

Depression-Era Bloomington Mayor Besieged by Jobseekers



Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers packed into two trucks head north on Madison Street (when Madison was a two-way street) in downtown Bloomington. “Don’t know where we’re going, but we’re going to work! read the original Pantagraph caption. (courtesy of The Pantagraph)

The everyday desperation that defined the Great Depression can be found in the letters out-of-work jobseekers wrote to Bloomington’s newly elected mayor in 1933.

Although local unemployment never reached the peak national rate of nearly 25 percent, things were plenty bad here. How bad? Well, for the 1932 school year, Illinois Wesleyan University accepted farm produce (like a truckload of potatoes) in lieu of tuition; Liberty State Bank in Bloomington went under, as did dozens of others in surrounding towns; and tax revenue plummeted, forcing Bloomington Public Schools to pay their employees in scrip.

In the April 1933 Bloomington mayoral race, Democrat Louis F. Wellmerling captured 58 percent of the vote to overwhelm Republican incumbent Ben Rhodes. Local Democrats tied their platform to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s unprecedented intervention in the economy. In fact, the local Democratic Party called for a “New Deal for Bloomington,” and promised to “Complete the Change” begun with FDR’s election a year earlier.

In the days after the mayoral contest, Wellmerling received letters from unemployed residents desperate to land a job with the city. “I suppose you are deluged with pleas for positions; well, I am another one,” wrote a widow from the 100 block of West Locust Street nine days after the election. This woman (to respect the privacy of the letter writers, names are not be used) expressed interest in becoming a police matron. Evidently her request fell short, for the 1934 Bloomington City Directory lists her as having no occupation, though by 1937 she was working as a seamstress, probably on a self-employed basis.

The Louis Wellmerling Collection housed at the McLean County Museum of History contains correspondence, speeches, campaign fliers and newspaper clippings. There’s also a file folder of letters from unemployed residents inquiring about—and occasionally pleading for—a job on the city payroll. These poignant letters open up a world of uncertainty and even hopelessness as experienced by ordinary folks caught in the maelstrom of the Great Depression.

The day after the election, an unemployed woman from the 500 block of South McClun Street wrote to Wellmerling. “My husband passed away last summer, leaving me with four small children, from one year to twelve years, to care for,” she told the mayor-elect. Clearly, there weren’t that many jobs for the incoming administration to dole out, and it appears this woman remained unemployed until after World War II when she found work with local candymaker Paul F. Beich.

“I would like to let you know that I have done all I could do for you in the election,” wrote another resident, this one from the 500 block of West Miller Street in the city’s historically German South Hill neighborhood. He told Wellmerling, in his earnest but imperfect grammar, that he talked to his nine brothers, as well as their “wives” and children, doing his part to bring in 30 votes for the Democratic ticket. “Now I am a poor man with a family of nine children four still going to [Trinity] Lutheran school,” he added. “I have lost my home, and just about everything I have ... I would ask you if you have work that I could do so I would not have to ask the church for help.” Again, it doesn’t appear that this Wellmerling supporter received a city job. A check of the Bloomington City Directory shows him unemployed through 1937. The following year he is listed as a carpenter, though no employer is listed.

Those who wrote Wellmerling had plenty of company. By May 1935, some 13,000 men, women and children were receiving food from the McLean County Relief Agency. Yet New Deal programs, in cooperation with state and local governments, began putting people back to work. Funds from the Civil Works Act (CWA), to cite one example, made possible Bloomington’s new municipal airport. Federal dollars from the Public Works Administration (PWA) helped build the Normal Post Office, and by August 1936, more than 2,000 area residents were working on some 40 Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects, the granddaddy of Roosevelt’s “alphabet soup” agencies.

After two mayoral terms, Wellmerling himself was the beneficiary of state patronage, working first for the Illinois Highway Department and then the Secretary of State.

