

RAMSEY COUNTY

# History

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*Frederick McGhee and his family on the porch of their home at 665 University Avenue, St. Paul, around 1918. He was among the African-American business and professional men and women who helped nurture, within a gracious community, several generations of achievers. See article beginning on page 4.*

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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**On the Cover:** The first black criminal lawyer west of the Mississippi, Frederick McGhee, shown with his home and family, was a prominent Democrat and Catholic in St. Paul in the early 1900s.

**Acknowledgements:** Photographs on pages 5, 7 (James K. Hilyard), 8 (J. Frank Wheaton), 10 (Owen Howell), 11 (W. T. Francis' house), 13 (the Vass house), and 14 (the Adams house) are reprinted from the September 12, 1910, Quarto-Centennial celebration edition of *The Appeal*. The photograph on page 17 is from A. A. Heckman's private files. The photograph on page 30 of the Bishop house as it appeared in 1980 is from the Ramsey County Historical Society collections. All other photographs are from the audio-visual collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**D**an Hoisington, the Society's executive director, is fond of saying: "We're all historians." Nowhere is this more evident than when we go through family letters, diaries or old photos seeking to reconstruct some family history. The theme of the Society's current "Have Lunch With an Historian" weekly lecture series is "Memories, Diaries and Letters."

In conjunction with this, the Editorial Board of *Ramsey County History* invites readers who would like to share an especially meaningful letter, diary, photo or artifact dealing with the history of Ramsey County to contact our office at 222-0701. We'll help you determine what bit of history your letter or photo contains.

We're also interested in your comments on articles we've published in *Ramsey County History*. We're inviting you to bring a bag lunch and participate in a new discussion series based on these articles. The first is set for 12-1 p.m. April 20 in Courtroom 408, Landmark Center. We'll invite some of our writers to attend.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

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# A Period of National Tragedy – The Homeless and the Jobless in the 1930s

*Virginia Brainard Kunz*

**R**elief costs were skyrocketing, threatening to bankrupt the country. Men without jobs were lined up four deep around the Ramsey County Courthouse. The homeless were sleeping under bridges and on St. Paul's park benches and the hungry were applying for the food vouchers that would keep their families from starving.

While there are eerie echoes today of the Great Depression, the years of the 1930s were a period of national tragedy. A. A. Heckman, the dean of Minnesota's social workers, lived through it and he hopes the country will never see its like again.

The Great Depression, which began in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929, touched bottom in 1931 and remained there. The anguish of the middle years of the 1930s was without parallel. It was the worst economic turn-down in American history. It was nation-wide; it was world-wide. Among other things, it helped bring Hitler to power in Germany.

In America the experience not only marked a fundamental change in the nation's social policy but it also left scars so lasting on the children of the Depression who rose to national leadership that even today, more than sixty years later, their memories strongly influence economic policy. The first public and private partnerships to care for the needy developed during the Depression and inaugurated a far-reaching change. Heckman himself helped to spearhead this change both in the city of St. Paul and, to some degree, nationally. Never again would the country attempt to rely entirely upon private agency funds to help the poor, the homeless, and the disadvantaged, despite calls from politicians to do so. The plain fact was that government, from the local to the state to the federal, had entered into the welfare

business, back in the 1930s, and it was in there to stay. This past December of 1990, government figures listed 3 million men and women out of work, the highest unemployment figures in seven years. But in 1931, three years after the stock market crash, more than 40 million people were unemployed or were members of a family whose chief bread winner had no job.

Millions of men, women and children were going hungry; many of them were

without food for three or four days at a time; others were actually starving. A Detroit physician told the newspapers that he estimated one death from starvation every seven hours. Thousands of families were evicted from their homes, their belongings dumped on the sidewalk. Bread lines appeared in the cities and shanty towns emerged outside of the city limits.

Many families were torn apart as men left to try to find work elsewhere or simply



*Warmth from a pot-bellied stove. Early in the Depression, coal was occasionally provided for needy families. By 1932 it had become impossible for private charity to handle the mounting relief rolls.*

to erase the need to feed another mouth. Some never returned. Thousands of them, unable to find work, would go door to door in the residential districts of the cities asking for food. Countless housewives who had a bit of food, even temporarily, set up a table by their back door and shared their family's meal with these desperate strangers.

Shock, confusion, helplessness, despair and worry gripped people and aroused a bitterness and suspicion that erupted into violent strikes—in Detroit, among the quarter of a million men who were out of work; in Minneapolis, among the truck drivers; in Austin, among the Hormel packing plant workers—as badly frightened people tried to find a way out of their predicament. In the 1932 “Bonus March,” an army of 20,000 World War I veterans descended on Washington to camp there and demand Senate passage of a bill granting a cash bonus for wartime service. After the Senate refused, the Congress adjourned and went home. The government, wanting the veterans out of Washington, ordered troops to set fire to their shanties and drive them away with tanks and tear gas.

As economic conditions worsened, President Herbert Hoover struggled to resolve conflicting approaches to the crisis—government intervention or old-fashioned American self-reliance. Out of deeply held convictions, the administration tried to rely on the private agency approach but found it wanting. Arkansas, hit hard by the ten-year agricultural depression and a drought, asked the American Red Cross to handle the relief effort. However, with 150,000 families in desperate straits, the Red Cross quickly ran out of the resources needed to keep pace with the need.

Hoover's administration established a federal aid program by making loans to the states for relief purposes, in an early version of the trickle-down theory that assumed money would reach those most desperately in need. But the apparently unsuccessful program came to an early demise with the end of Hoover's presidency. By 1933 the new Roosevelt administration was trying to create jobs for more than 4 million unemployed men using a bottom-up economic theory.

### **In Minnesota, 137,000 families were unable to survive the winter of 1931-1932 without help.**



*A. A. Heckman at his desk in the Wilder Building in 1934 or 1935.*

In Minnesota, 75,000 men and women were out of work. The Depression already had hit the Iron Range communities where the unemployment rate stood at 70 percent. Dairy farmers' income had dropped 75 percent since 1929 and throughout the state 137,000 families were unable to survive the winter of 1931-1932 without help. Many had seen their jobs and their savings vanish overnight. More than 1,300 banks across the country had failed in 1930; another 2,000 in 1931 and 5,700 more in 1932. Federal Deposit Insurance was non-existent. So were Unemployment Compensation, Social Security, Medicare, shelters for the homeless and food shelves for the hungry.

Still, strangely enough, the full fury of the Depression did not descend upon Minnesota until 1932. At first Minneapolis, reeling because of a slowdown in manufacturing, suffered more than St. Paul, which had a more diverse economy. Heckman, now the eighty-five-year-old recently retired executive director and current consultant for the Grotto Foundation in St. Paul, remembers that he found this set of circumstances surprising. He had arrived from Cleveland, Ohio, in 1931 to direct St.

Paul's United Charities, a welfare organization that had grown out of the Society for the Relief of the Poor, founded in 1876 and the first private charitable relief agency in St. Paul. United Charities would ultimately become Family Services of St. Paul in 1936. While Heckman found St. Paul still on the brink of economic disaster, the Cleveland he had left behind was already in the grip of the Depression.

A native of the small Ohio town of Tipp City, Heckman went to Denison University in Granville, Ohio, for an undergraduate degree in economics and sociology and Western Reserve (now Case Western) University for graduate study in the administration of social services. He did his field work with Associated Charities in Cleveland and stayed there after completing his course work.

With wide-spread unemployment, Cleveland was typical of many American cities at that time. There was no public welfare. All assistance came from private funds, primarily the Community Chest. The city was hard hit; in such a climate, protest groups flourished. Heckman remembers the hardships in Cleveland and his role in quelling public uprisings.

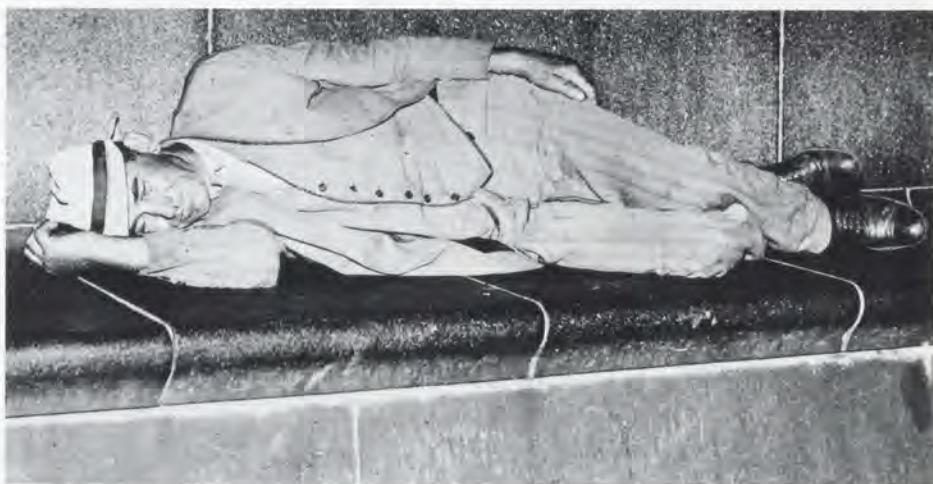
"One of my jobs was to deal with these groups and I became well-acquainted with two of the most radical of the organizations. They would come to my office in the Federal Reserve Bank and attempt to coerce us into a political fray. Fortunately for me, the bank was guarded by ex-marines with sidearms.

"I remember one particular time when a big parade of the unemployed was planned. There were speeches—somewhat inflammatory—ahead of time, and then people lined up to begin the march. Suddenly, out from under the federal building came a big Cadillac, its top down, an American flag on each of the front fenders and the public safety commissioner in the back. The car moved out in front to lead the parade. The crowd and the marchers simply evaporated, like an ice cream cone on a hot day. The commissioner had planned it that way. He was an interesting and imaginative person, and he didn't want several thousand people marching through Cleveland's downtown district when feelings were running high."

In St. Paul the Depression continued to be held at bay for a time. Several major construction projects not yet completed were providing jobs for hundreds of workers. Money appropriated in 1929 for a new Ramsey County Courthouse turned out to be far more than was needed by 1931 and 1932 when costs had plummeted. The building was constructed on a more lavish scale than originally planned, providing many with work.

The thirty-two story addition to the First National Bank of St. Paul was going up on Fourth Street and Minnesota. City engineer George M. Shepard was ready to launch a \$3 to \$3.5 million public improvement program that would put 3,000 to 3,500 men to work. A new building to house the Italia Club and Christ Child Community Center at Bradley and Patridge Streets was being completed and rows of bungalows were being built in the residential areas.

Full-scale production of Scotch tape provided jobs at 3M and so, for a time, did the stockyards in South St. Paul. St. Paul also benefited from being the state capital and an insurance center. Government payrolls held up for a time and so did the payrolls of the insurance companies.



*Homeless, jobless men sleeping on park benches and in public squares, a familiar sight during the Depression.*

**"I remember . . . seeing men pacing up and down, trying to make up their minds to come in and apply for relief."**

"Although we didn't feel the full effect of the Depression at first," Heckman remembers, "when it hit, it hit hard." Until around 1932 it had been possible to handle the mounting relief rolls on the local level through private charity. In fact, in 1931 the St. Paul Association of Commerce had proudly assured President Hoover that the city "would care for its own" through its strong network of private charities and its Board of Public Welfare. The charities continued to raise money and business firms organized relief efforts and pledged to provide jobs during the 1930-1931 winter; 3M even offered an employee benefit plan.

Few cities had public welfare systems. Heckman remembers that when public assistance was finally implemented in St. Paul, it basically consisted of "one person sitting on a high stool behind a wicker grill, like the grills in the old banks, passing out orders for groceries. A small family could get an order for a small package and a large family could get an order for a large family package. In the winter, coal occasionally was provided to needy families. However, there was nothing provided for clothing, utilities or rent. We got what help we could from the city, the county and the state. The rest had to come from the private agencies."

While assistance was often provided along sectarian lines, such as Catholic

Charities, Jewish Family Welfare, and the Union Gospel Mission, St. Paul also had a number of other strong charities: the Salvation Army, Volunteers of America, Wilder Charity and Heckman's own United Charities. All were housed in the Wilder Building at Fifth Street and Washington, the site today of the Ordway Music Theatre.

During this period of struggling to deal with relief through the private sector, Louis W. Hill, Sr., suggested that St. Paul establish a food commissary, similar to one in Kansas City.

"The other businessmen immediately and vociferously opposed the idea," Heckman recalls. "They felt that it would be better for the city if the problem could be handled in a more dignified way, in a way that respected the privacy of the individuals so they wouldn't be on display as they came in to identify themselves to get food. The businessmen also were concerned that free food distribution would have a discouraging impact on trade and on the sale of food.

"But L. W. Hill, Sr. disagreed. He decided to independently and secretly purchase a trainload of food. L. W. Hill was an interesting man. I always enjoyed him, but he tended to issue commands. One day after he'd bought the food he called me. 'Heckman, I want you down here right away.' He had an office in the Great Northern building. When I came into his office,

he said, 'Don't take off your coat. We're going out.'

"We went down to the street, got into his car behind his chauffeur and drove to a building near Seven Corners that used to be a tire shop. He got out his keys and unlocked the door. We went in and there was a tremendous quantity of dried groceries—beans and rice, all those things. I just stood there astonished!

"Then we got back into the car and went down Eagle Street to some caves in the bluff where the civic parking ramp stands now. Hill opened the door to one of the caves and back in there were potatoes, rutabagas and other vegetables, all packed nicely and covered with straw. I said, 'Pretty nice.' When we got through admiring them, Hill asked, 'Do you want them?' Well, of course I did, so he said, 'You can have all of it, including the rice and the beans.'"

Heckman, staggered by his bounty, hired a young man who'd been laid off to supervise the division of the food. He then asked the county's home economist to design two different food packages, one for large, one for small families. Then he asked relief workers who had trucks to deliver the food to needy families.

"We called them L. W. Hill Barrel #1 and L. W. Hill Barrel #2," Heckman remembers. "Every month I would send a report to Hill about the food we delivered. After he died, we found that he had kept every single one of those reports."

This was the last of the private efforts, however, because suddenly it wasn't enough. By 1932 there were 15,000 men out of work in St. Paul, one out of every five families. There was no way the private sector could deal with such an overwhelming problem. Fortunately, by 1933 the new Roosevelt administration was organizing its relief program, with Harry Hopkins as federal relief administrator.

The federal relief funds that began to arrive in Minnesota in the spring of 1933 were directed toward state and county agencies, not private charities. Therefore, the State Board of Control, created by Governor Floyd B. Olson to oversee the relief program in Minnesota, asked Heckman to reorganize the Ramsey County Welfare Board and set up a public welfare program for the county. No money was



*Distribution of surplus commodities to St. Paul families in 1934. The truck belonged to Joseph Gerner, a produce peddler, who is on the far right.*

available to pay a public welfare staff, so a unique agreement was reached with United Charities. In one of the early examples of private and public cooperation, Heckman took a leave of absence from United Charities and began drawing his salary from the newly established public welfare system. Equally unprecedented, he also took with him to the Welfare Board most of the United Charities staff. Their salaries continued to be paid by United Charities and the Welfare Board agreed that they would function as public employees.

Heckman depended heavily on the long-established Central Registration Bureau created in the 19th century by the Society for the Relief of the Poor. It was later inherited around World War I by United Charities. The bureau was an early attempt to bring about a cooperative relationship among relief-granting agencies to avoid duplication of services. It was essentially an extensive card file with the records, laboriously-maintained by hand, of people who had received help. It was meticulously cross-referenced to identify names appearing under different spellings, particularly in the case of immigrants from other cultures. Wilder Charity eventually took over the administration of the Central Registration Bureau.

Heckman's move onto the county payroll was a step that, in the depths of the Depression and in the face of a growing national concern over private vs. public welfare, required considerable courage. In 1933 and for some years later, as much welfare work remained firmly in governmental hands, Heckman would be roundly criticized by his social welfare colleagues around the country for his part in moving social welfare work into the public arena.

In St. Paul, however, the private/public initiative resulted in a smoothly functioning partnership. The city's political structure lent itself to the development of this rather unique policy.

City government in St. Paul was the old commission form of government, possibly one of the least effective forms of government but, Heckman recalls, a system which worked amazingly well for a city whose business owners were actively involved in government. The mayor chaired the Board of Ramsey County Commissioners and appointed the elected city councilmen as fulltime directors of city departments.

As a result of the commission form of government, the business of relief became a community-wide effort involving the city's most prominent leaders. They included Frederick R. Bigelow, president of St.

Paul Fire and Marine and a Wilder Charity board member; Julian Baird and Richard Lilly of First National Bank and Norris Jackson and his wife, all active in the Community Chest and United Charities; Edgar Ober and his wife, who established what would become the Mardag Foundation; Clarence Randall, legal counsel for the Tri-state Telephone and Telegraph Company; Arthur Savage, president of Savage-Girton Electrical Supplies; attorney William Mitchell of Doherty, Rumble and Butler; Rabbi H.S. Margolis of Temple Zion; attorney Milton Firestone; Horace Kline of Webb Publishing Company; Louis Headley and Philip Ray of First Trust Company; attorney George Morgan of Briggs and Morgan and a Wilder Charity board member; George Lawson, A.F. of L.; investment counselor Harold Wood and Harold Washburn and Frederick Crosby of American Hoist and Derrick.

George Sommers of G. Sommers and Co. in Lowertown was Welfare Board chairman and his brother and business partner, Charles Sommers, was even more involved. Homer Clark of West Publishing chaired Mayor Mahoney's Relief Coordinating Committee until the mid-1930s. Others on the Ramsey County Welfare Board, all appointed by the mayor, included Hubert White of Hubert White Men's Clothing; Dr. James Dunn of Anchor Hospital; Bessie Pearson; John Shenk; Councilman John Finley; Frank Pampusch of Ramale Printing Company; Helen Bunn and John Acheson, president of Macalester College.

Heckman particularly remembers Pierce Atwater, head of the Community Chest and a friend of Harry Hopkins, as being "tremendously helpful in developing the county welfare program." Atwater was instrumental during those years in merging the antiquated Protestant Orphanage with the Children's Welfare program to become Children's Service, Inc. Atwater also arranged for Wilder Charity to take over some of the Community Chest's financial problems.

And Heckman remembers American Hoist and Derrick as the first St. Paul company to assume responsibility for keeping its workers employed. The company spread the work around, reduced hours and assigned some workers to such tasks as

cleaning, painting and other maintenance work so everyone could remain employed and off relief.

Some of what Heckman experienced during the Depression years was unforgettable. One of his most vivid recollections concerned the "moat" that ran around the old Ramsey County Courthouse at Fourth and Wabasha Streets where the county welfare board had its office.

"I remember very well seeing that 'moat' filled with people," Heckman recalls. "They stood four abreast in a line that ran all around the courthouse and extended down Wabasha for at least two blocks. By this time we had more than one



Pierce Atwater

**"We got permission to develop these gardens out in the fields of Highland Park."**

woman on a high stool passing out vouchers. We had quite a number of trained workers who just could not seem to work fast enough to take care of all the people who were waiting for the large and small grocery vouchers—the \$5 or \$10 grocery orders. An order for a small family was supposed to last that family a month, but it often ran out before the month ended and they would have to find other means to put food on their tables."

Under the voucher system, St. Paul grocers—chiefly Michaud's at Eighth and Robert Streets, Schoch's at E. Seventh and Broadway, and Johnson's on the East Side—would submit sealed bids to the city

to contract for the grocery orders. The Welfare Board then would pay the selected grocer.

No cash was ever handed out at first.

"Oh, no, back in the beginning they didn't trust people with cash. Later on, through some quiet reforms, we handed out cash. It was my belief that families normally shopped with cash, not vouchers, and we were trying to help welfare families function as normally as possible," Heckman remembers. As Heckman reorganized the Welfare Board so that it began to function as an organization, help also became available for rent, clothing and utilities. Dental and medical services also were developed.

Yet, despite the help the Welfare Board and the private charities began to offer, many destitute people continued to find it difficult to accept aid during those trying times. There were, of course, the habitually dependent who lived out their lives always needing some help. There were the marginally dependent who didn't earn quite enough to always make ends meet. But by far the greatest numbers of people who were now streaming into the Welfare Board office were those who always had been self-sufficient and were devastated by the need to apply for relief, often losing their homes and their savings before doing so. These people were considered the "worthy poor."

"I remember looking out the window in the Wilder building and seeing men pacing up and down on the sidewalk, trying to make up their minds to come in and apply for relief," Heckman said. "Welfare, either private or public, was a shameful thing for family men who, all their adult life, had had a job, had been self-supporting, had been good citizens who contributed to a church and to other community needs. All of a sudden there was no money in their pocket and it was a drastic, shocking, demoralizing situation.

"All kinds of people were on the edge. We employed a psychiatrist every afternoon, five afternoons a week for a salary that only paid his office rent in the Lowry building. It was the only way he could pay his rent. Once my wife and I were invited to dinner at the home of a college professor and we knew we were eating food they could ill-afford to serve.

"There were some curious attitudes. In the early years of the Depression, there was a feeling that someone on relief shouldn't be driving a car so, for a time, we confiscated driver's licenses and held them in a safe in the county welfare office. But how could you ask a man who lived on the outer edge of the county to walk to South St. Paul to try to get a job in the stockyards and then not have a way to get to work? That policy was dropped."

There were other social and moral judgments, during those frightening days, concerning the "worthy poor," an attitude more characteristic of private than public welfare agencies. The "worthy poor" were referred to frequently in Amherst H. Wilder's will. Wilder was determined to meet the needs of the "worthy poor" by establishing the Wilder Charity. The "worthy poor" concept has appeared often in political and religious history and, to some extent, continues to appear today.

"The 'worthy poor' idea perhaps was an attempt to distinguish between those who had squandered their money and those who had not but were but were simply down on their luck," Heckman said. "Then there was an organization in St. Paul that gave relief to the 'dignified poor'—school teachers, nurses and others like them." He saw these judgments ultimately diluted by the legalistic approach inherent in the public welfare philosophy.

The shame many people felt at having to accept relief was countered by the humanity with which the Welfare Board, under Heckman's direction, responded to the needs of the impoverished. Using a program already launched by United Charities, Heckman established, as part of the Welfare Board reorganization, district offices for dealing with relief clients.

"This was a decentralized service delivery system which we grafted onto the public program," he said. "Rather than have all clients come downtown to the central office—where they would line up in the 'moat' or around the blocks and create a massive army of poor people—we set up offices in the neighborhoods where they lived. One was in the old Protestant Orphan Asylum, another in a nursing home attached to Miller Hospital, another in a mansion near one of the breweries. Each office was staffed with a professional social



*The St. Paul Public Library's Periodical Room in the 1930s. Libraries all over the country were "homes" for many of the unemployed during the Depression.*

worker who was supervisor for that district. That system made relief much more accessible to the people who needed it, much less public and much less likely to result in some of the public demonstrations I had seen in Cleveland."

There were numerous strains and tensions during these troubled times. With Minneapolis suffering more severely than St. Paul, the huge numbers of transients crowding into its dilapidated Gateway district inevitably spilled over into St. Paul. The Ramsey County Welfare Board, overburdened by its own demands, complained that Minneapolis and out-state counties were using Ramsey County as a "dumping ground" for those they couldn't handle, but the arguments were somewhat subdued. In 1933 when the federal government provided funds to set up transient camps around the state, these hard feelings persisted.

Along with relief, there were projects of practical value that also helped mobilize the community to combat the common enemy—poverty. One was Heckman's idea for "thrift gardens," a project resurrected a decade later in the face of another crisis and labeled "victory gardens." Today they're called community garden plots.

"We got permission to develop these gardens out in the fields of Highland Park," Heckman recalls. "Carl Schuneman, an investment counselor and assistant secretary of the Treasury in Washington, had a farm

near White Bear Lake, as I recall. I talked to him and he agreed to bring his tractor in and plow the fields himself, which today are east of Highland Park High School and south of the Highland Park golf course.

"We got free seeds from the county farm agent and we also got him to mark out plots for the gardens. Then we recruited the families to plant their gardens and take care of them. The gardens were well kept up and flourishing and people driving down Montreal from Snelling could stop and walk around and see them. I think we even hired a night watchman to prevent theft.

"And we had a bumper crop. Those gardens just thrived, so much so that we wondered what to do with the leftover produce. We finally decided to can it so the families would have food through the winter. We lined up some unemployed people who had trucks and started them on a drive to collect Mason jars. We collected hundreds of Mason jars. Each family was provided with Mason jars and help to can their extra produce so they could take it home.

"Agnes Erkel, the county home demonstration agent, supervised the canning and we had a real manufacturing business going on out there. The Hulme Company on Seventh Street loaned us a large tent and the Blaugas Company in the Midway provided gas and hot plates. It looked like a miniature county fair, with that great big



tent and all the gardeners and volunteers working with Agnes Erkel.”

With the arrival of federal relief funds aimed at finding work for unemployed men and women, Heckman also was assigned to direct the WPA work in Ramsey County. “In some ways it was a roller coaster ride,” he recalls. “Harry Hopkins was going to put so many people to work, come hell or high water, if possible. I’d get a telegram from Washington from Hopkins saying he wanted me to have 800 people working by 8 o’clock the next morning.

“I’d call up the county engineer. There was always road work to do until we could get something else going. And there was rip-rapping along the river. Some of those projects, of course, could have been done more cheaply than with men digging up a county road with picks and shovels, but the idea was to get some money into their jeans.”

Minnesota is still studded with WPA projects that put some 54,000 people to work almost immediately. Among the many Depression-era projects still visible today are Kellogg Boulevard, the nine-foot channel in the Mississippi, the second lock at the Ford Dam, the rebuilt Harriet Island pavilion and the reconstructed Lambert’s Landing at the foot of Jackson Street. City parks, including Como Park, were upgraded and the city auditorium improved by the addition of a third balcony.

However, things didn’t always go well. As Heckman recalls, the WPA wasn’t allowed to have engineers on its staff, but had to hire city and county personnel instead. “We built a swimming pool out in Highland Park. The sides were all sloped and nobody installed ladders or railings. The sides of the pool were as slick as a slide. When the first rain came along, all the debris from the park washed down into the pool. We had to put a snow fence all around it. We also had to hire a guard 24 hours a day to keep people from drowning.

“When we finally got permission to hire an engineer, we had to tear the whole thing out and start all over again. Then we finally had a swimming pool which lasted until just a few years ago when it had to be replaced.”

There were other projects. Workers helped in libraries and hospitals and brought services to the needy and sick. Un-

employed artists painted at easels in the Old Federal Courts Building (now Landmark Center) and out-of-work writers, working under the WPA Writers’ Project, created the *WPA Guide to Minnesota*.

“We had more trouble getting those artistic projects approved,” Heckman remembers. “Our elected officials tended to think in terms of physical projects, rather than the arts and humanities, but most other people realized that an artist had a right to practice his craft and earn a living. Besides, there was federal money available to fund artistic endeavors.”

In the meantime, while Heckman had moved the Ramsey County Welfare Board toward providing more than just food to keep people from starvation but also clothing, shelter, utilities and medical care, he also was asking the board to recognize the need for strengthening both families and single adults who were on welfare. In working with single adults, both men and women, the Welfare Board was able to treat them not just as clients but as individuals and to use federal money to provide them with food and shelter. They were given meals and housed in the cheaper hotels and at the Union Gospel Mission for some of the men.

Work with families presented a complex challenge. In many cases it had to begin with such practical matters as helping each family develop a budget.

“We had to determine *with* these families if they had resources and, if so, where those resources were going. Were they being applied toward the rent, for instance, or utilities? Some families thought that if they couldn’t pay the utilities bill, they would let Northern States Power shut off the gas and electricity and use a coal or a wood-burning stove. However, we soon found out that many of the houses our clients were living in weren’t constructed for coal or wood-burning stoves, so they had to be convinced to maintain their utilities.”

The concern for families had been a developing aspect of social service work since the turn-of-the-century. Heckman’s graduate work at Western Reserve University in the 1920s focused on the underlying causes of family disorganization; dependency and distress, including financial problems. United Charities, under

Heckman’s direction, was dealing with the problems within families and this concern would run like a thread through his administration of the WPA program in Ramsey County.

It also would mark the beginning of the implementation of the family-centered service model which Heckman had learned about at Western Reserve. The concept had formed the basis for services in Cleveland, it was the basis for Heckman’s own plans for a similar program and it was one of the more positive legacies of the Depression years. Heckman saw financial pressures uncover deep-seated family problems. When he returned to United Charities in 1935, he was determined to reorganize the agency into a family service organization that eventually became Family Services of St. Paul.

“I remember one family very well,” he said. “The man was employed at a low income and he was constantly in debt, constantly having his wages garnished. It was obvious that he was overspending his income. As I got to know him, it was also obvious that he was trying to prove that he was a good provider.

“The things he would do would be funny if they weren’t so sad. For example, the family needed a heating stove, so he went



The old Ramsey County Courthouse at Fourth and Wabasha. The walk around the building was recessed to form a moat. See also Letters on page 3.

out and bought an oil heating stove that was so big he couldn't get it in the front door. Then his wife would get angry because he earned so little money and his check often went to a creditor.

"We tried to get that desire of his to be a good provider focused in such a way that he could handle it financially. We did that by helping him buy a small home where he could spend hours fixing it up, showing it off to the neighbors and thereby proving his ability as a provider.

"With another family, the wife would get so angry at her husband for spending so much of his paycheck on bingo that she would go out and run up credit, leaving them in an ever tighter financial spot."

Through the middle and later 1930s, the Depression remained intense and intractable. Although federal money still poured into the state from Roosevelt's New Deal agencies, there continued to be a need for local funding of direct relief. Both St. Paul and Minneapolis issued millions of dollars in relief bonds in an effort to help support the cities' welfare costs.

In 1936 Carl P. Herbert, director of the St. Paul Municipal Research Bureau, told the United States Senate's Unemployment Committee that relief costs had skyrocketed until they matched total tax collections for all governmental purposes. According to his report, St. Paul spent more for welfare that year, excluding WPA, than it collected in taxes on real and personal property. Total welfare costs, Herbert said, were \$14,349,113, compared with \$14,242,171 collected in taxes. At the same time, he added, there were indications that the federal government was preparing a gradual withdrawal from the relief picture.

Somehow the country muddled along. St. Paul had 26,047 people unemployed or only partially employed in 1937. The next year a small but short economic recovery brought some hope that hard times were ending, but the Depression didn't release its grip until 1940 when the nation's production plants began their run-up to war.

Frank Rarig, Jr., had succeeded Heckman as executive secretary of the Ramsey County Welfare Board and director of the New Deal programs in the county when Heckman returned to United Charities. Within a few years Rarig would become



*The Highland Park swimming pool, with the hazardous sloping sides. With WPA help, the pool was torn out and rebuilt.*

executive secretary of the Wilder Charity, now the Wilder Foundation.

Heckman remained with United Charities, overseeing its transformation into Family Services. He then became executive director of the Louis W. and Maud Hill Foundation, an outgrowth of the Lexington Foundation which Hill created in 1934. Under Heckman's administration, Louis Hill's foundation became, successively, the Hill Family Foundation and, finally, the Northwest Area Foundation.

In the course of his long career, which took him through the directorships of the Jerome and Grotto Foundations, as well, Heckman was involved in an array of social and cultural programs: the development of KTCA-TV; the creation of Hazelden at Center City; the founding of Presbyterian Homes at Lake Johanna; the establishment of the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library at St. John's University, Collegeville; Minnesota Public Radio's move from St. John's to the University of Minnesota at St. Paul; the establishment of the International Writing Project at the University of Iowa; and the merger of three St. Paul hospitals into United Hospital, are among many others that carry his fingerprints.

Looking back, he says, "I don't want to see another Great Depression. There was a humiliation about being on relief, as well as some occasional scorn for those who needed help. But there was little talk then, as there is today, about 'welfare cheats.' I think there was much more understanding and compassion then. There was far more unemployment. Despite layoffs, we have many more employed today and the percentage of unemployed is small now. 'Help wanted' signs are still around. In the 1930s they would have read, 'No help needed.'

"The threat of losing your job during the Depression was immediate and ever present. With one out of every five families in St. Paul on public assistance, we knew it could happen to any one of us at any time without warning. Most of us said, 'There but for the grace of God go I.'"

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*Horse and buggy at the Minnesota State fairgrounds in 1903. Karal Ann Marling evokes once again the glories of the fair in her book, Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair, reviewed on page 26.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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