

INITIAL RELIEF

New legislation would chart a course toward the CCC, WPA & PWA programs of the New Deal & New Frontier

By STEPHEN BAUER
News-Gazette Staff Writer

The spirit of FDR's New Deal and JFK's New Frontier programs may be revived in the 1990s under legislation being considered in Washington.

Plans to put young men and women in America to work building homes for the poor, cleaning up the environment and taking care of the elderly would reach from Washington to Champaign-Urbana, just as the Roosevelt's programs did during the Great Depression.

The area legacy from the Roosevelt administration includes Kickapoo State Park in Vermillion County, part of the Illinois Union and Leal School in Urbana. The art deco city hall in Champaign, which was recently renovated, also was built under Depression relief programs.

Several Democratic senators, including Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., are backing legislation introduced by Sam Nunn, D-Ga., and Charles Robb, D-Va., that would establish a voluntary Citizens Corps to use unemployed and under-employed young Americans in a variety of national service programs.

The new programs are intended to get people off welfare and into productive work while providing a structure for youth to do public service. According to Robert McElvaine, a history professor at Millsaps College, Jackson, Miss., both goals are worthwhile — and similar to the aims of some New Deal programs.

McELVAINE, AUTHOR OF the book, "The Great Depression," said there has been a lack of civic responsibility in the past decade; an era dubbed the "Me Generation."

The proposed programs could give some people better self respect by providing useful work as an alternative to welfare. They also could "rekindle that spirit of community and sense of responsibility" that was "central to the ethic of the '30s," McElvaine said.

"We should realize that those programs of the New Deal did a great deal of good, both in terms of the actual physical legacy that you can still find all over the country and also in terms of the other purpose that they had, which was to maintain people's self respect during that crisis period," he said.

Harold Mayfield, a Mahomet builder, was a young boy during the Depression, but remembers that his father and older brother worked on WPA projects in rural DeWitt County.

"Dad worked on the farm as a hired man, but there was no money then," Mayfield said. "He and my brother got work with the WPA."

PROJECTS INCLUDED construction of a gravel road between Kenney and Warrensburg and paving of streets in Kenney, Mayfield said.

"They used tractors and horse teams," Mayfield said. "It paid practically nothing, but it kept food on the table."

George Mayes, 98, a long-time farmer west of Champaign, said Champaign County felt the impact of the Great Depression like other communities.

"I remember 1933 was a bad year for farmers," Mayes said. "I had about 400 acres and I lost about \$300 after all expenses. The worst of it was, I had some money in savings and the bank went broke."

Mayes, now retired and living in a nursing home, said he recalls WPA workers tore down the 1889 Champaign city hall and built the new municipal building.

"The street was all brick," Mayes said. "They tore it up and had to carry the bricks out. Between the pavement and the city building, they made quite a few jobs."

Records indicate the new foundation was laid in 1936; the building was modeled after the Los Angeles city hall. Work was completed in 1937 at a total cost of about \$213,000. Labor rates for the project included \$1 per hour for electricians and ironworkers, \$1.25 an hour for bricklayers and 57.5 cents per hour for laborers.

"THERE IS SO much of that sort of thing that needs to be done again, in part, because a lot of what exists today are things that are left over from the '30s and are in bad need of repair or replacement now," McElvaine said.

Contemporary projects that would benefit from national service programs could include conservation and environment work and repairs of roads and bridges. Those are areas where New Deal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration were most successful.

He said there are many parallels between the 1920s and 1980s, including problems with savings institutions and the impact of the

See RELIEF, C-4

'I had about 400 acres and I lost about \$300 after all expenses. The worst of it was, I had some money in savings and the bank went broke.'

Creating an alphabet bureaucracy

Numerous agencies were created during the Roosevelt administration to operate various emergency relief and regulatory programs. The agencies were usually known by their initials, but the alphabet bureaucracy often confused people. Some of the key agencies:

■ CCC — The Civilian Conservation Corps was established March 31, 1933, to organize conservation programs in the neglected state and federal forests and parks utilizing the country's young men. It was directed by Robert Fechner.

■ PWA — The Public Works Administration began June 16, 1933 as part of the National Industrial Recovery Act to improve the country's physical facilities and provide jobs by "priming the pump." It was headed by Harold Ickes, secretary of the Interior.

■ CWA — The Civil Works Administration was developed in the fall of 1933 as a federal work relief agency to create four million jobs, including work for artists and writers. It was headed by Harry Hopkins, one of FDR's close advisers.

■ WPA — The Works Progress Administration was developed in 1935 under the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act. It also was headed by Hopkins.