1.

⁶⁴ "Sidney Radiates True Christmas Spirit," *Sidney Herald*, 12 December 1929, p. 1.

⁶⁵ "Xmas Season To Have Gala Setting Here," *Sidney Herald*, 3 December 1936, p. 1.

Roundup in May 1937. Almost four thousand people attended the event to listen to sixteen bands from northeastern Montana and western North Dakota who entertained the crowds with "a day of concerts, colorful parades, and a climaxing and brilliant massed concert with 600 musicians participating." The event was "unanimously proclaimed the greatest day of entertainment ever held in Plentywood."⁶⁶ Although plagued by a horrible dust storm, a characteristic feature of the Dust Bowl years, the second annual band festival again attracted thousands to Plentywood. The musicians "gallantly participated in their part of the program and the spirit of the big crowd was presumably undampened by the adverse weather conditions." By 1940 twenty bands featuring eight hundred musicians and directors participated in the festival and performed on a stage built on a raised platform on the skating rink.⁶⁷ Over six thousand people crowded into Plentywood in 1941 to see the "gaily decked bandsmen, nattily attired majorettes and baton twirlers," enjoying mainly patriotic music and celebrating the talents of the local and surrounding communities.⁶⁸

As agricultural and economic conditions began to improve, Plentywood sponsored the annual Harvest Festival. The first festival opened in 1940 to "celebrate the bounteous harvest general throughout Sheridan county." People enjoyed two full days of free attractions and there was not "a dull moment from the start of the parade Friday noon until the last of the old time dancers . . . left

⁶⁶ "Band Fest Acclaimed 'Great Event,'" *Plentywood Herald*, 20 May 1937, p. 1, 4.

⁶⁷ "Hundreds Brave Dust to Hear Bands," *Plentywood Herald*, 19 May 1938, p. 1, 5; "City Prepares to Welcome Bands," *Plentywood Herald*, 9 May 1940, p. 1, 4.

⁶⁸ "Biggest Crowd in History in City for Fest," *Plentywood Herald* 16 May 1941, p. 1.

the city Sunday morning."⁶⁹ Events included baseball and football games, a street dance, an amateur contest, old time fiddler's contest, beauty contest, and old time dance. The center of the festival, however, focused on farming exhibits, crafts, and food. Once the United States entered World War II, the festival promoted the war effort and, during the 1942 festival, exhibit winners received war savings stamps. The fourth annual festival held in 1943 boasted its appreciation of "the bounteous 'food for freedom' harvest enjoyed in the area."⁷⁰

Perhaps the most anticipated event of the year was the fair as all members of the community participated in the festivities. Each summer pleasure seekers from all over Eastern Montana, Northern Wyoming, and Western North Dakota swarmed the fair grounds as the events proved bigger and better each succeeding year. In Eastern Montana, the two largest fairs were the Midland Empire Fair in Billings and the Richland County Fair in Sidney. Even with the immense popularity of the fairs, they could not escape the economic and agricultural realities of the depression. Neither Billings nor Sidney sponsored fairs in 1933 and 1934, but both returned in 1935.

During the Midland Fair "the tempo of life in Billings changed. Everybody went to the Fair. Families packed suppers and headed for the Fairgrounds, where townspeople visited, toured the barns, admired the art and craft exhibits,

⁶⁹ "Annual Harvest Fest Will Be Big Event In Plentywood This Year," *Plentywood Herald*, 21 August 1941, p. 1; "Harvest Festival Attended by Thousands," *Plentywood Herald*, 19 September 1940, p. 1.

⁷⁰ "Annual Harvest Fest Will Be Big Event In Plentywood This Year," *Plentywood Herald*, 21 August 1941, p. 1; "Harvest Festival Next Saturday Will Present Day of Free Entertainment," *Plentywood Herald*, 10 September 1942, p. 1; "Harvest Festival is Scheduled Saturday," *Plentywood Herald*, 30 September 1943, p. 1.



Figure 18. Aerial view of the Midland Empire Fairgrounds, circa 1940. Photo courtesy of the Western Heritage Center, Billings, MT. Photo #78.25.259.

and sampled the best results of the cooking contests."⁷¹ Community life centered on the fair and most businesses closed at 1 p. m. to allow employees to attend opening day activities. With such a huge influx of people in town for the event, the local police required the aid of the highway patrol to help with crowd and traffic control. To ease the traffic flow, police created one way streets going to and from the fairgrounds.⁷²

Although a source of recreation, the fair centered on agricultural exhibits promoting "... sleek cattle, ribbon winning woolies and prize porkers." The fair sought to put aside depression anxieties and highlighted the positive by promoting the "true conditions of the livestock industry." In 1932 agricultural conditions improved slightly, seeing an increase of over three thousand entries from 1931.⁷³ Providing youth with the opportunity to gain a sense of accomplishment also overshadowed depression fears as the fair showcased their achievements. 4-H club members often overran the fair and demonstrated their talents when showing their exhibits. In 1930, over 1,000 members participated in the fair. During the 1936 fair the 4-H program included a dress review and a parade of floats. The fair attracted other groups in addition to 4-H members, and people from the local communities entered exhibits that included art and horticultural displays.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Anneke-Jan Boden, *Billings: The First 100 Years: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk, VA: The Donning Company, 1981), 124.

⁷² "Midland Empire Fair Opens Monday," *Billings Gazette*, 12 August 1935, p. 1-2.

⁷³ "Midland Empire Fair Will Open Today," *Billings Gazette*, 5 September 1932, p. 1-2.

⁷⁴ "Governor Erickson Here to Open Fair," *Billings Gazette*, 1 September 1930, p. 1.

At nearly every fair the governor made an appearance and sought to ease depression worries. In 1931 Governor John E. Erickson addressed the opening day crowd, telling them that "after viewing the extensive exhibits of the Midland Empire fair, one would never know that this has been an off year for agriculture." Erickson sought to relieve the fears of the depression by looking to the future as he proclaimed that "... we are at the worst and are heading for greater days when Montana resumes its march down the road of progress and prosperity."⁷⁵ Governor Roy E. Ayers echoed this sentiment in 1940 during his opening address when he dedicated the "exposition to the future of Montana. It is important to point out that the large number of high grade exhibits which are housed on the grounds reflects the material progress and development which has been made in many fields."⁷⁶

Daily shows and midway entertainment attracted thousands of fairgoers who had "little opportunity to rest their eyes as the rodeo events, races and free acts were presented in a continuous stream of varying entertainment."⁷⁷ Each year firework displays fascinated those attending the night shows. In 1930 the display included the 4-H emblem in green and white. Depictions of "the goose that laid the golden egg, the crazy man on the flying trapeze and other special features" highlighted the 1936 display arranged especially for the children attending the fair. Other events drew large crowds as demonstrated by a three-

⁷⁵ "Record Crowd Attends Fair Opening," *Billings Gazette*, 8 September 1931, p. 1-2.

⁷⁶ "Midland Empire Fair Draws Huge Crowd Opening Day," *Billings Gazette*, 13 August 1940, p. 2.

⁷⁷ "Fair Devotes Wednesday to Pioneers," *Billings Gazette*, 10 August 1938, p. 1-2.

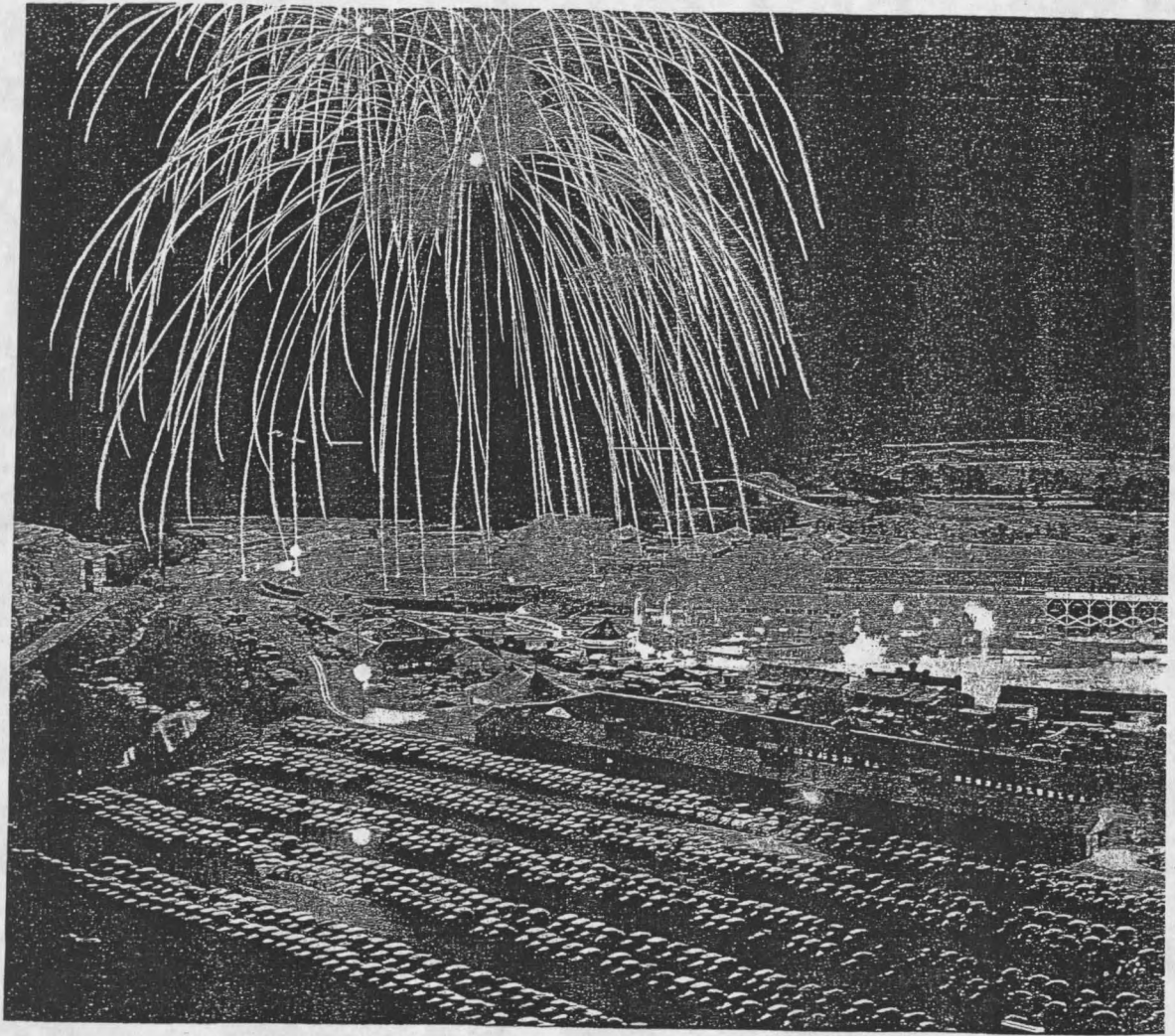


Figure 19. Fireworks display during the Midland Empire Fair. Photo courtesy of the Western Heritage Center, Billings, MT. Photo # 82.0203.

day rodeo that headlined the 1936 fair. The rodeo grew even more popular and in 1938 local cowboy artist and author Will James officially opened the event by telling the crowd that they would not "... find a tougher string of broncs and steers in the world than right in Billings."⁷⁸

Hollywood follies, managed by Dodson's World Fair shows, proved popular during the 1931 fair and the "tuneful melodies, sparkling humor and beautifully costumed performers" dazzled the crowds.⁷⁹ The Ernie Young musical, *A Trip Around the World*, performed on an "... electrical stage occupying three-fourths of the race track and some 40 feet in the inside enclosure," impressed fairgoers in 1936. The revolving stage the next year proved even more spectacular.⁸⁰ Crowds praised the 1940 production of *Flying Colors* and proclaimed it "the most elaborate musical production ever presented on the exposition's outdoor stage."⁸¹

The wholesome nature of the local fair and the overtones of educational benefits overshadowed the sometimes risqué and bizarre midway attractions. For thrill seekers, the 1938 fair offered stunt driver Smokey Harris' performance of the "slide of death" when he jumped "from an automobile traveling a mile a minute into a pool of flaming oil" becoming "a human torch." The following year stunt pilot Danny Fowtie shocked the crowds by landing a plane on top of a

⁷⁸ "Governor Holt Is To Officially Open Show in Afternoon," *Billings Gazette*, 10 August 1936, p. 1-2; "Fair Devotes Wednesday to Pioneers," *Billings Gazette*, 10 August 1938, p. 1-2.

⁷⁹ "Record Crowd Attends Fair Opening," *Billings Gazette*, 8 September 1931, p. 1-2.

⁸⁰ "Governor Holt Is To Officially Open Show in Afternoon," *Billings Gazette*, 10 August 1936, p. 1-2; "Throng Attends Fair Opening Here," *Billings Gazette*, 8 August 1937, p. 1-2.

⁸¹ "Midland Empire Fair Draws Huge Crowd Opening Day," *Billings Gazette*, 13 August 1940, p. 2.

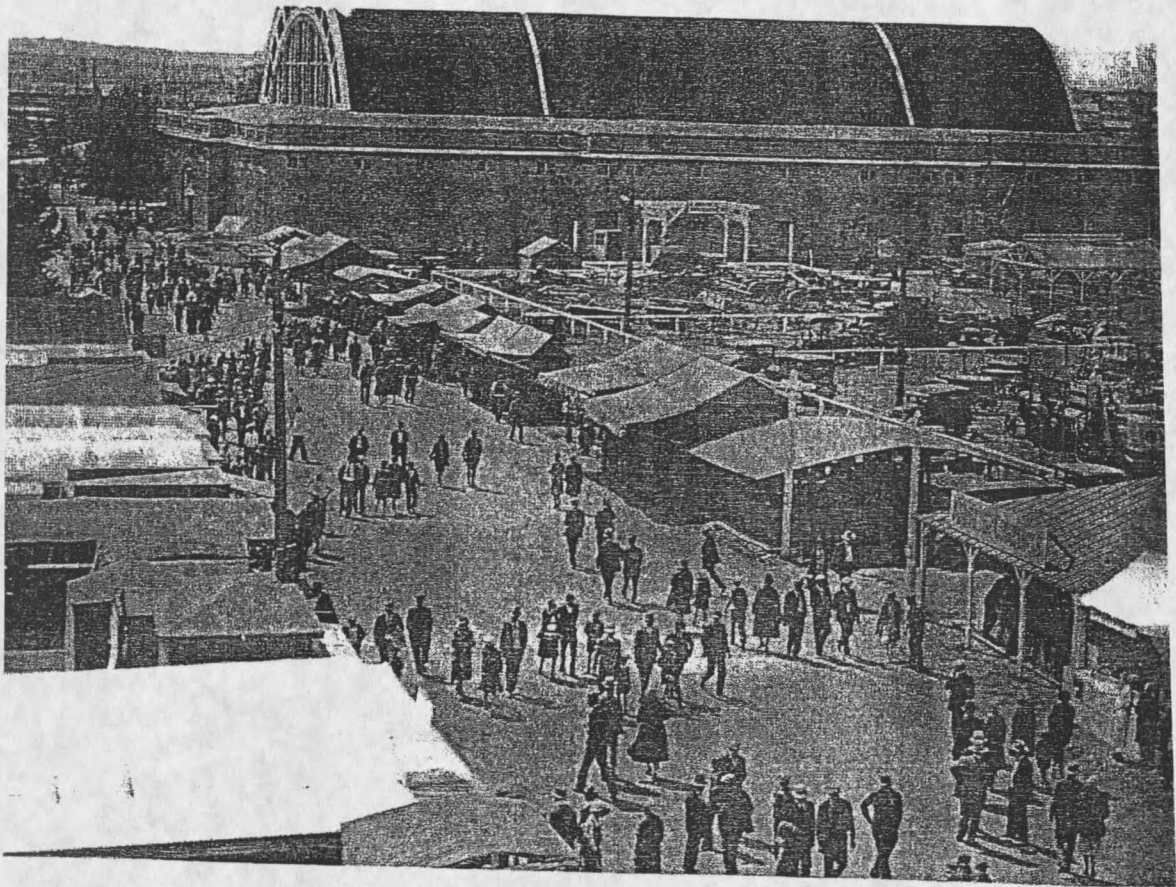


Figure 20. Midway at the Midland Empire Fair. Photo courtesy of the Western Heritage Center, Billings, MT. Photo # 79.10.01.

speeding car.⁸² Midway entertainment followed P. T. Barnum-style in 1940 when the Rubin and Cherry review arrived in Billings with "a 50-car trainload of attractions" including "sideshow freaks, minstrel men, beautiful dancing girls, scientific and animal exhibits, death-defying motorcyclists and noisy barkers." Rubin and Cherry shows featured the all-girl feature *Swing Revue*, Parisian beauties in the musical *French Casino*, an oriental mystery show *Streets of Shanghai*, and the Hinton sisters, "two buxom lasses, whose combinds [sic] weight aggregate 1,416 pounds." Exhibits included the *Monkeyland* animal show, a mirror maze, fun show, the thirty International Midgets and the triple ferris wheel. The most famous attraction during a Midland fair occurred in 1941 when Sally Rand performed her infamous fan and bubble dances.⁸³

Native Americans played a significant role in the Midland fairs. During the 1931 fair, Crow member Old Rabbit, though interpreter Barney Old Coyote, presented Governor Erickson with a beaded purse. The *Billings Gazette* described the ceremony and reported that the "Indians dressed in their native attire with beaded buckskin and feathered headdress rode out in front of the grand stand on their horses and Old Rabbit . . . came forward to present the purse. Four American flags were carried by the red men."⁸⁴ The Crow and Cheyenne, long time enemies, had declared peace at a ceremony in Sheridan,

⁸² During another part of the act Harris was launched from a car headfirst into a board wall. "Thrill Events Highlight Fair Today," *Billings Gazette* 13 August 1938, p. 1-2; *Billings Gazette*, 19 August 1939, p. 1-2.

⁸³ "Fair Has New Midway Shows," *Billings Gazette*, 8 August 1940, p. 14; "Horse Show Today Launches Empire Fair Week in City," *Billings Gazette*, 10 August 1941, p. 1-2.

⁸⁴ "Fair Attendance Marks Are Shattered," *Billings Gazette*, 12 September 1931, p. 1-2.

Wyoming, where they literally buried a hatchet. Almost two hundred Cheyenne and Crow camped in tipis in various locations surrounding Billings to demonstrate their recent truce during the 1932 fair.⁸⁵ During the final show of the 1941 fair, "Crow Indian tribal members, dressed in their colorful regalia, [and] performed ancient ceremonial dances. . . ."⁸⁶

Although not as large as the Midland fair, the Richland County fair proved extremely popular in Northeastern Montana. Hailed as the "World's greatest county fair," it attracted people from surrounding counties in Montana and North Dakota. The fair earned its reputation just months before the stock market crash in 1929 when the "actual paid attendance [was] . . . four times the population of Richland County and also because . . . more than 85 per cent of the farmers of Richland brot [sic] exhibits."⁸⁷ Several adjoining counties advertised the fair and people from the outlying areas organized car caravans to attend the event.⁸⁸

Many praised the

. . . locality that can produce annually, regardless of conditions affecting crop productions, the greatest county fair anywhere to be seen. It may not be the biggest, but it is the greatest—rated as that by the scores of visitors who came long distance from other states, attracted by that reputation, to make their own appraisal, which is unfailingly expressed in the superlative term above.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ *Billings Gazette*, 5 September 1932, p. 1-2.

⁸⁶ "Fair Sets New Attendance Mark," *Billings Gazette*, 17 August 1941, p. 1-2.

⁸⁷ "Richland County Fair To Be Bigger, Better Than Ever," *Plentywood Herald*, 14 August 1930, p. 1.

⁸⁸ "Large Attendance Expected At Fair," *Plentywood Herald*, 27 August 1931, p. 1.

⁸⁹ "A Great County Fair," *Sidney Herald*, 29 July 1937, p. 2.



Figure 21. Last-day crowd at the 1930 Richland County Fair. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

Even though the 1932 fair was extremely popular, economic conditions forced the board of county commissioners to close the fair until 1935. The newspaper reported in 1935 that "regardless of poor crop conditions as well as a general financial stringency, there was widespread disappointment over the lack of such an event to break the rather dismal monotony of the times and this year [1935] it was felt that the fair must be restored to life and vigor."⁹⁰ Fair organizers hoped to reclaim Sidney's title as the "world's greatest county fair" and were not disappointed with the support the 1935 fair received. The 1936 event proved even more outstanding when the opening day attendance records of 15,000 more than doubled those of 1935. Since Richland County had just under 10,000 residents, it is clear the fair drew attendance from a wider region.⁹¹

A woman from neighboring Dawson County described Sidney's fair as "almost a state affair" and praised the community for the cooperative efforts that allowed the prosperity of the event: "A successful fair or community affair of any kind cannot be without the willing and enthusiastic support of all. Cooperation is the word now much used, and as long as proper cooperation is extended the Sidney fair will be a thing of pride to all the peoples of Eastern Montana."⁹² Each year the *Sidney Herald* reported new attendance records and glorified the fair's popularity. In 1936 the paper described the enthusiasm for the fair:

⁹⁰ "Richland County Fair Grand Success," *Sidney Herald*, 5 September 1935, p. 1, 8.

⁹¹ "Richland Fair Draws 15,000 On First Day," *Billings Gazette*, 8 September 1936, p. 1.

⁹² "Dawson County Pioneer Writes Impressions of Richland Fair," *Sidney Herald*, 18 September 1930, p. 1.



Figure 22. Aerial view of the Richland County fair in 1937. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

A dozen newspaper scribes from surrounding towns have called at this office, or met us on the grounds or the streets, and praised the whole thing to the high heavens, saying invariably that they came in skeptical mood to meet with the surprise of their lives. Not only these people . . . but the entire attendance one day after the other, marveled at the spectacle.⁹³

People from all around the area marveled at the various exhibits. Car and horse races, a ferris wheel, merry-go-round, and circus entertainers thrilled the crowds. A packed grandstand even witnessed the public marriage of local residents Mary Arkie and Frank Brooks. In 1930 crowds watched the Ernie Young Futuristic Revue, a musical comedy featuring thirty performers, who proved so popular they returned in 1932.⁹⁴ Aerial trapeze performances, vaudeville acts, trick riding, roping and shooting, trained animals acts, and musical numbers also entertained the crowds. Horse races attracted hundreds to the grandstand and during the 1935 fair a wild game exhibit of fish and game birds caught the interest of many fairgoers.⁹⁵ One fair highlight in 1937 included a balloon ascension with a double parachute jump and a fireworks display.⁹⁶

Although not as widely attended as the Billings and Sidney fairs, the Sheridan County fair in Plentywood offered entertainment for the local community. The Sheridan County fair centered on agricultural exhibits rather than midway entertainment. Local citizens provided entertainment such as the

⁹³ "A Great Fair," *Sidney Herald*, 10 *Sidney Herald*, 26 June 1930, p. 3; "1932 Richland Fair Establishes New Records," *Sidney Herald*, 15 September 1932, p. 1; "Record Fair Attendance Totals 40,021," *Sidney Herald*, 18 September 1930, p. 1; September 1936, p. 2.

⁹⁴ "Richland County Fair To Be Bigger, Better Than Ever," *Plentywood Herald*, 14 August 1930, p. 1.

⁹⁵ "Richland County Fair Opens Monday," *Sidney Herald*, 29 August 1935, p. 1.

⁹⁶ "All Set For Fair Opening Monday, Sept. 6," *Sidney Herald*, 26 August 1937, p. 1; "Richland Fair Being Prepared," *Billings Gazette*, 7 August 1937, p. 3; "Richland Fair Plans Are Made," *Plentywood Herald*, 1 July 1937, p. 5.



Figure 23. The fairway at the Richland County fair always included many booths that provided a selection of places to eat or play games. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

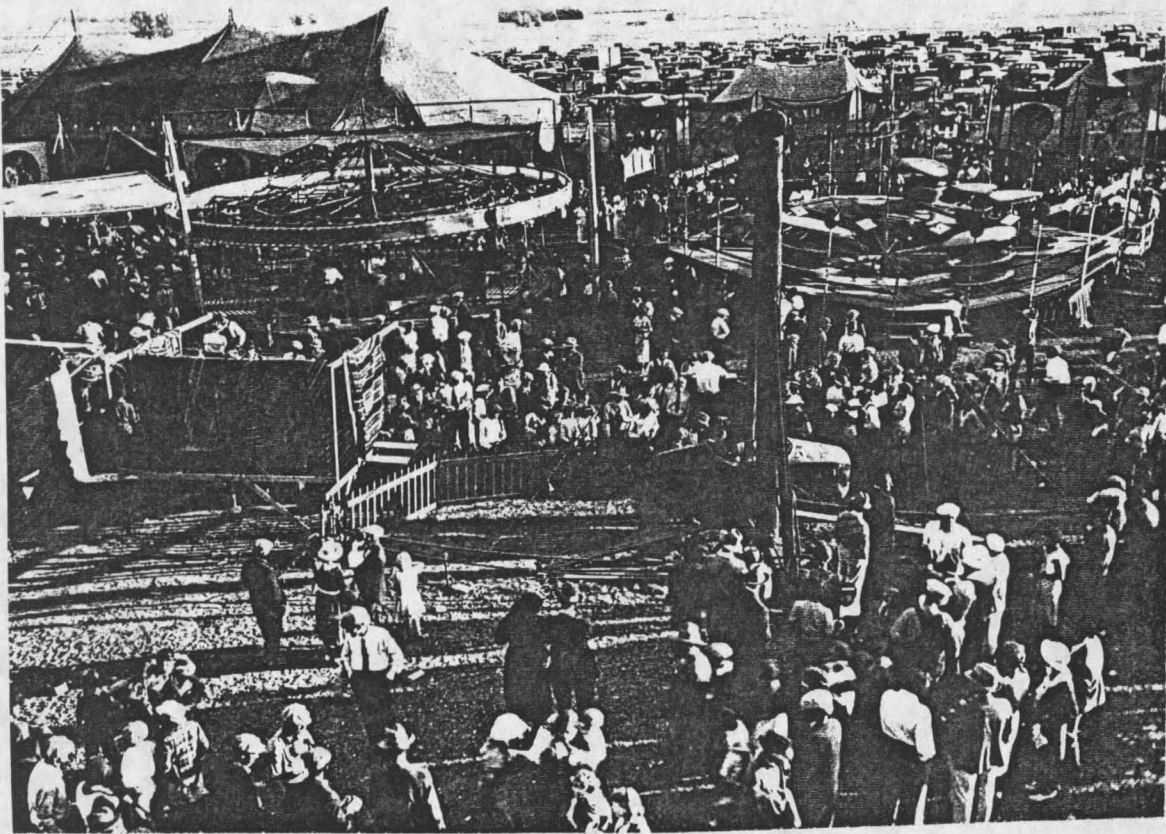


Figure 24. Exciting rides and entertainment drew large crowds to the Richland County Fair each year. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

Dagmar Folk Dancers, the Plentywood city and high school bands, and sporting events. The 1930 fair witnessed an increase of over five hundred exhibits from 1929. The most competitive exhibits proved to be the community booths that emphasized agricultural achievements.⁹⁷ Although an article from the *Plentywood Herald* in March of 1933 assured another county fair, the Commercial Club voted against it in August. The club explained that "extreme hot weather of the past month, coupled with damage from grasshoppers, had so destroyed gardens that it would be practically impossible to secure vegetable exhibits of any value."⁹⁸

Sporting events entertained the community and united them in supporting the home team. Possibly the most popular local sporting event in Plentywood was the annual district basketball tournament. The games always drew a packed house, even in 1936 when "a threatening blizzard . . . and sub-zero weather" hit the town. Life in Plentywood centered on the tournament during its duration. The Miller's Pharmacy window, decorated in the school's colors of orange and

⁹⁷ Only five points separated first and second place, with Dagmar winning the honors. "Exhibits From All Parts of County Promised For Fair," *Plentywood Herald*, 8 September 1932, p. 1; "Over 2100 Entries At County Fair And Over 5000 Visitors," *Plentywood Herald*, 2 October 1930, p. 1.

⁹⁸ "County Fair Will Be Held Again This Year is Assurance," *Plentywood Herald*, 23 March 1933, p. 1; "County Fair Has Been Called Off," *Plentywood Herald*, 24 August 1933, p. 1. During the same year, however, the *Plentywood Herald* sponsored a contest to win a trip to the World's Fair in Chicago by selling subscriptions for the paper. People could also attend the Century of Progress Exposition by purchasing a Herald Tour package. Prices ranged from \$38.50 to \$64.25 per person, and the paper made all the arrangements. "First World's Fair Guest of Herald Reaches Quota," *Plentywood Herald*, 3 August 1933, p. 1; *Plentywood Herald*, 17 August 1933, p. 7.

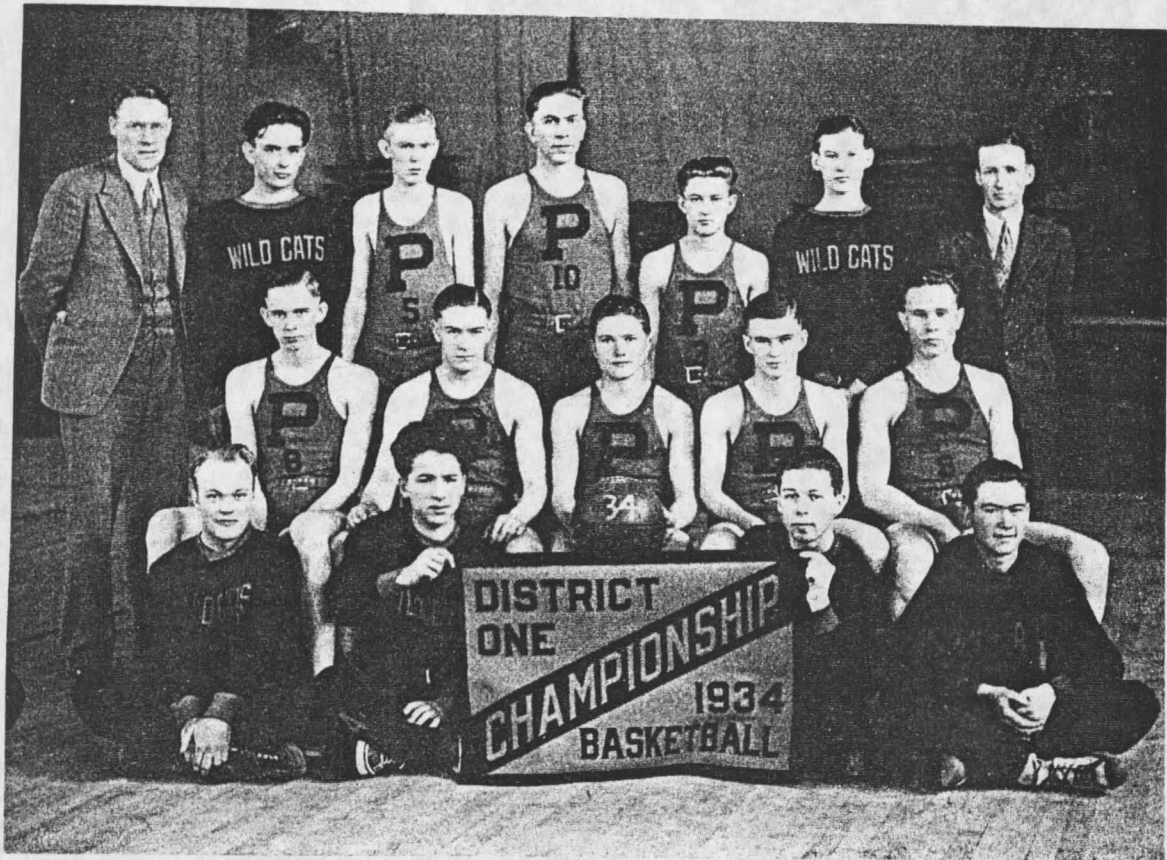


Figure 25. In 1934 the Plentywood Wildcats won the district one basketball championship. Top row: Assistant Coach Cadwell, Everett Morgan, LeRoy Antonson, Clifford Knudson, Kermit Helgeson, Levi Paul and Coach Lloyd Skor. Middle row: Mose Reinertson, Jack Loucks, Lewin Timmerman, Barr Zeidler and Clarence Kollman. Bottom row: Percy Moe, Dick Koike, Bob Johnston and Fay Chandler. Reprinted from *Plentywood Portrait: Toil Soil Oil* (Plentywood: Herald Printing, 1987), 238.

black, displayed pictures of the teams, trophies to be awarded at the tournament, and the tournament bracket with room to add scores after each game.⁹⁹

Plentywood defeated Antelope to win the district title in 1937 and "frenzied Wildcat supporters swarmed out on the floor when the last gun sounded their victory." The Wildcats defended their title the following year in front of a crowd of 1,350 fans.¹⁰⁰

Professional teams also entertained crowds during the 1930s when the A. M. Saperstein's Harlem Globe Trotters played several games in Plentywood. The paper described the famous quint to its readers: "Inman Kacson, the giant center, who grips a basketball with one hand almost as easily as he would a baseball, and little Pullins, the sharp shooting forward, who drops 'em in from almost any spot on the floor as Lefty Ryan throws a baseball, are with the Harlem's."¹⁰¹ During their first appearance in 1933, the Globe Trotters challenged the Plentywood Greyhounds, defeating them 43 to 36, but entertained the packed house "with a brand of ball and clever antics that kept the huge crowd of fans in an uproar from the starting whistle."¹⁰²

Saperstein's quint, who were the talk of the county for weeks after their first appearance, challenged the Greyhounds again the following year. The manager for the Plentywood team commented on their previous defeat and

⁹⁹ "Sixth Annual Tourney Opens Today," *Plentywood Herald*, 24 February 1938, p. 1, 4.

¹⁰⁰ "Outlook Wins District Tournament," *Plentywood Herald*, 27 February 1936, p. 1, 8; "Wildcats Win District Hoop Championship," *Plentywood Herald*, 25 February 1937, p. 1; "Wildcats District Champs, Play at Havre Next Week," *Plentywood Herald*, 3 March 1938, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ "Colored Quint To Play Here To-Nite," *Plentywood Herald*, 9 March 1933, p. 1.

¹⁰² "Colored Quint Win Game 43 To 36," *Plentywood Herald*, 16 March 1933, p. 1.



Figure 26. The Harlem Globe Trotters always entertained crowds in Eastern Montana. Reprinted from *Sidney Herald*, 17 March 1938, p. 3.

stressed that "their bag of tricks left us stage struck. We're going to let our own cat out of the bag this time." The "largest crowd ever gathered under one roof in Plentywood" watched the exciting game and in the end, the Globe Trotters were again victorious, defeating the home team by a score of 43 to 40.¹⁰³ The New York team returned in 1935, this time challenging the Plentywood Redbirds at the Farmer-Labor Temple. In 1940 the Trotters again returned, this time in a match against another famous team, the House of David. The team offered "clever ball handling and comedy to amuse the fans and has been voted by basketball critics as one of the most entertaining clubs in the professional ranks."¹⁰⁴

Despite a shortage of ready cash during the depression years, eastern Montanans enjoyed some commercial entertainment. Listening to the radio became a popular activity for many people. Friends and families would gather around the radio and listened to their favorite programs. During the day programming catered to housewives and offered several soap operas. Children became the center of attention in the late afternoon as they listened to their favorite adventures and participated in many promotions that offered "official"

¹⁰³ "Flashy Colored Quint to Appear in Plentywood," *Plentywood Herald*, 25 January 1934, p. 1; "Record Crowds Attends Globe Trotters—P'wood Tilt," *Plentywood Herald*, 8 February 1934, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ "Trotters' Coming With Classy Quint," *Plentywood Herald*, 10 January 1935, p. 1; "House of David—Globe Trotter Quints Clash at School Gym," *Plentywood Herald*, 14 March 1940, p. 8. The House of David was organized in 1903 as a commonwealth in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Members of the commune believed the old world would be destroyed bringing about a thousand years of peace once the twelve tribes of Israel gathered there. House of David members practiced celibacy, turned in all of their possessions to the commonwealth fund, and most of the men did not shave or cut their hair because that was how Jesus lived. In addition to a vegetarian restaurant, world-famous waffle cones and ice cream, and a miniature train set, the House of David was famous for its baseball and basketball teams who barnstormed across the Midwest and even built their own baseball stadium in Benton Harbor. For more information on the House of David, visit the www.maryscityofdavid.org website.



Figure 27. The House of David, the "Whiskered Gents from Benton Harbor," played against the Harlem Globe Trotters in Plentywood in 1940. Reprinted from *Plentywood Herald*, 14 March 1940, p. 8.

rings, secret decoders, badges, whistles, and membership kits in return for mailing in boxtops and sometimes a dime or quarter. Newscasts dominated the dinner hour followed by "prime time" programming. Parents and children could "escape into the world of music, comedy, drama, game shows or crime . . ." ¹⁰⁵

The Billings community listened to local station KGHL. Charles O. Campbell of the Billings Northwestern Auto Supply Company began broadcasting on 8 June 1928. KGHL was the only radio station in Billings until 1946 and the "classic N-B-C chimes, followed by the unique station identification: 'This is Billings . . . KGHL,' told listeners they were in tune with a friend and neighbor." ¹⁰⁶ People could tune into the radio from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. and listen to NBC sponsored programs such as Happy Jack, Little Orphan Annie, Melody Mixers, Mardi Gras, Western Farm and Home Hour, and Bits of Broadway. Local programs included the Polytechnic Institute, Harry Brashear (Montana's Cowboy Singer), Shoppers' Program, Security Building and Loan Orchestra, and Organ Concert. ¹⁰⁷ Dale Galles of Broadview recalled listening to sports, especially the World Series, on the local station. ¹⁰⁸

Station KG CX entertained people in northeastern Montana. The station, the dream of co-founder Edward Krebsbach, began broadcasting in the small town of Vida, Montana, in 1925. The station received a radio license and made

¹⁰⁵ Best, 63.

¹⁰⁶ Howard C. McDonald, *Voices in the Big Sky: The History of Montana Broadcasting* (Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 1996), 9-11.

¹⁰⁷ Radio Program Station KGHL Billings: Montana, March 1, 1933; May 1, 1933. Vertical files, Montana Room, Parnly Library, Billings, MT.

¹⁰⁸ Joan and Dale Galles, interview by author, 5 January 2000, tape recording, Billings, MT.



Figure 28. Billings KGHL Radio Station Transmitter Building. Photo courtesy of the Western Heritage Center, Billings, MT. Photo #81.46.06.

its first legal broadcast on 5 October 1926, making it the smallest community in the country to have a licensed station. Krebsbach made his broadcasts from the First State Bank of Vida during his lunch hour and any spare time he could find. He continued broadcasts in Vida for a couple years until he moved to Wolf Point in 1929.¹⁰⁹ With the economic hardships of the depression, Krebsbach struggled to keep the station running with most of the support for KGCX coming from the listeners themselves, local benefits—usually dances—and “pot-luck” dinners.¹¹⁰

The Wolf Point station offered a variety of programming, and local talent often filled the airwaves of KGCX. Popular performers included the guitarist known as “Montana Pete, The Lone Driftin’ Rider—KGCX,” and the dance band Duke Snyder and His Happiness Boys. One interesting performer was the semi-vagrant fortune teller Stardust who would occasionally drop by the radio station to tell fortunes.¹¹¹ Clair Krebsbach recalled that the selection of station programming was diverse as “you’d have a quarter hour of organ music from Hollywood, then you would have a Lawrence Welk quarter hour, then a Hawaiian quarter hour, and then a John Philip Sousa quarter hour. If you wanted a little break you put on Army or Air Force disks that used their own announcers.” Economic conditions in Wolf Point proved too trying, so in 1942 Krebsbach

¹⁰⁹ Vida had a population of about twenty-five in 1925, “Radio in the Hinterlands: KGCX 1925-1993,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 47(Spring 1997): 46.

¹¹⁰ McDonald, 8.

¹¹¹ Bill Knowles, “KGCX: The Voice of Cow Creek,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 47 (Spring 1997): 56.

moved for the final time to Sidney, a community considered "depression proof."¹¹²

The people of Sidney were well acquainted with KGCX long before the station moved there. In 1936 R. S. Nutt delivered an address during a Sidney booster program which complimented Ed Krebsbach's contributions to the area and also promoted the "highly productive irrigated valley." KGCX also featured a "Sidney Day" program in 1937.¹¹³ The radio station celebrated its first Sidney broadcast on 20 September 1942. KGCX invited all communities within seventy-five miles of Sidney to listen to the dedicatory program and the broadcast promised "very entertaining, strictly live talent program. . . from 12:30 throughout the afternoon."¹¹⁴

Another form of mass media that provided a great escape from the hardships of life during the depression years were the movies. Between sixty and ninety million Americans viewed movies each week. People attended for different reasons as some wanted to escape the economic worries and others found relief from the weather.¹¹⁵ President of the Motion Picture Procedures and Distributions of America Will Hayes explained that it was "the mission of the screen, without ignoring the serious social problems of the day, to reflect

¹¹² Knowles, 57; Clair and Keith Krebsbach, "KGCX: Not a Pretentious Operation," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 47 (Spring 1997): 65.

¹¹³ "Sidney Booster Program Station KGCX Today," *Sidney Herald*, 22 October 1936, p. 1; "KGCX Will Feature Sidney Day Broadcast Saturday," *Sidney Herald*, 18 March 1937, p. 12.

¹¹⁴ "KGCX Will Hold Formal Opening Coming Sunday," *Sidney Herald*, 17 September 1942, p. 1.

¹¹⁵ Gary B. Nash et al eds., *The American People: Creating a Nation and Society* 2d ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 844; Gerald D. Nash, *The Crucial Era: The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945*, 2d ed., The St. Martin's Series in 20th Century U. S. History (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 104.

aspiration, achievement, optimism, and kindly humor in its entertainment." Even Herbert Hoover recognized the importance of movies: his administration distributed food, clothing, and movie tickets to the needy.¹¹⁶ Movie-goers did not want to miss the latest Hollywood production, whether it was a gangster film such as *Public Enemy* and *Angels With Dirty Faces*, a political movie like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, or musical productions such as *Top Hat* and *Swing Time*.¹¹⁷

Billings housed as many as five movie theaters during the depression, including the Fox theater, which opened in 1931. Joan Galles, like hundreds of other youths in Billings, saved her money in order to go to the movies with her friends during the depression years.¹¹⁸ The grand opening ceremony for the Fox, which was affiliated with the Fox West Coast theater, was a major event in Billings. It commenced with a "... parade of Indians, cowboys, and an ancient stagecoach through downtown streets, exemplifying the union of the old west and the modern east as typified in the theater." The opening of the Fox awarded Billings the "distinction of being the only city of less than 100,000 population included on the Fanchon and Marco revue circuit."¹¹⁹ In 1934 the Fox commemorated its third birthday with a week long celebration. Virtually every

¹¹⁶ Best, 80; Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 65.

¹¹⁷ Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 6-7.

¹¹⁸ Galles interview.

¹¹⁹ "Fox Theater Will Open Here Tonight," *Billings Gazette*, 17 November 1931, p. 1-2.



Figure 29. Fox Theater in Billings, circa 1931. Photo courtesy of the Billings Parmly Library, Billings, Montana.

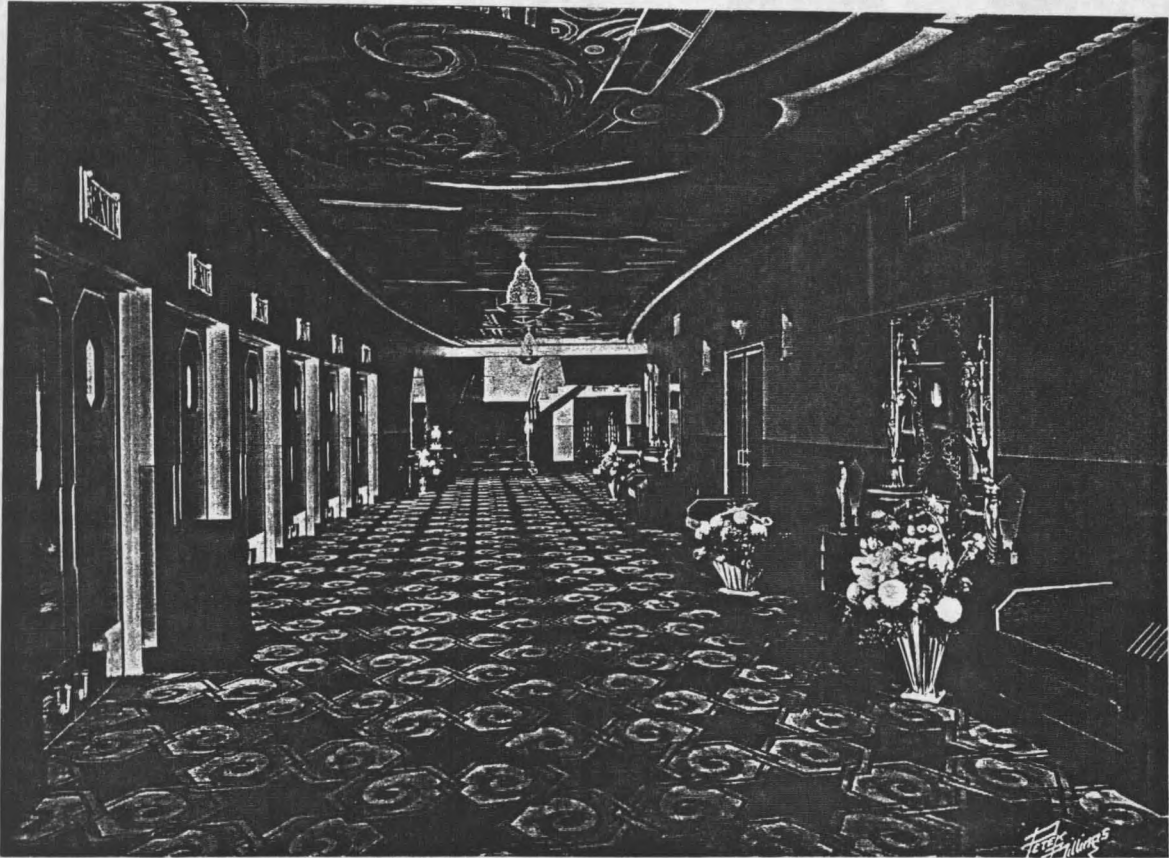


Figure 30. Lobby of the Fox Theater in Billings, circa 1931. Photo courtesy of the Billings Parmly Library, Billings, Montana.

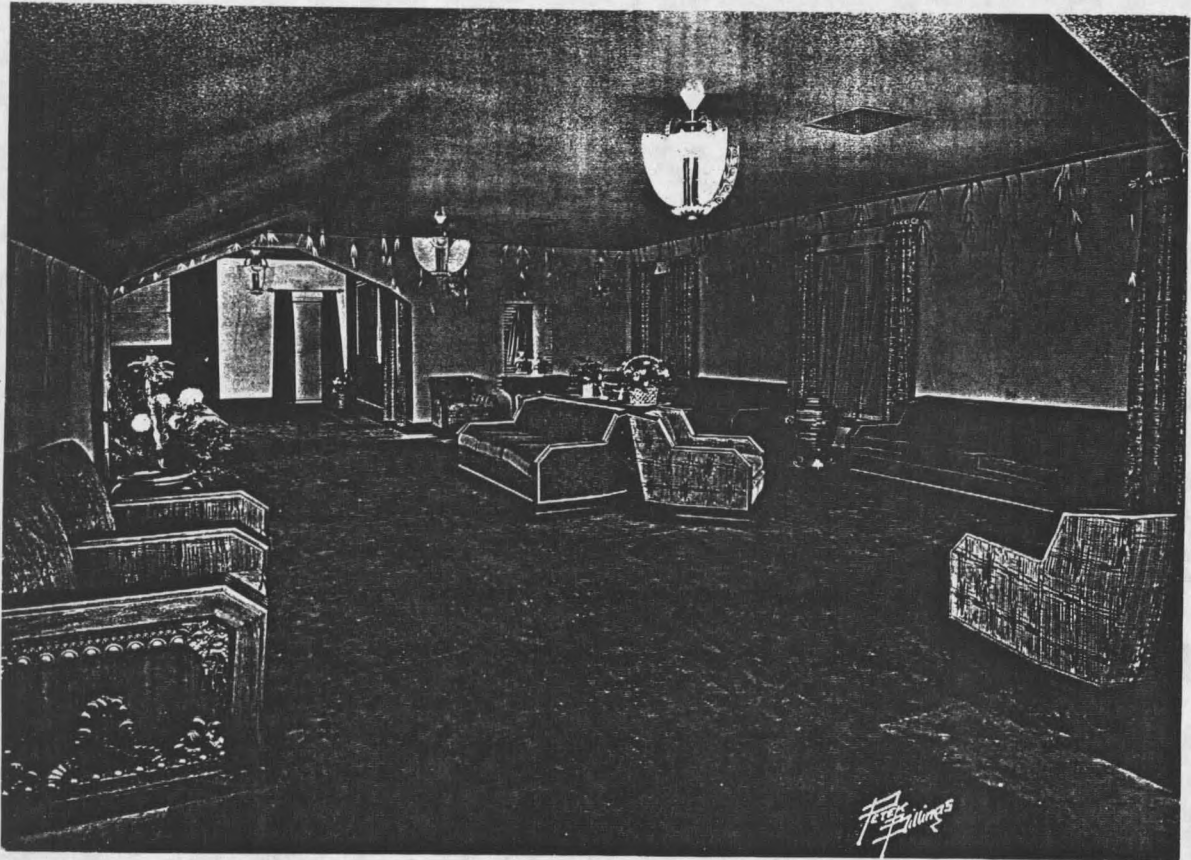


Figure 31. Interior view of the Fox Theater in Billings, circa 1931. Photo courtesy of the Billings Parmly Library, Billings, Montana.

group in the city used the Fox and the theater boasted that they had "tried to make the theater an integral part of our community life."¹²⁰

In 1932 the Fox West Coast Theater company took over the Babcock theater, formally part of the Hughes-Franklin chain. The Babcock, considered the "finest playhouse in the state" had remained closed for two months after the Hughes-Franklin chain dissolved.¹²¹ Just three years after the takeover, a fire destroyed the theater's interior. Work began immediately to restore the theater that had provided entertainment in Billings since 1907. The newly decorated Babcock featured the most modern designs and equipment and reopened just six months later to a gala ceremony.¹²² People from across the United States sent telegrams congratulating the theater owner and manager. Most noteworthy were telegrams from Bette Davis (who starred in the movie featured at the grand opening, *Front Page Woman*), Mae West, Katherine Hepburn, Montana native Gary Cooper, Ginger Rogers, Bing Crosby, Clark Gable, Joan Crawford, and Irenne Dunne.¹²³ Babcock owner Hyme Lipsker explained to the public that the new theater was "entirely different in every respect from the old house" and that he spared "no expense in making the playhouse one of which the residents of Billings can be proud."¹²⁴

In addition to movies, the theaters also sponsored live entertainment. In 1933 the Fox featured shows ranging from the wonder child Jackie Merkie who

¹²⁰ "Fox Theater To Celebrate Third Birthday," *Billings Gazette*, 18 November 1934, p. 1-2.

¹²¹ "Fox Takes Over Babcock; Will Reopen Mar. 26," *Billings Gazette*, 15 March 1932, p. 1-2.

¹²² "Babcock Plans Gala Opening Tuesday Night," *Billings Gazette*, 4 August 1935, p. 1-2.

¹²³ "Theatergoers Praise Remodeled Babcock," *Billings Gazette*, 7 August 1935, p. 1-2.

¹²⁴ "Babcock To Be Thrown Open to Public Tonight," *Billings Gazette*, 6 August 1935, p. 1-2.

could "answer any question asked him," vaudeville acts, and a comedy dance team. The Hinton Sisters, Daisy and Violet, appeared at the Lyric theater in 1940. Manager Max Fregger boasted that the sisters were the "world's most famous Siamese twins" and their singing performance and personalities made their show popular.¹²⁵

Seemingly untouched by the depression, Sidney's Princess theater kept up a busy business through the 1930s.¹²⁶ The theater in Sidney ran somewhat like the theaters nationally. At the Princess, the main film usually played Sunday through Tuesday, then a less prominent movie on Wednesday, and another movie on Friday and Saturday. The theater in Fairview designated Wednesday nights "Bank Night." During that show the theater manager drew a name, and if that person were present, he or she won dishes.¹²⁷ In 1936 owner J. M. Suckstorff improved the Princess theater, scheduling the construction between films so no shows would be missed. He created more space for an additional 134 seats and installed a new screen, two feet larger in all directions, improving the viewing of the films.¹²⁸

The Orpheum was the local theater in Plentywood. The theater underwent massive remodeling in 1933, including new sound equipment, drapes,

¹²⁵ "Stage Features Are Scheduled For Fox Theater During Week," *Billings Gazette*, 16 July 1933, p. 3; "Lyric Books Siamese Twins For Two Days," *Billings Gazette*, 7 July 1940, second edition, p. 9.

¹²⁶ "Princess Getting Ready For Talking Pictures," *Sidney Herald*, 23 January 1930, p. 1.

¹²⁷ *Sidney Herald*, 18 January 1940, p. 5; Dore letter.

¹²⁸ "Princess Theater Is Newly Decorated and Thoroughly Modern," *Sidney Herald*, 13 February 1936, p. 1.



Figure 32. The Princess theater in Sidney. Photo courtesy of the Mon-Dak Historical and Arts Society, Sidney, Montana.

and decorations.¹²⁹ The theater sponsored several promotions to attract viewers including free tickets and "pal night." Manager E. M. Jackson announced in 1933 that the "Orpheum theater is going to let you bring your pal to [the movie] . . . without any charge."¹³⁰ In January of 1938, one purchased ticket and a coupon naming the patron's favorite movie genre and the best way for the Orpheum to advertise admitted two adults to the movie. Another ticket giveaway included a puzzle in the weekly movie listings in the *Plentywood Herald*. Each week the name of one person from the area appeared jumbled. Once that person deciphered the name, he or she won a free ticket for that week.¹³¹

Dances also provided an inexpensive way for the community to socialize together and offered supervised entertainment for youth. The *Sidney Herald* announced a dance practically every week and Synove Lalond recalls dances held at the schools, the Triangle, and Legion Hall downtown. Various organizations sponsored dances in order to raise money for numerous occasions as well as providing entertainment for community members. Annual dances proved popular and were well attended. The annual New Year's Eve dance, the St. Patrick's Day dance hosted by the Catholic women, and the May Time Ball attracted large crowds year after year in Sidney.¹³²

¹²⁹ "Orpheum Theatre Here Will Undergo Much Remodeling," *Plentywood Herald*, 2 February 1933, p. 1.

¹³⁰ "Pal Night' to be Feature at Orpheum Next Week," *Plentywood Herald*, 17 August 1933, p. 1.

¹³¹ *Plentywood Herald*, 28 January 1937, p. 4; *Plentywood Herald*, 4 November 1937, p. 8.

¹³² Lalonde interview; *Sidney Herald*, 1 May 1930, p. 1; *Sidney Herald*, 5 February 1931, p. 1.



Main Street looking south...late 1930's.



Main Street looking north. Late 1930's

Figure 33. Main street Plentywood in the late 1930s. Reprinted from *Plentywood Portrait: Toil Soil Oil* (Plentywood: Herald Printing, 1987), 174.

Communities across the nation including Billings, Sidney, and Plentywood celebrated the President's birthday with the annual Roosevelt Ball. The dual purpose of the dances was to raise money "for the aid of crippled children and for the observance of the birthday of President Roosevelt." Most Montana communities donated seventy percent of the proceeds to St. Vincent's orthopedic hospital school in Billings to help crippled children. The Montana Birthday Ball raised almost \$4,500 for St. Vincent's hospital in 1938 alone.¹³³ Richland County divided the seventy percent between St. Vincent's hospital and the county Child's Welfare committee. The people of Sidney wanted money to be donated to the local committee because Richland County "had several cases of infantile paralysis . . . only a short time ago. . . ."¹³⁴ Communities donated the remaining thirty percent to the national Warm Springs (Georgia) Foundation. By 1940, the numbers changed to a 50-50 split of the money.

Over five thousand communities across the United States and in seventeen towns in Montana celebrated the first Birthday ball.¹³⁵ The event proved a success and the following year an additional 1,153 dances were held throughout the country; by 1937 over fifty communities in Montana held Birthday Dances. Tickets admitted people to "any President's Birthday dance that night in

¹³³ "Billings Joins Nation Tonight To Aid Crippled," *Billings Gazette*, 30 January 1935, p. 1-2; "Birthday Ball To Be Held Tonight," *Billings Gazette*, 30 January 1937, p. 1-2; "Orthopedic Ball To Be Saturday," *Billings Gazette*, 28 January 1938, p. 5.

¹³⁴ "County Committees Named for President's Benefit Dance Jan. 30," *Sidney Herald*, 10 January 1935, p. 1; "President's Birthday Dances To Be Held At Sidney, Fairview," *Sidney Herald*, 23 January 1936, p. 1.

¹³⁵ "Large Crowd Is Expected For Roosevelt Ball," *Billings Gazette*, 30 January 1934, p. 1-2; "Birthday Dance Set For Tuesday," *Billings Gazette*, 30 January 1940, p. 3.

Montana, as they are all being given for the same beneficent purpose." In 1935 twenty-five civic and social organizations sponsored the event held at the Billings Commercial Club and Sidney's Legion hall entertained over five hundred people. By 1936 Richland County sponsored three dances, again at Legion hall; at Dreamland, and also at the Orpheum in Fairview. The high school auditorium hosted the Plentywood Birthday dance in 1936 with three orchestras providing the music. With the United States' entry into World War II, the 1942 dance donned the slogan "A Healthy America Is Our First Line of Defense."¹³⁶

The most anticipated dance each year in Plentywood was the Fireman's Ball. During the 1930 ball, over six hundred people danced from 9:30 at night until 3:20 in the next morning. The Firemen chartered a special train to accommodate the nearly two hundred "terpischoreans who were unable to come on account of bad roads." The first five hundred guests at the seventeenth annual ball held in 1931 received huge bandannas as novelty souvenirs. The dancers "all wore these huge red handkerchiefs, cowboy and cowgirl style and it would have led a timid easterner to believe that all the dancers were ranchers instead of the ordinary rank and file of our town and farmer folks of northeastern

¹³⁶ "President's Ball Huge Success for Benefit," *Sidney Herald*, 4 February 1937, p. 1; "President's Birthday Dances at Triangle And Dreamland Jan. 30," *Sidney Herald*, 25 January 1940, p. 1; "President's Birthday Ball At Triangle Saturday, Jan. 31," *Sidney Herald*, 22 January 1942, p. 1.

Montana."¹³⁷ By 1936 the annual ball moved from its original February date on Washington's birthday to ring in the new year on December 31.¹³⁸

The most popular and successful dance hall in Sidney was Dreamland, a combined dance hall and beer parlor that Elmer Bosshard built nine miles north of Sidney on Highway 14. The Cavaliers, a band from Williston, North Dakota (45 miles east of Sidney), played for "Eastern Montana's finest dance pavilion's" grand opening on Saturday, 22 June 1935.¹³⁹ Dreamland remained open every night, with live music on Saturdays and Wednesdays. Each week the *Sidney Herald* advertised the upcoming bands, most of which came from eastern Montana and western North Dakota. Groups such as the Galloping Swedes, the Caballeros, Wen Schuh and His Great Band, and the Tempo Kings with Miss Shirley frequently played at Dreamland. Some bands traveled from as far away as Minneapolis and Kansas City to play.¹⁴⁰ On nights when no live bands played, a nickelodeon or juke box provided the music.

¹³⁷ "Annual Firemen's Ball Proclaimed Gala Affair By All," *Plentywood Herald*, 27 February 1930, p. 1; "Firemen's Ball is Event of Season," *Plentywood Herald*, 26 February 1931, p. 1.

¹³⁸ The Twenty-third annual ball was a carnival dance and participants received horns and confetti. The 1943 ball celebrated thirty years of the event and floor awards replaced the carnival theme. "Firemen 23 Years Ago Had First Ball; Now Annual Event," *Plentywood Herald*, 24 December 1936, p. 1; "Firemen's Ball Friday Evening," *Plentywood Herald*, 30 December 1943, p. 1.

¹³⁹ *Courage Enough: Mon-Dak Family Histories, Richland County, Montana*. Bicentennial ed. (Sidney, MT: Mon-Dak Family Histories Office, 1978), 371; "Dreamland Pavilion Opens 9 Miles North," *Sidney Herald*, 20 June 1935, p. 4. Fairview even opened a dance hall on State Street called the Rainbow Gardens. Some nicknamed it the "Bucket of Blood" due to the many knife fights that occurred after the arrival of migrant workers who worked the sugar beets. It later became a place to roller skate. Dore letter.

¹⁴⁰ *Sidney Herald*, 18 June 1937, p. 1; *Sidney Herald*, 29 October 1936, p. 12; *Sidney Herald*, 9 July 1936, p. 1; *Sidney Herald*, 13 August 1936, p. 8; *Sidney Herald*, 18 June 1937, p. 1; *Sidney Herald*, 6 August 1936, p. 8.

Dreamland also hosted special events. People often held their wedding dances there and in the summertime, Bossard held dances for the Mexican migrant workers on Sunday nights. Bossard would often set aside one night a week for youths to roller skate. The men from the CCC camp frequently traveled there on their time off. The Fourth of July dance in 1936 showed a record attendance of two thousand people. The dance hall also sponsored a local baseball team called the Dreamland Tigers.¹⁴¹ Although Dreamland remained extremely popular, Bosshard later sold it to Vern Gardner. Gardner planned to remodel and reopen the dance hall, but when he could not obtain a liquor license, he closed Dreamland's doors.¹⁴²

The youth of Eastern Montana used pastime materials available to them to entertain themselves, such as the many dances, fairs, community celebrations, radio programs, and sports activities. They made the best they could out of the depression times. Adults supported wholesome recreation activities to tie youths to their communities and to keep them out of trouble.

Throughout the depression years, adults fought to provide youth with wholesome, family-oriented recreation. They believed it was necessary to fill young people's play time in order to keep them away from the social ills of society as well as connected to their communities. Adults greatly feared juvenile crimes and radical youth groups promoting fascism, communism, and socialism. Keeping youth out of trouble, therefore, was essential in the fight to restore

¹⁴¹ Dore letter; "Record Crowd Attends Dreamland 4th Dance," *Sidney Herald*, 9 July 1936; *Sidney Herald*, 23 July 1936, p. 4.

¹⁴² Dore letter.

America's faith in democracy. Both national and community leaders sought to provide youth recreation through the WPA recreation programs, parks, swimming pools, dances, school events, and community holidays. Mass media entertainment also entertained youth as throngs listened to the radio or went to the local theater to watch a movie. Youths themselves wanted cheap and wholesome recreation and made do with what they had, often providing their own safe and fun entertainment. Play time proved just as important as jobs and school to keep youths on the path of democracy.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION:
THE SHIFT TO DEFENSE

On 7 December 1941 the nation listened in horror as news of the attack on Pearl Harbor spread. The Japanese attack destroyed eighteen major ships, 188 planes, and killed 2,403 people.¹ Eight men from Montana died at Pearl Harbor, including Seaman Earl L. Morrison and Sergeant Carlo A. Micheletto of Sidney.² The next day President Roosevelt delivered an emotional address to Congress asking for a declaration of war against Japan; his plea was approved with only one dissenting vote from Representative Jeannette Rankin of Montana.³ Three days later Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. America now became fully involved in World War II, an effort which would lead to economic recovery from the depression.

With the onset of World War II, life changed drastically in the United States. For over a decade, people only thought of the depression and hardships. Low farm prices and elusive jobs made life difficult. Millions of Americans

¹ William E. Shapiro, *Turning Points of World War II* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), 66.

² Gary Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing Companies, Inc., 1994), 17; "Earl Morrison is Listed at Victim Pearl Harbor Attack," *Sidney Herald*, 29 January 1942, p. 1.

³ Robert A. Divine et al., *America Past and Present*, Brief 2d ed., vol. 2, *From 1865* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 464.

depended on relief from the government in order to survive. With the war, everything changed. The events in Europe and the Pacific overshadowed talk of the depression. Mobilizing for war became people's top priority. Farm production and prices increased and farmers enjoyed prosperity. The demand for soldiers, sailors, marines, and defense workers assured almost everyone of a job. Feelings of self-worth and comradeship increased as people once again felt useful after a decade of depression.

People wanted to do what they could to help the war effort. The CCC and NYA both shifted their efforts to defense work. NYA youths made munitions and war supplies instead of toys and skating rinks. In the beginning of 1942, the youth center in Sidney housed a "defense sheet metal and wood working project."⁴ The CCC started losing enrollees to the war movement, either through enlistment in the armed forces or jobs in the defense industry. As early as 1940 almost twenty CCC campers at Ridgelawn joined the Marine Corps when recruiters arrived in Sidney and another eighteen signed up with selective service from the Flint Creek camp outside of Anaconda, Montana.⁵ The CCC tried to convince young men over the age of seventeen, but still too young to enlist, to join their program. They explained that the work in the CCC was also an important service to their county and that it was "not possible for everyone to shoulder a gun, but young men not available for military service can feel that they

⁴ "NYA Youth Center Will Be Completed," *Sidney Herald*, 25 December 1941, p. 1.

⁵ "Five CCC Boys Here Join Marine Corps; More in Line to Go," *Sidney Herald*, 22 August 1940, p. 1; "CCC Youths Said Enlisting in Army," *Billings Gazette*, 10 November 1940, p. 3.

are making a definite contribution to their country in helping conserve its natural resources." In order to appeal to these youths and compete against the war industry jobs, the monthly payment method changed. Campers still received \$30 a month, but only \$10 instead of \$25 went to their dependents and they kept \$12. The remaining \$8 was deposited with the finance manager and given to the young man when he left the camp.⁶

The "competitive call of the defense program for the services of the youth of this county" also explained the decline in CCC enrollment. The NYA, due to its focus on defense training, did not suffer the same losses. Defense manufactures hired CCC boys by the hundreds, attracted by the disciplined working habits they learned in the camps. Across the nation boys turned to defense instead of conservation. The report of the director for the month of May 1941 reported that 10,225 boys had left CCC camps, the "largest monthly exodus in the history of the CCC." Over 9,000 accepted private employment, most of which was with the defense industries, and the rest enlisted with the military.⁷

As the war continued, the United States decided the money designated for the New Deal programs needed to be used more directly for defense. Although during the depression many had advocated making the youth programs permanent, the war conditions ended the discussion. Winning the war was more important. By 1941 the government had cut 264 of its 1,500 CCC camps across the nation. During the 1942 fiscal year, the Secretary of the Treasury

⁶ "Boys Wanted for CCC Enrollment," *Plentywood Herald*, 19 March 1942.

⁷ "Decline of the CCC," *Sidney Herald*, 24 July 1941, p. 2.

recommended non-defense spending be cut by a billion dollars. The CCC was included among the agencies marked for massive budget cuts.⁸ On 30 June 1942, after over nine years of service, the CCC disbanded and began the process of disposing its assets to the army.⁹ Although the NYA focused on defense training and projects during the early war years, it faced a similar fate. In 1943, under Executive Order 9235, all real and personal property of the National Youth Administration was declared surplus, and all equipment, materials, and supplies were to be "assembled, inventoried, and turned over to the Director of Procurement, Treasury Department." The NYA had to complete its liquidation by 1 January 1944.¹⁰

Economically, life improved dramatically with America's entry into World War II and a return of good weather. Agriculture boomed as a result of great wartime demands and a generous amount of rainfall. In 1941 farmers in Montana witnessed one of the best crop seasons in almost twenty years. The 1943 harvest was the most productive they had ever seen. That year crop values reached over \$188 million and the livestock industry netted over \$134 million. Between 1940 and 1948 Montana ranchers saw a net cash increase of 188 percent.¹¹ The national income in the United States when World War II began in

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Leslie Alexander Lacy, *The Soil Soldiers: The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Great Depression* (Radnor, PN: Chilton Book Company, 1976), 208.

¹⁰ *United States Statutes at Large Containing the Laws and Concurrent Resolutions Enacted During the First Session of the Seventy-eighth Congress of the United States of America, 1943*, Vol. 57, Part 1, Public Laws (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1944), 57 Stat 539; 40 U.S.C. 304 (a) and 304 (b).

¹¹ Michael P. Malone, Richard Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, Revised ed., (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 308-309.

Europe in 1939 was \$70.8 billion. By the end of the war in 1945 that number jumped to \$161 billion.¹²

With plentiful crops and high wartime prices, signs of the depression gradually diminished in Eastern Montana. New Deal jobs were replaced with war industry employment. Talk of winning the war replaced talk of the economic hardships of the depression. In December of 1943, Roosevelt declared that "Dr. New Deal had outlived his usefulness and should give way to Dr. Win-the-War."¹³ Although the events of the war caused much pain and suffering with the rising death and injury tolls of the soldiers fighting in Europe and the Pacific, most Americans believed it was a just cause and looked to the future. After over a decade of depression, the future finally seemed brighter.

Youth, with the help of government and community support, weathered the hardships of the depression years. They were able to regain a sense of self-worth by having the opportunity to gain an education and employment. The CCC and NYA helped millions of youth achieve their goals and provided them with practical vocational guidance. Through wholesome recreation, national leaders hoped to instill in youth a connection to their community and nation and hopefully keep them out of trouble. Government leaders, educators, community groups, and parents knew this generation could not lose its faith in democracy or the future of capitalism in the United States was lost. Their efforts indeed restored the faith of many youths in the nation, but the onset of World War II interrupted

¹² Richard Polenburg, *War and Society: The United States, 1941-1945* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1972), 16.

¹³ Polenburg, 73.

the process. No proof exists to determine if their efforts would have been enough or if the war turned the tides.

Youths who lived through the depression learned to take life one day at a time. Although they faced the greatest threat to capitalism the country has ever experienced, few believed they did anything special. Everyone was poor. As a result, they learned modesty and frugality. The same group of youngsters who Maxine Davis named the "lost" generation in 1936 faced their "rendezvous with destiny" with courage and dignity, becoming what some now proclaim to be the "greatest" generation.

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