

**Legends of Freeborn County**  
**Government programs after Depression directly affected lives of area citizens**  
by Bev Jackson

Thirty-eighth in a monthly series of Freeborn County Articles - May 2003  
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- 1. Which president was described as being the "People's President?"
- 2. Who aimed for more "American Shareholders?"
- 3. Whose programs aided millions of tradesmen, artists, farmers, children, older citizens, and factory workers?
- 4. Who dreamed of spending \$25 million to place 25,000 families on small farms while the head of the household continued to work in the nearby city?
- 5. Did Congress go along with this dream?
- 6. Was Minnesota affected by this congressional action?
- 7. How?
- 8. What was the program called?
- 9. Where did this all take place?
- 10. Who was involved?
- 11. Can one of those Capitol Hill programs actually be tracked all the way to Freeborn County and individual families in the Albert Lea area?

End of quiz.

How many questions could you answer? Were you guessing or did you figure that I wouldn't be asking if there was not a Freeborn County connection?

Well, you are right. There is a strong connection, and I'd like to tell you about it.

In 1933, with the encouragement of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Senator John H. Bankhead wrote a \$25 million appropriation for subsistence homesteads into the National Industrial Recovery Act, and Congress approved it. This was to be a project which would affect the lives of thousands of Americans... a middle class movement for selected people.

In an effort to help bring the country out of the Depression, the government would build homes on approximately five acres of land, bring in roads and utilities, purchase livestock, and then sell these "subsistence homesteads" to families whose breadwinners worked in a nearby factory, thus providing a "return to the land" opportunity for families whose factory income barely covered living costs.

Throughout the United States, 99 of these communities were built, three in Minnesota... one in Duluth, one in Austin, and one in Freeborn County.

Just east of Albert Lea, near the present REA, 80 acres of land was purchased and divided into lots. Men were hired by the Federal Emergency Relief Association to build foundations, roads, and driveways, and to dig wells. The Tapager Construction Company built the houses.

About 125 families applied for a homestead on the government project. The requirements included: a factory job in Albert Lea, good health, a good credit record, pride in their home, dependability, and some agricultural experience. Twelve names were selected and later two more were added.

Fourteen families signed 30-year mortgages for a five-acre plot of land (two were seven and a half acres sites), a two or three bedroom house, and a building to be used as a combination barn, garage, chicken house, and outhouse.

□ This is where the story gets difficult for me to tell with objectivity. for you see, my parents signed one of those mortgages. My dad and mom and four sisters moved to that brand new home on five acres of land just east of Albert Lea.

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Their country home, with monthly payments of \$13.06 had no electricity and no plumbing. It gave them a place for a large vegetable garden, a small corn field, a pasture, and a barn for the cow, the chickens, and the pig. It gave them acres of mud in the spring following the construction, a driveway and road to shovel after a snowstorm, neighborhood parties in basements, and friends to share the good times and the hard times.

□

One of my favorite pictures from the family album is of dad and mom dressed for Colonel Albert Lea Days standing in front of their neatly painted, white, story and a half, cottage-style home with green shutters, with flowers and shrubs planted in front.

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Was Franklin D. Roosevelt really the "People's President?" Did his national program, designed to help the country surmount the agony of the Depression, directly affect the lives of our local residents? The answer, of course, is yes.

□

Why is it so important to me?

□

Lot number 12 was purchased by my parents. My family lived there for several years. I was born there. It was my home.