WPA's of Abilene

(Works Progress Administration)

The **Works Progress Administration** (renamed during 1939 as the **Work Projects Administration**; **WPA**) was the largest New Deal agency, employing millions to carry out public works projects, including the construction of public buildings and roads, and operated large arts, drama, media, and literacy projects. It fed children and redistributed food, clothing, and housing. Almost every community in the United States had a park, bridge or school constructed by the agency, which especially benefited rural and Western populations. Expenditures from 1936 to 1939 totaled nearly $7 billion. By 1943, the total amount spent was over 11 billion.

In Abilene, KS the WPA built the swimming pool, Garfield Elementary school, Tom Smith stadium, Rose garden and other buildings, located in the Eisenhower Park. Under the WPA, this was one of 30 such projects in Kansas, sponsored by the Federal Government and completed in 1938.

Construction of the swimming pool began in December of 1936 with 60 men working 4 days a week. These men used shovels and wheelbarrows to dig out the pool area and horses to haul the dirt away. At one time it had a 35 ft. diving tower. It also had an observation deck on top where the snack bar was located and dances were held. It was completed for the cost of $92,000.

In 2009, city voters approved a sales tax to rebuild the pool. The original pool was excavated and a totally new pool constructed. There was strong sentiment among the public to preserve the WPA bath house. The City was able to preserve the historic bath house, however the observation deck, which had not been in use for decades, was not rebuilt.

Created by the order of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the WPA was funded by Congress with passage of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935 on April 8, 1935.

The WPA continued and extended relief programs similar to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), which was established by Congress in 1932 during the administration of Roosevelt's predecessor Herbert Hoover. The WPA provided jobs and income to the unemployed during the Great Depression in the United States. Between 1935 and 1943, the WPA provided almost eight million jobs.

Until ended by Congress and war employment during 1943, the WPA was the largest employer in the country. Most people who needed a job were eligible for at least some of its jobs. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Works_Progress_Administration - cite_note-3) Hourly wages were the prevailing wages in each area; the rules said workers could not work more than 30 hours a week, but many projects included months in the field, with workers eating and sleeping on worksites.

Before 1940, there was some training involved to teach new skills and the project's original legislation had a strong emphasis on training.

By March, 1936, the WPA rolls had reached a total of more than 3,400,000 persons; after initial cuts in June 1939, it averaged 2,300,000 monthly; and by June 30, 1943, when it was officially terminated, the WPA had employed more than 8,500,000 different persons on 1,410,000 individual projects, and had spent about $11 billion. During its 8-year history, the WPA built 651,087 miles of highways, roads, and streets; and constructed, repaired, or improved 124,031 bridges, 125,110 public buildings, 8,192 parks, and 853 airport landing fields.

The WPA was consistent with the strong belief of the time that husbands and wives should not both be working (because the second person working would take one job away from a breadwinner.) A study of 2,000 women workers in Philadelphia showed that 90% were married, but wives were reported as living with their husbands in only 18 percent of the cases. Only 2 percent of the husbands had private employment. "All of these [2,000] women," it was reported, "were responsible for from one to five additional people in the household."

About 15% of the household heads on relief were women. The average worker was about 40 years old (about the same as the average family head on relief).