Up In The Woods:

Shell Lake During The Great Depression, 1928-1941

Senior Thesis

History 489: Research Seminar

Department of History

Ryan Travis Mikula

November 2015

Copyright for this work is owned by the author. This digital version is published by McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire with the consent of the author
Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................. iii
Lists of Figures and Tables ................................................................................................................. iv
Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 1
Background ........................................................................................................................................ 2
Historiography ................................................................................................................................... 3
Part I: Impact, 1930-1933 .................................................................................................................. 6
Part II: Perseverance, 1934-1937 ....................................................................................................... 14
Part III. Rebuilding with War on the Horizon, 1938-1941................................................................. 21
Conclusions ........................................................................................................................................ 25
Works Cited........................................................................................................................................ 31
Abstract

The period between 1930 and 1940 saw the worst economic period in American History. In the northern woodlands of Wisconsin, the Village of Shell Lake fought to survive. Before the Depression, the village was quickly becoming one of the most prominent towns in Washburn County. But at the turn of the decade it quickly lost over 10 percent of its population with a heavy portion of the rest left unemployed. The village represents many of the general themes across the nation in regards to the Depression as follows. Its business sector mainly dealt with manufacturing and general labor industries as well as farmers whom were all dealt major blows economically. In tandem with the nation’s bank system collapse, The Bank of Shell Lake shut down in 1931 and left the citizens without access to bank support. Without financial access, the village crumbled. In this paper, I will be analyzing the efforts made by the Village of Shell Lake during the Great Depression. I will also be presenting data and information on the extent to which Shell Lake and Washburn County received aid from the Government. And finally, I will be comparing Shell Lake to the national trends of the Depression.
Figures

Figure 1  Map of Northwest Wisconsin .............................................................. 4
Figure 2  A Hurry Call, Washburn County Register ........................................... 9
Figure 3  Shell Lake State Bank Advertisement, Washburn County Register ......... 14
Figure 4  The Civilian Conservation Corps, A Guide to CCC Camps in Wisconsin ... 18
Figure 5  “Imagine me, steering a Destroyer!” Washburn County Register .......... 21
Figure 6  Comparison of Assets, Liabilities, and Investment Assets, 1928 & 1939 .... 23
Figure 7  Graph of National Unemployment Percentage ..................................... 26
Figure 8  National Total Livestock Purchases .................................................... 27
Figure 9  National Expenditures on farm inputs: 1928-1940 ......................... 28
Introduction

As the first rosy streaks of the dawn of 1960 appear on the horizon, I lay down my pen, knowing that some eager interested person (probably not yet born), will pick up and carry on from where I have left off.

-A. L. Stouffer, author of The Story of Shell Lake

In the spring of 1934, deep in the northwestern Wisconsin heartland halfway between Superior and Eau Claire, the rural village of Shell Lake had a problem on its hands that it had been dealing with for years. During the months without snow on the ground or on their houses, the citizens encountered a recurring danger. On particularly windy days, flaming pockets of sawdust akin to fireballs flew from the air outward from the local boat factory. Naturally, this caused concern for the citizens who remembered when, 18 years prior, they watched in horror as the village High School burned to the ground.¹ But, without the funds to do much about it, the residents were left to hope that they were lucky enough for the wind not to blow the flaming sawdust towards their home or business.

However, a solution was on its way. As part of the federal efforts orchestrated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the village attained enough aid to support the employment of 21 men in an attempt to empty the boat factory sawdust. Desperate for work, these 21 men eagerly participated at an average 15 hours per week. While in the midst of the overwhelming financial ruin brought upon by the Great Depression, 15 hours of work per week was a reprieve for the unemployed but physically able men and additionally worked to ease the concerns of the citizens over the matter. Upon seeing the success of the project, the Works Progress Administration and Civil Works Administration continuously

¹ A. L. Stouffer, The Story of Shell Lake (The Washburn County Historical Society: Washburn County Register, 1961), 118.
provided opportunities to the individuals struggling within the rural county. With businesses suffering and all but three banks closed within the county, these efforts provided the reprieve needed to maintain the livelihood of the village.

The passage above illustrates the far-reaching efforts made by the federal government to reach the very desperate Village of Shell Lake. These events occurred during the Great Depression, largely considered the greatest financial ruin of the United States’ history. The depression brought many families and individuals into financial struggle with an unemployment rate of 23 percent during the worst year, 1932. History books often relay the effects of the depression on big cities and the farmers caught in the dust bowl. While these are important areas to analyze since they impacted larger proportions of people, the rural areas of states outside the dust bowl came across similar hardships.

Having lived in rural Shell Lake for almost all my life, I wanted to discover what happened to my hometown during the Great Depression. How much did the depression impact Shell Lake? Did the federal and state government provide enough aid? To what degree were Shell Lake’s experiences similar to the rest of the nation? In this paper I will be chronicling Shell Lake through the depression to find the answers to these questions.

**Background:**

For those not familiar with northwestern Wisconsin, some information is necessary. It is a beautiful area filled with trees, rivers, lakes, and animals. Washburn County in particular is filled with hills and valleys littered with a mixture of trees ranging from oak to pine. Shell Lake holds all these characteristics. In the summer, it is common to see boats race across the lake as the residents and tourists enjoy the expansive body of water, and when winter arrives, boats are replaced with snowmobiles and ice-fishing shacks. It is a place of secret beauty, hidden in the expanses of the northern forests. As citizens settled in the northern regions of Wisconsin in the mid to late 19th century,
farming and woodcutting quickly became the driving forces behind the area’s economy. As the southern cities such as Milwaukee and Madison grew, people also began to gravitate to Superior, Minneapolis, and Eau Claire. As such, individuals settled in the areas between these cities and in the area halfway between Eau Claire and Superior, Shell Lake was formed.


To Shell Lake’s benefit, it resides within close proximity to Spooner, which was and remains today, the most populated Washburn County municipality. Spooner had established its manufacturing sector which drew citizens looking for work in the years before the depression. There are 964 lakes and 700 miles of rivers just within the county which made for easy transport within the logging industry well
before the rise of automobiles in the 1920s. During the prosperous 1920s and the rise of automobiles, with Spooner’s economy progressing, Shell Lake rose along with it. A train track also ran through Shell Lake alongside highway 63 which provided additional means of transportation for businesses in the area.

The lack of human development enabling them to cut down trees almost at will, combined with access to bodies of water and the railroad worked in the favor of logging and manufacturing industries. Perhaps some of the land in Washburn County could be classified as ‘cutover’ which, “usually refers to the logged-over counties of northern Wisconsin, which were characterized by land ill-suited to agriculture, high rates of tax delinquency and land abandonment, a sparse population, and a low standard of living.” But, Shell Lake’s agriculture industry was strong proportionally, and the area emphasized farming as a whole.

Shell Lake was a cohesive unit, and during the 1920s, the village created a handful of buildings that cultivated a sense of pride throughout the community. “The Lakeview Hotel building is an advertisement of our town. The Bank of Shell Lake building is the latest in banking conveniences and as the banks are the measure of our prosperity this building speaks of the growth, development, and progress of our community.” Shell Lake’s prominence was rising, with a population of approximately 920 by the end of the decade.

---


When the stock market crashed on October 29, 1929, Shell Lake was carrying on as it would any other day. While Wall Street crumbled, and banks began to fail across the nation, citizens of Shell Lake were preparing for the coming winter during which temperatures often dropped well below zero degrees Fahrenheit. The 1920s had been a prosperous decade for the village, and its people were looking forward to ‘prosperity just around the corner’\(^6\). Yet, even while President Hoover insisted the calamity would pass quickly, Shell Lake began to feel the oncoming depression.

**Historiography**

Due to the nature of this project, a large majority of my research for this paper relied on primary sources. Aside from Eau Claire and Superior, it is rare to come across a scholarly source about Shell Lake or Washburn County along any time-frame in history. As a result, secondary sources were used mostly to supplement claims about Shell Lake within the greater context of Wisconsin during the Great Depression and even the Great Depression itself. One of the key secondary sources used was Paul Glad’s *History of Wisconsin: Volume 5: War, a New Era, and Depression 1914-1940*. The book is heavily focused on Madison and its efforts to combat the Depression, but it does have a section that talks about northwestern Wisconsin which I used to piece together my narrative. This source was used to supplement my knowledge. In order to get a real sense of what happened to Shell Lake during the depression, I had to research the sources myself. In the Superior Area Research Center is a collection of Washburn County records including county board proceedings, drought relief records, and audit reports. These sources allowed me to gather data on the financial conditions of the county and Shell Lake in general.

---

\(^6\) “Review of the Year 1930 at Home and in Other Lands,” *Washburn County Register*, January 3, 1931.
The Story of Shell Lake by A.L. Stouffer is particularly effective because he recollects the Great Depression during Shell Lake as it happened from his point of view. Stouffer lived through the Depression and was one of the key citizens of Shell Lake during its growth before the depression. Due to its nature as an eye-witness account, his claims should be considered with a bit of uncertainty, but for the most part, what he discusses sheds light upon the economic and social climate of the village. The Washburn County Register provided the most information possible for this paper. It contains a plethora of information ranging from county financial reports to social opinion on the banks. Without the Washburn County Register it would be likely impossible to put together this research.

There are some shortcomings with this research that I would like to address: first, throughout the records, some years were missing. Of the Washburn County Audits 1936, 1938, and 1940 were missing, the Drought Relief Records only consisted of the years 1936 and 1937, there is a gap in the County Board proceedings and papers between 1928 and 1931, and the Board of Supervisors consisted of years 1928, 1930, 1932, and 1936-1941. Additionally, I dealt with a limited time researching these files in the Superior archives. As a result, there are some small gaps in the information presented. One of these gaps was the end to the depression’s effects on Shell Lake.

The Washburn County Register’s mention of the depression simply suddenly ceased and transformed into narratives over World War II along with regular news about the comings and goings of the various county towns and cities. To supplement this narrative I sought out several sources: Martin Melosi’s, “The Great Depression, World War II, and Public Works”, Aimee R. Dechter and Glen H. Elder Jr.’s, “World War II Mobilization in Men’s Work Lives: Continuity or Disruption for the Middle Class?”, and Christina D. Romer’s, “What Ended the Great Depression?” to get a sense of what was occurring throughout the nation and compare that to my findings on Shell Lake to complete my narrative. Since this paper is largely socio-economic, there is a minor amount of analysis on the state of agriculture.
purchases for farmers during the Depression as well as employment rates. Certain statistics such as Shell Lake’s unemployment rate were unfortunately not found during my research.

Part 1

Impact: The Depression hits Shell Lake, 1930-1934

By the beginning of 1930, just two months after the crash, Shell Lake began to truly suffer. In The Story of Shell Lake, author Albert Stouffer, resident of Shell Lake during the 1930s and onward, recounted the conditions by stating, “The years of depression, which swept the nation during the early 1930’s were coming up and Shell Lake was as hard hit as any municipality.”7 Due to the rural nature of Washburn County, there were scarce opportunities for work. The economy of the county largely depended on unskilled labor jobs such as lumbering, railroad work, and miscellaneous manufacturing. As the depression worsened the decline in demand for products dropped and subsequently these industries suffered, and with few other opportunities, many individuals were left unemployed and vagrant. Farmers also saw a steep decline in the prices of crops. In a review of the year, the Washburn County Register stated, “Overproduction by farmers and manufacturers and timidity of consumers resulted in business depression and unemployment that lasted throughout the year, despite all efforts to restore prosperity. The great drought played its evil part, affecting conditions in the entire country.”8

Some of the unemployed were fortunate enough to find shelter amongst their relatives and friends due to the close-knit and family-oriented nature of Shell Lake’s rural community. However, as early as November 13th, 1930, the board moved to permit the Village of Shell Lake to use the County Jail


8 “Review of the year: domestic” Washburn County Register, January 3, 1931.
as a Village Jail to handle cases of vagrancy.\(^9\) Clearly, without access to job security a handful of Shell Lake citizens were left to the streets and being homeless during the harsh winter of northwest Wisconsin would likely result in death for these individuals. Being placed in the county jail would at least give them reprieve from the below-zero temperature and starvation, conditions of homelessness that they would likely wish to avoid. Yet, there were others unaccounted for, living perhaps secluded from community life. In regards to the Great Depression, “The Iron River Pioneer found that in northern forested areas, a surprising number of ‘shackers’ had taken to the woods after losing their jobs. Building shanties for themselves, they had laid in whatever supplies they could afford, and with some hunting and trapping they expected to survive the cold winter months.”\(^{10}\)

The lack of access to job security caused many of the village citizens to be in dire need of government assistance. However, Washburn County was scrambling as well. Without people to pay taxes, the circumstances called for Shell Lake to cut back. For example, according to the Washburn County board proceedings and papers, on November 5\(^{th}\), 1930 a judge recommended that several pensions be reduced or discontinued. Several citizens’ Child Welfare and Blind Aid pensions were to be discontinued, or reduced by amounts such as $10.00, $20.00 or even $30.00 per month.\(^{11}\) Losing access to pension funds or having them reduced was by no means an ideal situation for said individuals, but in the wake of financial ruin, the county seemingly saw them as necessary procedures.

Having lived in Shell Lake during the Depression, Stouffer recollects the condition of the village, “The local newspaper was full of ‘mortgaged land sales’. For several years there were no taxes collected

\(^9\) Washburn County (Wis.), County Board Proceedings and Papers, Board of Supervisors, 1930.

\(^{10}\) Paul W. Glad, The History of Wisconsin: Volume 5, War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940. (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin), 364.

\(^{11}\) Washburn County (Wis.), County Board Proceedings and Papers, Board of Supervisors, 1930.
to run the village, but it got by in a fashion with the gas tax and other taxes received from the state. People who could not raise tax money did no repairs on their property. The town looked shabby and defeated.” 12 This occurrence was not present in just Shell Lake, but across the region. “In the rural Midwest, foreclosures and sheriff’s auctions were common. Farmers postponed purchasing tractors and combines long after they became available because there was no way to afford them. Electric lights and indoor plumbing were present in towns but did not extend to the surrounding farms.” 13 Clearly, farms were in trouble, and needed financial assistance.


Farmers worked hard enough before the Depression, but when crop prices fell drastically across the nation combined with droughts even in northwestern Wisconsin, conditions worsened. President Hoover, to his credit, realized the peril of farmers especially in regards to the farming situation in states caught in the dust bowl and responded via programs such as the Farm Relief Board in order to boost farmers. Hoover also pushed for congress to appropriate over one hundred million dollars to aid unemployment and loan money to farmers. However, of the over 100 million promised by Congress to aid farmers, 75,000,000 dollars were actually made available for loans, only $621,000 were applied for by Wisconsin farmers, with just $7,058 of it going to Washburn County farmers. Without the lack of demand for crops and inadequate compensation, many farmers in northwest Wisconsin simply did the best they could to prepare for the winter.

In 1931, many banks across the nation had closed or were in the process of closing. The condition of the Shell Lake Bank, a vital aspect of the village’s financial state, was quickly succumbing to a similar fate. According to Stouffer, “The Bank of Shell Lake closed its doors June 16th, 1931, leaving the village ‘broke’, having to borrow $500.00 from the Sarona Bank.” With the collapse of the bank, the citizens of Shell Lake were left without access to their money stored in the Bank, and with the hardships encountered by businesses, over ten percent of the population fled. The Washburn County Register acknowledged in reference to the news, “the closing of most any bank causes much hardship and

14 “Review of the year 1930: domestic,” Washburn County Register, January 3, 1931.
15 “Many Loans Made To Washburn Co. Farmers,” Washburn County Register, June 4, 1932.
17 Ibid.
originates bitterness and grief....It has shaken the publics’ faith.” However, knowing that the village needed a bank to prosper, the remainder of the citizens, worked almost right away to begin the process of creating a new bank.\textsuperscript{18}

Of the 13 banks open in the county before the Great Depression, only 3 stood standing by 1931, and this was not an occurrence in just Washburn County. Even Eau Claire, one of the largest of the northwestern Wisconsin areas alongside Superior had only one functioning bank by mid-1931.\textsuperscript{19} But, efforts were being made with help from the \textit{Washburn County Register}, particularly, to regain trust towards banks. The register often pointed out various ways in which bankers were assisting the county’s economy by supporting agriculture through work in the Extension Service, 4-H Club, and Drought Relief. One passage, for example, states, “Our people must be brought to realize that the welfare of our country depends upon its banking system, that the strength of the banking system depends upon the public’s faith and understanding and the vast majority of banks, because of faithful service rendered, even through the whole of this general breakdown, had the right to expect the trust and confidence of the people.”\textsuperscript{20}

With the financial situation continuing its downward spiral, the need for government aid was rising as people were in need of provisions. With many pensions reduced or discontinued, a member of the Washburn County board petitioned for the improvement of pension directives, “Experience has shown that the number of families coming under the mother’s pension law, has been increasing each year and it is my opinion that by reason of the present depression, there may be an even more than

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} “Local Bank Closes It’s Doors Tuesday,” \textit{Washburn County Register}, June 20, 1931.
\item \textsuperscript{19} “Eau Claire Banks Close,” \textit{Washburn County Register}, September 26, 1931.
\item \textsuperscript{20} In the \textit{Washburn County Register} on ‘The Public’s Part’ during the depression encouraging the public to renew their confidence in the country’s economy, September 30, 1933.
\end{itemize}
moral increase in the number of families who may be able to show themselves entitled to a mother’s pension this coming year.” 21 By the end of 1931, the situation had not improved, in fact, it seemed to be getting worse; the county was not receiving the aid it needed.

Shell Lake was well aware of the damaging costs of the financial situation. And yet, in the face of this adversity, they were largely determined to push through. In the 1931 Board Proceedings and Papers for Washburn County a supportive narrative was penned, “We must not forget that any easy method of sliding along in 1932, will be that much added to next year’s burden.” 22 Indeed, many citizens were discouraged by the economic situation, but many also recognized that there would be no cutting corners.

Businesses continued to suffer, and to make matters worse, the citizens of Shell Lake did not have enough money to purchase goods from these companies. It was a vicious cycle; the citizens did not have enough money to purchase goods from companies which caused companies to fail and close down leading to a decline in job opportunity and government money via taxes. One of, if not the lone bright spot in regards to business, was the Shell Lake Boat Company. The Washburn County Register reported in March of 1932 that, “during the month of February the company received orders totaling 65 boats. We believe that a great deal of credit is due the Shell Lake Boat Company for the relentless efforts they have made to maintain their force in the face of most uncertain business condition.” 23 Interestingly, in August of ’32, the Wisconsin Hydro Electric Company announced they would, “submit to the Public Service Commission for formal approval, a temporary relief plan for their Rural customers. The desperate nature of the present economic situation warrants, in their estimation, some drastic

21 Washburn County (Wis.), County Board Proceedings and Papers, Board of Supervisors, 1931.

22 Washburn County (Wis.), County Board Proceedings and Papers, Board of Supervisors, 1931.

23 “Shell Lake Boat Co. Going Good,” Washburn County Register, March 5, 1932.
action and this will enable such customers as are affected a change to cut down on their electric bills providing they are willing and able to conserve on energy usage.” 24 Whether this was actually a decision grounded in generosity or not, this move provided a needed boost to the citizens of Shell Lake.

Although they were limited by the Depression, the citizens of Shell Lake were active agents towards bring about positive change to their society. By February 1st, 1932, just 8 months after the Shell Lake Bank closed, organization and plans for a new one had been completed with locals such as E.R. Hering, A.J. Plahn, and W.B. Hansen among others connected to these efforts. 25 These efforts demonstrate that Shell Lake’s citizens were not idle and were not just waiting for government assistance. They were working to encourage their children, and took matters into their own hands in order to reestablish a banking presence. However, in spite of these efforts, debt continued to rise for the rural village and schools began to suffer as Stouffer recalls: “The years 1930, ’31, and ’32 show delinquent taxes increasing. In 1933, part of the school tax was not even collected. Excess roll now $9859.09, largest in the county. Schools have closed in many towns.” 26 Additionally across Wisconsin, by 1932, a total of 8,904 families with 21,141 children under 16 years of age were maintained by special state aid to dependent children with an increase of $180,509.19 or 8.1 percent in expenditures from the previous year. 27 However, only 43 families received child welfare within Washburn County. 28

Government aid took some time to get to Shell Lake. In fact, it took until about 1933 for real job creating assistance to reach the village. By then, there were reports such as, “The Civil Works program

24 “Relief Plan Affects Higher Minimum Charge,” Washburn County Register, August 13, 1932.
25 “Shell Lake To Have A First National Bank Next Month,” Washburn County Register, January 16, 1932.
27 “From Our Observer Fred L. HolmesWhats Transpiring Around The Capital,” Washburn County Register, 1933.
28 Washburn County (Wis.), County Board Proceedings and Papers, Board of Supervisors, 1932.
for this county, with directory, Andrew E. Kennedy in charge, is progressing nicely and beginning to function smoothly,” and “As a result of a recent conference between veterans’ officials, announcement is made to the effect that 600 veterans from Wisconsin are eligible for employment in the conservation corps for a period of six months” coming out of the Washburn County Register. The Civil Works Program, ambitious in its mission to mitigate unemployment, sought to create 68,000 jobs going into 1934 with 388 of those jobs going to Washburn County.

Many of these efforts can be attributed to Franklin Delano Roosevelt who had recently been elected President. Roosevelt and his associates quickly engaged in various federal aid projects. On September 23rd, 1933, the Washburn County Register reported, “it has been gratifying indeed the response which has come to our efforts to promote the National Recovery Act in the state of Wisconsin. In a number of communities, all the employers and all the consumers have signed the President’s Agreement.” Conditions seemed to begin to look optimistic with Roosevelt as President. Wages were increasing; employment began to increase, and perhaps above all, there was a real sense of optimism forming. This notion is supported by Henry Ford’s statement in the Washburn County Register,

A great thing has occurred amongst us. We have made a complete turn-around, and at least America’s face is toward the future. Three years—1929 to 1932—we Americans looked backward. All our old financial and political machinery was geared to pull us out of the depression by the same door through which we entered. We thought it simply a case of going back the way we came. It failed. We now realize that the way out is forward—through it.

29 “County Civil Works Progressing Nicely,” Washburn County Register, December 9, 1933.
30 “Emergency Relief Work For Vets,” Washburn County Register, June 17, 1933.
31 “388 Jobless Men In County To Get Work,” Washburn County Register, November 25, 1933.
33 Ibid.
34 Henry Ford addresses the financial situation by advocating for progression. Washburn County Register, 1933.
Part II

Perseverance: As aid arrives, Shell Lake fights through the Depression, 1934-1937

Figure 5. Shell Lake State Bank Advertisement, *Washburn County Register*, December 15, 1934.

Through the first four years of the Great Depression, with the hard work and perseverance of R.L. Tarbox, E. R. Hering, E. R. Miller, Monroe Todd, C. L. Lewis Jr., L. W. Allen, A. J. Plahn, and C. C. Coe, the Bank of Shell Lake reopened on November 7th, 1934. A report on the opening is as follows, “It appears that the bank will be opened for business in the very near future. This will be a new bank in every particular. It will have no notes, either receivable or payable. Its only assets on the opening day

---

will be $27,500.00 in cash, with no liabilities.”

The opening of the Shell Lake State Bank was a source of pride amongst many in the Shell Lake community, and signaled improvement in the village’s efforts to combat the depression, but the bank’s work had just begun. After seeing their finances disappear via the crashing banks, how were people supposed to trust in the bank system? They had just spent the previous three years seeing banks across the county close, and to make matters worse, there were several trials against bank workers. One occurred just 6 miles away, in Spooner, the year before when the Washburn County Register reported, “J.D. Thomas, former president of the defunct Spooner State Bank, was brought before Judge L. J. Jones in First Municipal court in this city last Tuesday after being served with a warrant issued on complaint of a depositor of the bank, charging that he allowed, permitted and accepted money on deposit from depositors, knowing the bank to be insolvent or unsafe.”

As the bank worked to regain trust, federal aid in the form of the Civil Works Administration and the Farm Credit Administration filtered in. “A total of $164,400 of Federal land bank and Land Bank Commissioner’s farm mortgage loans was made in Washburn County, Wisconsin, from June 1, 1933 to May 1, 1934. Of this total, farmers in Washburn County used approximately $133,700 or 81.3 percent to refinance their indebtedness.” Being able to pay off debts provided a much needed reprieve for farmers.

As the Dust Bowl raged through the Great Plains and garnered a majority of the Government’s conservation efforts, the droughts of 31’ and 32’ in Wisconsin not only decreased productivity dramatically for farmers, but also cultivated what Michael Goc described as, “extremely favorable

36 “Our New Bank,” Washburn County Register, October 6, 1934.
37 “Former Spooner Banker Brought Into Court,” Washburn County Register, November 18, 1933.
38 “Farm Loans,” Washburn County Register, June 2, 1934.
conditions for an explosion of insect pests in the northern half of Wisconsin” which only added to the issues farmers experienced. The battle against insects is one that has created ecological damages throughout the nation in the form of pesticides. It is a serious problem for farmers in any time period, in a time of financial uncertainty; northern Wisconsin’s farmers encountered an assault from cut worms, army worms, corn ear worms, and grasshoppers. Wisconsin attempted to remedy the issue with an insect-control program, but due to the restrictions caused by the Depression it ‘experienced mixed results’. Aside from the minimal amount of loan money received from the federal government, and the semi-effectiveness of the program, Washburn County farmers were left to fend for themselves.

Outside the agriculture sector, the Civil Works Administration’s (C.W.A.) steadfast efforts chipped tirelessly away at Shell Lake’s financial situation. It worked to provide jobs mostly in the form of beneficial projects. Progression in their efforts was made evident in the *Washburn County Register* which relayed, “There were 881 men on the C.W.A. payrolls in Washburn County. In April 1934, country relief offices were opened in Spooner, Minong and Shell Lake.” According to Stouffer, government projects for Shell Lake included, “cleaning out saw-dust pockets at the boat factory, building a football field in the schoolhouse hollow, and building a school gymnasium.” All these improvements reflected President Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’ agenda; provide relief for the unemployed through public works. In doing so, the citizens were able to generate an income that could be used to pay off debts and purchase goods which in turn boosted the local economy while simultaneously ameliorating aspects of the village.

---


42 Ibid.
In addition to C.W.A. projects, various other areas of aid were coming to fruition such as the Public Education Commission, the Constructive Customer Relations program, and the Agricultural Commission, all of which worked to improve bank relations with the community. Additionally, the northwest woodland was seen as an area in need of conservation. As such, organizations such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) worked to expand their program in order to prevent fires, and restore water levels. However, even while these programs worked to employ citizens, the economic situation seemed to flat line. A vast majority of funds received by citizens were largely being used to pay off debts or saved for later hardships. Conditions had improved from ‘30-’34 but had not returned to the 1920’s prosperity.

43 A section of the August 10 1935 issue relays efforts being made to ‘create better understanding regarding banks’ as they worked to restore the shattered confidence of their previous investors. Washburn County Register.

The years 1935 and 1936 advanced similarly. Projects such as sewer shoveling, ditch digging, sawdust removal, and fire prevention filled the employment possibilities. While these projects were perhaps not ideal, they were far better than nothing, and while the nation still lingered within the effects of the depression, conditions were not nearly as bad as they had been during ‘32 and ‘33. By, 1937 The Civilian Conservation Corps stepped in also to play a hand in assisting Washburn County residents, particularly young adults. On September 16th the Washburn County Register reported, “the CCC was formerly a strictly relief program but recently has been changed to an educational and employment activity, it offers a real work opportunity to young men in Washburn County who need a job but have not been able to get one.”45 These jobs largely consisted of parks and forest management,

45 “New CCC Enrollment Open To Washburn Boys,” Washburn County Register, September 16, 1937.
but still provided reprieve for young citizens looking for work. A large aspect of parks and forest management focused on the lakes within these areas. The lakes, rivers, and streams had dried up through the course of the years and the Works Progress Administration decided to make efforts toward replenishing the water level in Shell Lake. “The project to put water into our lakes has been surveyed, the cost paid by the club, and it is in the hands of the Highway Commission. It looks favorable and if it is done, the lake will slowly come back to its old time stage. This project is quite simple, but it means most of all to us.”

Despite all these efforts farmers were still dealing with high prices and low return. The Washburn County Register reported that, “Wisconsin farmers are now back where they were a year ago, so far as the things for which they can trade their farm produce is concerned. This is partly because farm prices are slumping but mostly because of the increased cost of things that Wisconsin farmers need to buy.” This impacted Shell Lake due to its high farming population, and because farming conditions were failing to improve appropriately, the economy stagnated.

Despite stagnation in the agriculture industry, at long last, in 1937, Shell Lake saw real improvements to their livelihood. Several houses were being remodeled, and the Apple River Mill company was working to build a base of operations for their business. Likewise, the Shell Lake Creamery Association had attained total liabilities and net worth of $50,769,47 and the Washburn County Register reported that over 200 traffic officers patrolled the highways with the year 1938 seeing the, “largest force of traffic officers on duty that Wisconsin has ever seen”. Moreover, by 1937, the

46 “Federal Projects,” Washburn County Register, March 25, 1937.
47 “Farmers In Same Predicament,” Washburn County Register, 1937.
48 “Many Improvements In Shell Lake Properties,” Washburn County Register, 1937.
49 “Shell Lake Co-Operative Creamery Association Financial Statement,” Washburn County Register, 1937.
50 “200 Traffic Officers To Patrol Highways,” Washburn County Register, December 30, 1937.
Bank of Shell Lake had rebounded and contained $6,523.55 dollars on behalf of Washburn County. So while there were some sectors of the county’s economy that were either seeing regression or stagnation, there were still improvements being made which signaled signs of encouragement for the citizens of Shell Lake.

Still, there was significant aid being dispersed amongst the county. In the early months of 1937, between January and April, about 128 children received aid at an average of $12.40 per child for the month. In the same amount of time, old age assistance doled out on average $17.49 per case. These two programs alone cost the county $39,755.75. Throughout 1937, Washburn County received funds for a handful of projects. In the Washburn County Audit reported a general fund of $200,214.85, a highway fund of $54,029.83, funds of $428.32 and $258.88 for the county schools, $339.59 for the Boys’ and Girls’ clubs, and $9,740.51 for the County Forest Reserve fund. Overall, the county received $265,139.78 in funds. One of the key funds going toward the county resonates with the New Deal directives orchestrated by President Roosevelt; the highway fund. By the end of 1937, Shell Lake had reason to hope. Job opportunities were appearing and sectors of business were experiencing improvements. Perhaps there was light beyond the tunnel after all.

Part III: Rebuilding with War on the Horizon, 1938-1941


52 “Aid to Dependent Children,” Washburn County Audit reports, 1937.

53 Washburn Country (Wis.), Washburn County Audit reports, 1937.
By 1938 Shell Lake began to expand upon the improvements of 37' within the business sector as two lots near the courthouse and turned into an apartment house by Paul Solt. Additionally, a bowling alley and recreation center is built on Main Street by Peter Mahringer, while a tavern is started by Walter Ek. After eight years of uncertainty and trial, the citizens of Shell Lake are able to ease into a form of life they experienced before the Depression. The Washburn County Register by this time contained an emphasis on positive events such as a report on a ‘Chuch Bazaar and Supper’ during which, “Miss Marie Kennedy won the $20 donated by W. F. Ek, Shell Lake Boat Company, Rude Dahl, Shell Lake

---

Bank, J. M. Smith company, Shell Lake Recreation Pariors, Shell Lake Drug store and Shell Lake Hotel.”

This passage illustrates the increases in prosperity Shell Lake was experiencing: several companies were contributing to the community in a manner they would not have done just a couple years previous.

By 1939, three banks were listed in the county assets, the Bank of Spooner, the Shell Lake State Bank, and the Citizens’ State Bank-Birchwood. While the Bank of Spooner held the most money for the county, confidence in the Shell Lake State Bank seemed to be stable as it held $1,987.33 in available funds and $311,574.59 in total assets. However, even in 1939 there was still $18,831.52 in outstanding order-checks insinuating that citizens of the county were still struggling to pay off their debts. So, while the Washburn County Register reported positively and there were improvements being made within the business sector, the Depression still lingered within some people’s lives. The stretch between 30’ and 39’ had caused the county to accrue considerable debt in loans borrowed from the state. In addition to the numbers above, the Washburn County Audit reports for 1939 show that, “Washburn County owed the state $109,447.00 and $113,485.69 in tax certificates.

Figure 5, below, displays a comparison of Washburn County’s assets, liabilities, and investment assets. In 1928, 2 years before the Depression hits Shell Lake, the county held $31,947.57 and $67,407.23 dollars’ worth of assets and investment assets respectively with liabilities totaling $27,758.40. In 1939, after 9 years of Depression, the county had virtually doubled its assets while keeping its liabilities relatively low. The 1939 asset numbers indicate that Washburn County had experienced considerable rise, particularly, with the rise in national productivity in congruency with the

---

55 “Church Bazaar And Supper Draw Good Crowd Tuesday Night,” Washburn County Register, October 26, 1939.
57 Washburn Country (Wis.), Washburn County Audit reports, 1939.
58 Ibid.
oncoming of war following Germany’s invasion of Poland on September 1st 1939. Accordingly, the nation as a whole was rising economically, “Between 1933 and 1937 real GNP in the United States grew at an average rate of over 8 percent per year; between 1938 and 1941 it grew over 10 percent per year. These rates of growth are spectacular, even for an economy pulling out of a severe depression.”

Increasingly, the *Washburn County Register* saw its pages fill with advertisements ranging from the Shell Lake Creamery to the Allen Auto Company, reports of record enrollment within the Shell Lake High School, and constructions of new buildings or additions such as Shell Lake’s new gym. By 1941,

---


60 “School Opens Monday With Record Enrollment,” *Washburn County Register*, September 7, 1939.

the *Washburn County Register* had relatively little to report on the Depression. Farming was seeing progress via efforts from the AAA (*Agricultural Adjustment Act, established in 1938*) as described in the following, “Despite declining world markets, prices have been held up by the AAA program. With three good crop years behind them, farmers right now could have been suffering from low prices if it had not been for the guidance of the AAA.” As acknowledged in the previous statement, government aid’s role in improving the lives of Shell Lake and Washburn County citizens was invaluable.

Concerns over the World War were on the rise and on December 4th, 1941 it became central to the minds of many Shell Lake citizens, “According to R.D. Stouffer, chairman of the Washburn county draft board, 19 young men will leave Dec. 11 for Eau Claire to undergo physical examinations.” It had been 11 years since the Depression arrived, and Shell Lake had made tremendous strides. The focus had shifted, from the crippling Depression, to the events overseas. On December 7th, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and news of the attack concerned the citizens of Shell Lake due to the presence of William Tobler in Hawaii as part of the Navy. He was fortunately not injured during the attack but, “due to the strict censorship of the mails, he could not give no information about the attack on Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, nor his whereabouts.” The United States had declared war, and in Washburn County, concerns over the Depression were all but gone as its citizens had a new unsettling occurrence. The latest era in Shell Lake history had begun.

**Conclusions**

---


63 “Many Gains In Soil Conservation Due To AAA Program,” *Washburn County Register*, January 16, 1941.

64 “19 Draftees Will Go To Eau Claire For Examination,” *Washburn County Register*, December 4, 1941.

65 “Parents Hear That Son With Navy In Hawaii Is Safe,” *Washburn County Register*, December 18, 1941.
In Richard J. Jensen’s “The Causes and Cures of Unemployment during the Great Depression” he argues that historians have “attacked the New Deal as too fainthearted in its assault on unemployment. The WPA is criticized for reaching less than half the total unemployment, whereas the unrestricted Civil Works Administration is celebrated”. There is a plethora of analysis, contention, and discussion on the economic dilemma of the Great Depression. But from a historical standpoint, an analysis of Shell Lake tells us several things. First, very clearly, the Great Depression was intensely detrimental to the village that had been growing into one of the premier areas in Washburn County. The village’s prosperity came to a grinding halt and not only did its industry and population stagnate, but decline as well. Throughout President Hoover’s tenure until 1932, the village struggled mightily; its main source of assistance came from the Farm Relief efforts which provided very little reprieve to Washburn County farmers. Some may argue from any angle over President Roosevelt’s New Deal but in regards to Shell Lake, the efforts were mostly beneficial. The tone of the Washburn County Register turned from pessimistic to hopeful as federal projects reached the county, and a steady increase in job opportunity and business appeared.

Unemployment proved to be a serious problem in Shell Lake. The village’s job access relied on only a handful of economic sectors consisting of manufacturing, farming, and logging. With drastic cuts to these industries as a result of the Depression, there were few opportunities left for work. Early in the Depression President Hoover facilitated a minimal aid effort majorly towards farmers, whom needed the aid. However, the agriculture industry remained in decline with the ill-timing of the near nation-wide droughts. Not until Franklin D. Roosevelt becomes president does Shell Lake see changes begin on a large scale. Roosevelt’s efforts mitigated the economy’s decline and managed to benefit Shell Lake via

---

the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Civil Works Administration by creating jobs among projects that worked to improve or maintain the landscape.

![National Unemployment Percentage](image)


The graph above displays the national unemployment throughout the Great Depression. These numbers do not display Shell Lake’s unemployment figures, as those are unknown to the author of this paper. However, one can see that the unemployment throughout the nation increased dramatically in the span between 1930-1932 while reaching its peak between 1932-1933. Likewise, one can see that once President Roosevelt enters office and embarks upon his New Deal policies, unemployment drops slowly as these policies are implemented. When place side by side with the evidence compiled in this paper, Shell Lake followed these trends.

Likewise, in relation to the national agriculture trends of the United States, the Shell Lake narrative follows the same pattern as shown by the graphs below. In terms of total livestock purchases,
the agricultural sector throughout the nation dipped dramatically by almost 2 million dollars in the years between 1930 and 1932. Total livestock purchases decreased due to loss in finances which caused agriculture manufacturing businesses to suffer. Hired and contract labor decreased as a result, putting thousands of individuals out of work. Albeit on a smaller scale, Shell Lake encountered these difficulties, but unlike the trends in these graphs, did not see as much as an increase as the Depression progressed into 1936 and 1938. Because of Shell Lake’s emphasis on farming, these two graphs speak volumes to the difficulties the village faced in the wake of the Depression.
The Great Depression draws a heavy volume of scholarly interest for diverse reasons. It subjected millions of Americans to social, psychological, and financial difficulties. It emphasized a culture of endurance amongst the survivors, cultivated an increase in governmental influence, and caused dramatic changes in the country’s economy. So why is Shell Lake’s story through the Depression important? There are countless studies on the Great Depression, and for the most part they follow one of three themes. The first theme consists of the agriculture sector in relation to the Dust Bowl. Individuals caught in the Dust Bowl suffered in great lengths, and represents, “the worst man-made ecological disaster in American history”67.

In regard to the first theme, the areas caught in the Dust Bowl were hit harshly, but often times, agriculture struggles in other locations such as northwest Wisconsin or Minnesota are forgotten. As told in the narrative, Shell Lake’s farmers encountered strong drought and insect attacks and largely wrestled with adversity. However, as mentioned in Part 1, Washburn County farmers received only $7,058 in aid in the first years of the Depression which proved to be inadequate as many of them fell into debt. With the small population size and subsequent lack of voice, Washburn County farmers were largely left to sustain for themselves.

The second theme in regards to studies on the Depression consists of correlations between employment and the New Deal. While these studies range from conclusions of effectiveness to ineffectiveness, many studies focus on bigger cities and urban developments. For example, Martin Melosi argues that, “The onset of the Great Depression had a multiplier effect on urban development. Accelerating demand for better services and for the repair and replacement of a deteriorating infrastructure ran well ahead of available resources”.68 One can navigate through sources on big cities such as New York, Chicago, and Dallas to discover information on the Depression’s affects with relative ease, and if one attempts to search for the Great Depression’s effect on Wisconsin academic studies are focused largely on Madison or Milwaukee. In fact, in the Wisconsin County Histories database, Washburn County is not listed as one of the 80 available for selection. Rural histories are often overlooked, for reasons aware to this author, but there are people within these areas that are forgotten with histories that matter and contribute to the larger narrative.

Lastly, the third theme relates to World War II’s contribution in finally bringing the nation out of the Depression. While this is a key moment in American history, the narrative tends to focus on the rise

in industry as a result of demand via the war effort, particularly in California. While this narrative is correct, it commonly also ignores rural areas such as Shell Lake that did not see this dramatic rise in industry. In fact, as production increased for the Second World War, many individuals from rural areas either joined the war or moved to urban areas in order to work in the factories due to the high demand for war materials and low supply of workers. While this particular study does not go into the aftermath of World War II and its effect on Shell Lake, it remains a small rural area with a population of 1,329 as of 2013, and based off this study, the Depression stunted what could have been a prominent municipality.


70 United States Census Bureau, Shell Lake Population, 2013.
Works Cited

Primary Sources:


Washburn County (Wis.). Clerk. 1932-1949. *County Children’s Board Records*. Washburn Series 22

Washburn County (Wis.). *County Board Proceedings and Papers*. Board of Supervisors. 1881-1959. Washburn Series 18


Secondary Sources:


