The WPA in Le Mars

Once upon a time, twenty-five buildings were built just outside of LeMars, Iowa, at a fancy recreation complex/golf course, a facility otherwise unheard of in the area, each building blessed with the very same Kasota limestone veneer, a building material so weather-averse that the collection at Willow Creek looks as if they’ve never yet seen a Siouxland storm.

Of the 25 buildings, only four are gone. The rest still stand, fortress-like: a bathhouse-shelter house over the sand beach above a swimming pond; a custodian’s cottage and service building; a scout cabin and six, one-room Adirondack shelters designed in a shape and form you won’t find anywhere else in east of the Mississippi.

The old clubhouse has a gabled roof of rough-cut stone rubble. A huge fireplace points up at an open-beam ceiling right in the middle of the great room. Massive gates stand at the entrance, stone portals that run out 35 feet in such a stately fashion you might think you’re driving onto palace grounds.

Count ‘em—fifteen buildings and structures make LeMars’s Willow Creek complex as much a museum as a golf course and recreation park because the entire original facility was built by the WPA. That’s right--WPA.

If my dad knew that, he’d smirk. A quarter century after thousands of WPA hand tools were rusting in some shed somewhere, my father could still get irritated. “You know what we used to say,” he’d tell me, “—if there’s a half-dozen guys standing on the streets with shovels, and five of them are leaning on ‘em, for sure it’s WPA.”

I didn’t know what the WPA was back then. All I knew is it was an outfit my dad used to call “make-work,” meaning, create jobs where there weren’t any.

But then he thought Franklin D. Roosevelt was a socialist and a stinker and that voting democratic meant leaving the straight-and-narrow to put your boots down on the path to perdition. What the Works Project Administration created, he maintained, was projects the government should have stayed the heck away from.

Like a golf course in LeMars, Iowa, and a fancy swimming hole. Like all those toady shelters created out of Kasota limestone veneer. My word.

He wasn’t the only one either. I’m guessing they’re still around today, whole tables full of gents my age in a dozen greasy spoons, drinking coffee and brimming with similar attitudes: the government sticks it’s money-grubbing hands into things and what happens just like that, five guys lean on shovels around somebody else’s gravy train. You know.

The Works Progress Administration started its engines in 1935 with an appropriation of $4.9 billion (6.7 percent of GDP), which isn’t—and surely wasn’t, I’ll grant you—chicken feed. But then, it was mid-Depression. Farm prices fell through the slats, pushing families off the land, shoving them, when there was no food on the table, into soup lines. Wasn’t pretty.
Speaking of chicken feed, one of the off-told tales was of a farmer—put him anywhere in
Siouxland—so sick of losing chickens that he sets up a shotgun to go off the next time some thief
raids the coop. Trap works, but the thief is a neighbor whose family has nothing to eat.

The WPA was created to quell poverty sweeping across the nation in the dirty Thirties. Hard,
cold cash went into empty pockets and put shovels into empty hands. “Relief” is actually what it
was.

Forty bucks for five six-hours days on the north side of LeMars, Iowa, where as many as a
hundred men down on their luck went to work on the city’s north side.

Doesn’t take much to get up a fight these days. Bring up the idea of the government creating
infrastructure jobs, and some people will roll their eyes--some of them, maybe, out there on the
greens at Willow Creek, where that great club house was built, once upon a time, by the sweat of
three or four dozen men who couldn’t have otherwise put food on the family table.

Great buildings out there. You ought to see them. That Kasota limestone, people say, lasts
forever.

Who knows?—after all, they’re still there.