

Looking to the past

Division hears New Deal's controversial story

By SONJA HEGMAN

The country was in the throes of The Great Depression in 1935. It saw passage of the Social Security Act, as well as the Wagner Labor Relations Act, making collective bargaining possible as a means of maintaining labor standards. It was also the year President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration began putting people to work.

Mary Murphy knows what it's like to have Roosevelt impact your life. The DFL representative from Hermantown grew up in a house built as a part of the WPA, which was the largest agency in Roosevelt's New Deal.

"I am a product of growing up thinking that

Franklin Roosevelt was some kind of a hero," Murphy said during a meeting of the House Cultural and Outdoor Resources Finance Division, which she chairs. "Actually, I thought Franklin Roosevelt was a house builder."

There were 84 houses built in Murphy's area

in the 1930s. This project provided two- and three-bedroom houses that were available with either 5- or 10-acre lots. Murphy said her parents were eligible for a house because at the time, they had four children and a job — her father was a steel worker at the Duluth Steel Plant — but he didn't make a lot of money.

Her parents applied for a house along with about 200 other families, and their names were pulled out of a hat during the first drawing. "My dad said it was the wrong house," Murphy said. "My dad said he already had a two-bedroom house, and he needed a three-bedroom house."

The Murphys put their name back in the hat for the second drawing a week-and-a-half later. "And lo and behold, at the second drawing, Lloyd and Gertrude Murphy's names were pulled out again, and it was matched with a three-bedroom house and 10 acres," Murphy said. "That is the only home I've ever lived in and I've never been away longer than six weeks."

Murphy has kept the house true to its era. As a child when neighbors started getting more

First Reading continued on page 4



Rep. Mary Murphy, at about age 8, stands in front of her New Deal house in Hermantown. She has lived in the house her entire life.

Photo courtesy of Rep. Mary Murphy

modern looking “fancy” kitchens, Murphy’s father would say, “Franklin Roosevelt built this house and this is the way he wanted it.’ So you can imagine what I thought when I went to school and my second- or third-grade teacher was talking about President Franklin Roosevelt and I said, ‘How could Franklin Roosevelt be president when he was the guy that built my house?’”

New Deal history

Suddenly, what Hy Berman has been teaching for more than 40 years has become very relevant.

A history professor at the University of Minnesota, Berman has been educating students on Roosevelt’s New Deal. He said today’s students “thought that this was so irrelevant that they didn’t pay any attention to it.” With today’s economic troubles, a thing or two could be learned, he said.

Roosevelt entered office in 1933 in probably the worst economic crisis in our nation’s history, Berman said. This crisis had already been in existence for more than two years. Unemployment had reached 25 percent to 30 percent and underemployment was at 30 percent to 40 percent.



Works Progress Administration rock cutters prepare rock for a stone wall connecting the state fairgrounds’ race track.

Photograph Collection 8/18/1936, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

“So it was really a very disastrous time,” he said. “Between the time Roosevelt was elected and when he became president, the bank system collapsed, so he was faced with an immediate problem.”

In an attempt to solve the problems the nation faced, it was thought that recovery could be done by putting control of the industries into the hands of the large corporations and

their leaders, but it just didn’t work, Berman said. The result was a major period of upheaval and discontent that reached a peak in 1934 all over the nation, including the Minneapolis truck strike.

Work relief was only an afterthought during the deep economic depression of the winter of 1933-34. Public works was considered a necessity, but it wasn’t immediately effective for economic stimulation. The Public Works Administration was involved with large projects, like the Triborough Bridge (renamed the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Bridge) in New York, or the Bay Bridge between San Francisco and Oakland, but these kinds of projects were not immediately effective.

In 1935, the nature of the New Deal shifted to the belief that there was a necessity to increase public spending to stimulate the economy.

“The public spending was going to be done in the way of expanding job opportunities for people, making work, even if the work was to be funded and the federal government was to be the employer of last resort,” Berman said. This was done through the WPA starting in 1935.

It was through these work projects that Murphy’s house was built.

The WPA was not only an agency that put the usual kind of blue-collar workers to work. Berman said the belief was that other people — like artists, teachers and historians — were also put to work in different kinds of projects that had an effect on art, music and literature. For instance, as part of a WPA project for the Library of Congress, historians were put to work recording the lives of slaves.

“It was not only the building of bridges and building of your homes and of the roads and the infrastructure and

the other light industries, like seamstresses working in different kinds of activities,” Berman said. “But also the works of the artist and musician, the teacher and the historian were of great value.”

There is a tendency among some economists to believe, he said, that the New Deal didn’t work.

“It didn’t get us out of the Depression, but it

put people to work,” Berman said. “Getting us out of the Depression was a function of other kinds of activities. It stimulated the economy, and the nation was better off after 1935 than it was before.”

In 1935 and 1936, 65,000 people were employed by the WPA on 1,700 projects in Minnesota.

The New Deal in Minnesota

In 1932, there was massive unemployment on the Iron Range.

Steel plants in the country were operating at 22 percent of capacity, while 78 percent were cold. If the rate of steel consumption continued, there would be enough ore stockpiled at the steel plants and at the mines — especially on the Iron Range— to feed the steel plants for five years, which meant there was no reason for iron miners to be working. Iron Range unemployment during the Depression was at 70 percent.

“It gives you a sense of how devastating that really was,” said Pam Brunfelt, instructor of history and political science at Vermillion Community College in Ely.

Although it did not end the Depression, taking a quote from President Obama, she said FDR “gave the American people the audacity of hope.”

A ray of hope came in the form of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that was established by Congress in 1933 as a measure of the New Deal program. Unlike the WPA, which employed adults, the corps provided work and vocational training for unemployed single young men through conserving and developing the country’s natural resources.

Most of the CCC camps in Minnesota were in the Chippewa and Superior national forests, state forests, state parks and one private forest, Brunfelt said. “There are still remnants of a camp in Royalton.”

Sixty-one camps were built across the state, with nine in farming areas or flood control areas. Two of the camps were in Otter Tail County, where some of the men cleaned up the Ottertail River. Soil conservation work was also done by the CCC, along with tree and seedling planting.

In the program’s first six months, Brunfelt said the men fought forest fires, repaired or installed 165 miles of telephone lines, created 48 fire breaks, cleared 3,914 acres of timber slash and 211 miles of dead or damaged timber, built 20 dams and 25 bridges, inventoried 12,708 acres of forest, made improvements to beaches and lakeshores, and trimmed 1,508 acres of trees. 🌲