

Jobs for Workers on Relief in Milwaukee County, 1930-1994

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VI. Employment Programs Targeted at Young Workers from Families on Relief

During the depression the problem of unemployment was particularly acute for young people, who lacked work experience and usually showed little success in competing for those jobs available. Two major federal initiatives were developed for youth -- the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which enrolled only young men, and the National Youth Administration (NYA), which enrolled young men and women.

A. Six Civilian Conservation Corps Camps in Milwaukee County

The CCC was established as part of a "Reforestation and Relief Bill" adopted in 1933, which authorized establishment of forest camps that would employ physically fit young men, ages 17 through 28, who were single and unemployed. Men enrolled for a six month period, and could re-enroll for a total of two years. (In 1937 total CCC service was reduced to 18 months.) In spite of objections by Wisconsin Governor Philip La Follette and William Kelly, executive secretary of the Milwaukee Urban League, most of the Wisconsin camps were closed to African American men, with a segregated camp in Illinois designated a "Negro unit."¹³ (Photographs show integrated CCC crews in Milwaukee County.¹⁴) The camps were operated by the U.S. Army, followed strict regimen of discipline, and provided uniforms for the corpsmen. In Wisconsin over its nine year history, the CCC employed more than 92,000 men, including about 50,000 men from Wisconsin, at 97 camps.¹⁵

"[CCC crews] at Estabrook park cleaned about 100,000 cubic yards of rock out of the bed of the Milwaukee river for three-fourths of a mile and are now completing a \$65,000 dam with flood gates that is expected to lessen flood damage."

-- Milwaukee Journal
April 3, 1938

In Milwaukee County the Department of Outdoor Relief certified eligible young men for the CCC, opening up enrollment every four months. Federal CCC regulations allowed enrollees from non-relief families, but initially the men were selected from active relief cases, WPA cases with large families, and Aid to Dependent Children cases.¹⁶ Regulation changes allowed enrollment of youth from families not on relief but with income "below a normal living standard." In 1938, 28 percent of Milwaukee County men enrolled in CCC were from relief families, 61 percent were members of families formerly aided by the Outdoor Relief Department, and the remaining 11 percent had not received county relief.

Workers received \$5 a month, with another \$25 sent home to family dependents. The CCC check "home" was sufficient to close half of the county cases of workers on public relief, and to substantially reduce payments for the other half.¹¹⁷

Six CCC camps were operated in Milwaukee County at the request of the Park Commission: two at Honey Creek, and one each at Kletzsch, Sheridan, and Whitnall parks. (The camp at Kletzsch Park closed after six months, following construction of a dam in the Milwaukee River.) The camps employed about 200 men each, and the federal government provided equipment for heavy construction work and grading, and most costs of materials. The CCC crews laid jetties into Lake Michigan to control erosion at Sheridan Park, where the bluff had been receding at a rate of two feet a year. Other crews excavated rock and dirt and built dams on the Milwaukee River to control flooding, landscaped miles of parkway, and developed large sections of Whitnall Park. A Milwaukee Journal article described the work on the dam at Kletzsch Park.

Most of the work on the dam was done in the winter of 1936, in a mad race between bad weather and a camp of lusty CCC youths who worked day and night in eight hour shifts. They strung floodlights over the project and set up steam boilers to heat materials. The bottom of the footings were about 14 feet below the river level and only a very small opening could be provided to permit the water to flow. Had a thaw come before the work was done, melting snow and causing the river to rise, the whole project would have washed out. The youths worked against time. On the afternoon they poured their last concrete, a blizzard came -- but the work was done. The CCC had won.¹¹⁸

"Fortunately, the county had many large acreages of undeveloped park land and also had plans prepared, ready for construction. The result was that the county obtained a great amount of benefit from the CCC camps."¹¹⁹

--Eugene A. Howard,
Milwaukee County Park
Commission

"CCC crew . . . worked to move ice jams in the Milwaukee River. Lifelines were ready to be thrown from shore and the bridge if waters became too rough."¹²⁰

-- Eugene A. Howard

Examples of CCC Projects for Milwaukee County¹²¹

Sheridan and Grant Parks

Built 13 jetties to control lakeshore erosion.

Estabrook Park

Removed about 100,000 cubic yards of rock from the bed of the Milwaukee River at Estabrook Park. The rock was crushed and used for roads and dam construction.

Constructed a flood control dam at Estabrook Park, including a rock spillway and flood control gates, separated by a small island.

Whitnall Park

Developed the easterly portion of Whitnall Park, extended the drive south of College Avenue to connect with the golf entrance at South 92nd Street, constructed a 15 acre lake (excavating 120,000 cubic yards of earth), graded three islands, constructed a reinforced concrete dam faced with field stone, improved the channel of the creek north of the lake, reinforced the concrete bridge with wood railings and field stone facing, graded and graveled a parking station for the golf course, erected a service building in the parking area, developed an arboretum area with a farm house style building.

Honey Creek Parkway

Improved 225 acres of the parkway from North Avenue to Church Street, planted 10,000 shrubs and trees, built 7 bridges, constructed 5 miles of roads.

Erected 2 miles of retaining wall along the Menomonee River to halt erosion.

Constructed an overhead for the Rapid Transit over the parkway.

Menomonee River Parkway

Constructed a suspension bridge on the parkway leading into Hoyt Park.

B. National Youth Administration Sewing, Parks and Vocational Training Projects

The National Youth Administration (NYA) was established within the WPA to *"to initiate and administer a program of approved projects which shall provide relief, work relief, and employment for persons between the ages of 16 and 25 years who are no longer in regular attendance at a school requiring full time, and who are not regularly engaged in remunerative employment."*¹²² The administration operated two programs: an out-of-school work program for unemployed youth and a financial aids program to enable young people to continue their education part-time.

The Milwaukee County Department of Outdoor Relief sponsored a youth sewing project which initially employed young women ages 18 to 25 in three shifts of 70 workers each to produce clothes for families on relief and persons in county institutions. (In 1939 the numbers employed reached a high of 560 a month.) The project was described by the Outdoor Relief Department: *"Production at the beginning was limited to simple garments, and infants' layettes. Infants' dresses, nightgowns and slips, blankets and bands, boys' woolen knew pants and blouses, and girls' and children's clothing are now also produced. . . . The girls [women] are encouraged to sew for their own family needs, and are taught to weave rugs, upholstery materials, etc. The educational interest of the girls [women] was stimulated through a series of talks by recognized authorities on questions such as household arts, women's employment, labor legislation, how to apply for a job, health, family relationship, etc. A guidance counselor has been assigned on a full time basis by the W.P.A. Adult Education Project, to continue this work."*¹²³

Over time the operation was expanded to include an arrangement with the Milwaukee School administration to sew gym suits, kindergarten aprons, cooking aprons and workshop aprons, which could be sold at school bookstores on a "cost-of-material" basis. As workers gained more skills they also prepared woolen snowsuits and coats, and products were expanded to include doctors and nurses operating uniforms and hospital supplies. A weaving department was established to make upholstery material and woven rugs. The women were allowed to use the machines on their own time to sew clothes for their families and encouraged to enrolled in school courses.

"The youth problem is serious. It's harder for young people to break into industry now than it has been for several years."

-- William F. Rasche,
Milwaukee Vocational
School, 1940

*"It would be well to make [the NYA sewing project] a permanent interim school for training those least able because of economic or other handicaps, to get suitable employment, forming a bridge between school and job."*¹²⁴

-- Milwaukee County
Department of Outdoor
Relief, 1937

Wage scales for the women's sewing project varied over time. In 1936 workers received \$6 a month for personal expenses and \$14 to contribute to the family budget. The Department of Outdoor Relief strongly supported the NYA sewing project. In late 1939 the county Board of Public Welfare established a policy that if a young woman refused to accept NYA work, her family's relief budget would be reduced by the amount of the NYA employment.¹²⁵

Parks programs were used to employ young men in the NYA in Milwaukee County. According to the Park Commission, *"They cultivated shrub beds and newly planted trees, mowed lawns, raked leaves, took care of weeding and watering, did clean-up work in the parks and buildings, worked in the nursery and in the gardens at Whitnall Park, helped with some of the planting in the parks and parkways, and erected fireplaces for picnic areas. A large crew was kept at the service department making benches, picnic tables, and boats, painting, making signs, dismantling obsolete buildings, and helping with the repair and maintenance of equipment. Some of the boys [men] who had clerical training assisted with records and carried on routine office tasks. In many of the jobs individuals worked as assistants to regular park employees, affording them an opportunity to learn many of the various phases of park operation."*¹²⁶

In the summer of 1935, sixty Milwaukee men were sent to cherry-picking camps in Door County and another crew helped operate a camp for physically handicapped youth at Camp Whitcomb, thirty miles northwest of Milwaukee.¹²⁷ In Milwaukee County crews erected and operated two camps -- one at Holler Park for handicapped children and one in the Root River Parkway for African American children from needy families.

The student aid program of the NYA provided part-time jobs to young people to enable them to continue their schooling. In February 1936, Milwaukee County had 2,461 students from 53 schools on financial aid. Aid payments were based on the level of schooling, with \$6 a month paid for students attending high school.¹²⁸ Types of vocational training programs encouraged under the program are shown in a report on NYA programs in 1940.

**Report on the Milwaukee NYA Training Program: 1940
(Milwaukee County Board of Public Land Commissioners)¹²⁹**

The National Youth Administration training program in the Milwaukee area is considered one of the most efficient in the United States. As of December 4, 1940, a total of 2,087 youths were being served by N.Y.A. in the following manner:

- 489 receiving comprehensive metal training,
- 80 receiving aviation mechanic training,
- 70 receiving technical training, 31 of which are in a 20-week short-wave radio course in the Milwaukee Vocational School,
- 67 in automotive repair in West Allis and Milwaukee Vocational Schools,
- 664 in clerical and service work,
- 501 [women] receiving training in comprehensive power sewing work, and
- 216 in common labor.

The youths work 46 hours per month on production projects and go to school the balance of the time. The Vocational Schools operated by the City of Milwaukee, City of West Allis, City of Cudahy, and the City of South Milwaukee are heartily cooperating in this work.

When properly trained, all of these youths will be available for, and anxious to work in private industry situated within a reasonable distance of their place of residence. Unless employment is available, an important phase of the National Youth Administration program will not be realized. Jobs must be found for these young people when their period of training has been completed if the morale of the youth of America is to be maintained on a satisfactory plane.

VII. Wisconsin Work Programs for Unemployed Teachers

*"One of the chief aims of the WPA has been to develop in unemployed persons those skills, knowledges, and personal qualifications which will enable them to secure private employment, and the WPA adult education program has attempted to include courses and instruction directed toward this end."*¹³⁰

--State Board of Vocational and Adult Education, 1941

Throughout the Depression, the Wisconsin State Board of Vocational and Adult Education promoted the employment of out-of-work teachers to organize adult education courses in the state. In 1933 under the Civil Works Administration, approximately 900 teachers were employed with over 40,000 adults enrolled in classes. In 1934 about 1,450 unemployed Wisconsin teachers were hired under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to conduct adult education, vocational, and literacy classes for about 63,000 adults.¹³¹

When the WPA was established, projects were allowed to employ teachers who had lost their jobs and were on public relief during the depression. Other persons on relief who appeared capable of teaching adult classes were also recruited to organize course offerings. The WPA regulations initially restricted WPA teachers from supplanting or assisting with regular courses already offered by the public schools, providing courses in music or art at the public school, or providing remedial education to children.¹³²

The Board of Vocational and Adult Education served as state sponsor for adult education projects in Wisconsin, working with local sponsors, including directors of vocational schools, city superintendents of schools (in cities not having vocational schools), and county superintendents of schools for rural and village areas. Local schools were expected to offer free classroom space and loaned textbooks. The State Board screened relief clients to identify persons they believed could be trained to be effective adult education and vocational instructors. Many of the WPA instructors subsequently found regular employment as adult educators or returned to elementary and secondary teaching, which contributed to a constant turnover in staff. To train newly hired teachers and to improve the quality of adult instruction, the Board established a program of continuing in-service training, conferences on techniques for teaching adults, and bulletins on developing course outlines and lesson plans.

Monthly wage rates, which varied for urban and rural areas, were set in Milwaukee at \$55 for unskilled workers, \$65 for intermediate workers (with no experience or professional training), \$85 for skilled workers (with high school or elementary school teaching experience, or highly skilled in a given profession), and \$94 for professional and technical workers (licensed to teach, with a college degree, and senior high school or college training).

Sponsors who hired nine or more teachers from relief rolls were allowed a supervisory position, preferably filled from the relief rolls but if not, with a teacher assigned by the district WPA office. Projects with at least ten teachers could request clerical assistance.

George Hambrecht, State Director of Vocational Education, saw WPA as an opportunity to increase the skills of unemployed workers, observing, *"With this nationwide [WPA] plan to make jobs for the unemployed, no adequate funds were provided for the vocational training of the unemployed for greater vocational usefulness and for better living. In fact, requests for increased federal aid for vocational training were actually resisted most strenuously by many of those in authority."*¹³³

The Wisconsin State Board received permission from federal WPA officials to expand its existing course work in adult education, and particularly high school subjects (e.g., history, economics, English, literature, mathematics, chemistry, physics, foreign languages) targeted to factory workers, scout and recreation leaders, WPA workers and other adults. Adult education and vocational classes were developed in over 300 municipalities throughout the state, with strong emphasis placed on expanding opportunities for adult education into unserved rural areas. In 1936 about 700 WPA teachers were employed and 50,000 adults enrolled in classes; in 1937 over 800 teachers provided classes for 65,000 students.¹³⁴

Sixty WPA teachers were assigned to 43 Civilian Conservation Corps camps, where they provided grade school and high school course work and assisted CCC enrollees in qualifying for 8th grade and high school diplomas. (From 1935 to 1940, a total of 1,678 young men received their eighth grade diplomas and 112 were granted high school diplomas.)¹³⁵ Over 100 teachers provided vocational education at the CCC camps with over 10,000 workers enrolled in instruction in auto mechanics, machine shop, welding, electricity, woodwork, aviation, drafting, mechanical drawing, radio, seamanship, telegraphy, typesetting, metalwork, etc. The State Board also used available WPA teachers to expand vocational course offerings statewide in business and clerical skills. By the end of the decade, the State Board saw an increase to nearly 4,000 students in adults enrolling in Americanization classes for immigrants wishing to become naturalized citizens. These classes enrolled many adults over age 50 who had not learned to read and write English and had consequently been unable to qualify for citizenship.¹³⁶ In addition, about 75 teachers provided instruction in avocational and leisure-time activities for over 8,000 adults statewide.

*"Educational benefits to be derived were emphasized rather than the mere employment of unemployed teachers. Workers were assigned because they were qualified to give something of educational value to the communities in which they were employed."*¹³⁷

-- State Board of Vocational Education

By 1939 over 70,000 individuals in the state were enrolled in classes taught by about 650 WPA teachers.

**"Accomplishments of the WPA Education Program"¹³⁸
(State Board of Vocational and Adult Education, 1941)**

First: Needy, qualified teachers have been given employment in their profession.

Second: Adult Education has been promoted in many rural areas in this state which might have been impossible otherwise. Experiments have been made possible to determine the most feasible methods of conducting adult education programs in rural areas. These experiments will be invaluable when plans are made for permanency of adult education programs in the rural areas of this state.

Third: Schools of vocational and adult education have been enabled to experiment with new activities through the use of WPA teachers. In many cases those activities prove successful where the workers are taken over on the regular staff of the school.

Fourth: Educational opportunities are being offered to many heretofore educationally underprivileged groups including Indians, persons on relief, and workers on other WPA projects.

Fifth: Thousands of non-citizens have been given instruction which enabled them to obtain their citizenship.

At the Milwaukee Vocational School VE-ND classes were held Monday through Friday nights, with one six-hour shift starting at 9:00 p.m. and a second shift starting at 3:00 a.m..

600 instructors taught 565 defense programs, with average monthly enrollments of 8,000 students, using every training station in the 43 vocational schools in Wisconsin.¹³⁹

At the onset of World War II, WPA adult education projects focused on the nation's defense needs. The federal government established a special WPA program for Vocational Education for National Defense (VE-ND), which provided federal support for teachers, supervisors, equipment and supplies for course work preparing workers for defense industries. VE-ND training courses ran from 3 to 12 weeks and used existing classrooms in the evenings and weekends when regular vocational classes were not in session. Students received 10 week, 300 hour refresher courses in mechanics, welding, metal work, automotive repair, foundry work, engines, and other industrial skills. For the VE-ND classes, instructors were hired from private industry with at least seven years practical experience. Over half of the students were WPA workers who continued to draw WPA wages while attending school. Most of the other students were unemployed workers referred by the public employment service.¹⁴⁰

In addition, VE-ND training was provided directly on site in local factories. One history explained, *"Early in the War, the demand for workers had been so great that some factories hired untrained people. This practice resulted in damage and lowered productivity. The training-within-industry program was added to VE-ND in 1941. In Milwaukee alone, 27 war production plants had Milwaukee Vocational and Adult School instructors in-house over two years."*¹⁴¹