

## THE WPA WAGON

The WPA came into existence in 1935, the basis for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'New Deal' program known as the "Works Project Administration." It was inaugurated by Harry Hopkins to provide government work to more than two million persons each year who were otherwise without jobs and nearly destitute.

During the eight years it was operated, the WPA erected thousands of hospitals, school buildings and children's playgrounds. The cost of the program was more than ten billion dollars, and was highly criticized by businessmen for creating make-work projects. For those employed by the WPA, it provided the basic substance of life.

One of the most significant programs under the WPA was the National Youth Administration offering financial aid to millions of school children. So successful were the results that the effort was expanded to aid millions of young people not enrolled in school because of need. Few remain alive who actually participated in the WPA, but there are descendants who can recall details of these desperate days.

Local projects in Jackson County, Indiana included the building of the Vallonia Dam and a park in the western part of Jackson County near Kurtz or Houston. There are later stories of families talking about their survival because of this program. Historically speaking, we as a nation are probably better off because someone really cared during those trying times.

One of the remnants of this time is the Paymaster Wagon now owned by the Jackson County Historical Society. It was acquired in 1991-92 from an individual who had bought it from the Crane Naval Weapons Depot.

This wagon was constructed in December 1929 during the early days of the "Great Depression" for use at Crane, Indiana. Six years later with the inauguration of the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) program in 1935, it was hauled to various construction sites to serve as the paymaster wagon. The workers filed past the rear window on a raised platform, signed the government register and drew weekly paychecks from the site superintendent who conducted his bookkeeping on a single table. It also served as a storage for tools and equipment such as transits, etc. The wagon remained in use during the construction of the Crane Naval Weapons Center.

The wagon is about 24 feet long, just a little more than 8 feet wide, and more than 11 feet high. The wagon weighs more than 10,000 pounds. It was built on a steel chassis and rests on wooden spoke wheels with solid rubber tires.

The WPA as a program is long gone. The cost of such a program today would be staggering and hopefully will never be needed again. But what isn't gone is this wonderful old wagon which can be seen by just driving by the Historical Society at 115 North Sugar Street.

Better still, we invite you to come by and let someone really show you the wagon. You will be amazed of its size once you are inside. You can even sit at the original table and dream that you are the paymaster. Bring your camera and take pictures.

Richard Rumph

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