

The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

“New Deal” Legacy

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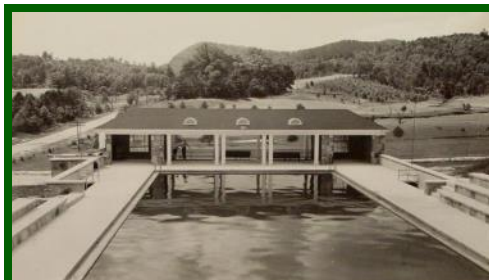
Frank A. Smith with his famous writer sister Lillian in front of the County bookmobile. Photo: circa 1940

When the stock market crashed in 1929 and the United States sank into a major economic depression, jobs disappeared and families suffered significant hardships. President Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” was a series of programs designed to put citizens back to work and reform the nation’s economic infrastructure. Agencies such as the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were created, as well as the largest program of them all, the Works Projects Administration (WPA).

The WPA was established in 1935, and at one time was the largest employer in the United States. Not only did it put people to work constructing buildings, but it also hired artists to create public art and librarians, actors, musicians, nurses, and cooks to do what they did best.

The WPA not only impacted Rabun County by providing desperately needed jobs, but it left a legacy of new construction that remains today. Of the 1,634 new schools built by the WPA, three were in Rabun County. Persimmon, Satolah, and Tiger schools were constructed. The school at Tiger, which opened in 1940, is still the original building, just remodeled and with numerous additions. The Persimmon Community still uses their former school as a community center, while the Satolah building is now a private residence.

Two gymnasiums were also constructed with WPA funds and workers. The Rabun County High School gym is now used as a county civic center, while the original gym at Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School has now been remodeled and is used as an administration building.



The swimming pool which was part of the development of the country club. Photo: 1940

FDR’s WPA also funded and built the swimming pool, tennis courts and golf course at the Rabun Country Club, as well as two canning plants for homemakers to preserve their garden produce. One of the most visible and highly used WPA buildings in Rabun County is the Rock House in downtown Clayton, originally called the Community Center, which was constructed in 1935.

Frank A. Smith, once Rabun’s CEO, recalled that approximately 300 Rabun County men and women were put to work by the WPA. Some worked as stonemasons on buildings and bridges. Some worked sewing, building 262 outhouses for public and private buildings, or cooking hot lunches for school children, a program that was begun with federal money from the WPA. Some critics of Roosevelt’s agency called it “make work,” suggesting that the jobs were not productive. Those three hundred

families that were employed in Rabun County would no doubt disagree, much preferring a “real job” with lasting results to receiving a handout from the government.

When the WPA was phased out in 1943, Rabun County had the WPA to thank for fifty miles of new roads, seventeen new bridges, a new bookmobile, 760 persons taught to read and write, thousands of garments sewn, and 371,000 hot school lunches served. The Clayton Tribune reported in December of 1941 that “this program has been one of the largest factors in the well-being of the county... It was designed to give employment to jobless people, but the benefits are permanent and will be a credit to the county for many years to come.” This prediction



Contemporary photo of the Rock House, which was built in 1935.

- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment

The “Hot Lunch” Project

In an era when concerns about children and food are not new, as we still enjoy the New Deal legacy in 2018, it is difficult to imagine a time when students had no school lunches at all and often went hungry at home.

During the Great Depression in Rabun County, economic times were even harder than usual, and families struggled without jobs. Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” programs, particularly the WPA (Works Projects Administration) sought to aid those struggling to make ends meet by providing jobs. In Rabun County, one of the most important programs funded by the WPA was the initiation of a hot lunch program for school children in the mid-1930s. Before these new hot lunches were established, students would bring a cold lunch or walk home to eat. Eleven Rabun County schools built kitchens where local women were paid by the WPA to cook and serve hot nutritious food at lunchtime. They included Clayton, Mountain City, Tiger, Lakemont, Chechero and Persimmon.

Much of the food served also came from the federal government in the form of surplus commodities from the Department of Agriculture. In addition, food was purchased locally, which aided in supporting Rabun County farmers. The county also operated five gardens, which in 1942 produced 16,830 quarts of canned food and 600 bushels of potatoes for school lunches. Carrie Edwards Dillard, well known for serving great food at her family’s boarding house, was head of Rabun County’s entire school lunch program. As Mrs. Dillard put it, “our aim is to prepare and serve well-balanced meals,” which were in many cases the only well-balanced meals some children enjoyed.

After World War Two began, Congress prepared to dismantle the WPA. This caused an uproar in Rabun County as it was felt there were not enough local funds to continue the school lunch program. Frank A. Smith, Rabun County’s C.E.O., and L.P. Cross, publisher of *The Clayton Tribune*, hatched a plan to save

“Hot Lunches.” Members of the community, including students, teachers and parents were urged to write public officials to voice opposition to phasing out the vital program. The response was so great that many of the letters were published in a special *Tribune* edition in January of 1943. No one can recall such an overwhelming outpouring on any other county issue of the twentieth century. Three thousand copies of the special newspaper edition were sent all over the United States and to every member of Congress.

The importance of the lunch program to Rabun County is best summed up in a few of those letters: Sixth grader Ray Owens said, “I lost ten pounds last summer because I did not have as good a meal at home as I did at school.” Third grader Sue Von York of Tiger proclaimed that she enjoyed her meals, and both she and her mother fervently hoped they would continue. Nellie Mae Hunter, a fourth grader at Burton, said she got a lot more fruits and vegetables now, and they helped her to study better. The lunches cost a nickel per day and could be paid in cash or in farm products. A teacher at Lakemont declared that before the program, more than half the students were found to be undernourished. J. H. LaPrade of Lake Burton summed up community feeling by stating, “I am very impressed with the Hot Lunch project, and anything you can do to keep this going will be appreciated by me.”

From 1935 through 1942, the WPA assisted in serving more than 371,000 school lunches in Rabun County and the school lunch program did continue even after the WPA was dismantled. Hungry children still exist, of course, but nutritious breakfasts and lunches at school are still helping to fill the need.



Lining up for lunch at the Persimmon School, 1942



Lunch at the Mountain City School, 1942



Clayton School students line up for lunch at the Cannery Building, 1942



Quenching Rabun's Thirst for Books

On February 11, 1916, the Clayton Tribune contained a news article that reviewed the formal opening of the public library in Clayton. More than one hundred people attended the reception, and more than fifty books were let out. That library, which was located on Main Street where Reeves Furniture is now located, was operated by the Clayton Woman's Club until 1920.

In April 1937, the Rabun County Library opened. The library came to be largely because of the efforts of Frank Smith, who was called "judge" since his days as Rabun County Ordinary. Smith was the brother of the famous novelist, Lillian Smith, who made her home in Rabun County. In a Foxfire interview, Judge Smith said that it was hard times in Rabun County, and people couldn't get to any books except perhaps the Bible or the Sears Roebuck catalog or a bulletin that came out from the Department of Agriculture.

During the years of the Great Depression, the WPA furnished personnel if the counties would furnish books and housing. Judge Smith found a tiny four by six foot room in the county courthouse to house the library. Judge Smith donated about one hundred of his personal books, and the members of the Clayton Women's Club, whose library had become inactive, gave their books. Citizens also contributed books, and the library opened with about 300 books. In the beginning, there were few books, short hours, and only one worker. Later that year, because of increasing circulation, a larger space was remodeled in the grand jury room in the courthouse.

In July of 1938, a Ford panel truck was purchased to carry books out into the county. It was like a vegetable truck with sides that lifted up to reveal the books. The bookmobile driver was also paid with WPA funding. The bookstock and circulation continued to increase, and the overwhelming majority of the circulation was through the bookmobile. In 1942 circulation was 79,352; 64,067 of these books were



Rabun County Library Bookmobile - Photo, circa 1950

checked out from the bookmobile. Circulation of library books in Rabun County was reported to be three times the national average. This was more than ten books for every person in the county. One mountain reader said Rabun County people had a reputation for being "the book-readingest folks in or out of the Blue Ridge mountains."



Rabun County Library building next to the gym (now Civic Center) - Photo, circa 1960

When the WPA went out of existence in the early 1940s, the library was threatened and Judge Smith acted again to save it. He waged an active campaign to obtain state aid for the library, which was accomplished in 1944. Today funding for the library is provided by Rabun County, and the state

provides minimal funds for some services.

The library and its 16,000 books were moved from the small quarters in the courthouse to a cement block building constructed on the grounds of Rabun County High School in 1949. It remained in that building until moving to the current location in 1980. Throughout these changes, the bookmobile continued to bring the library's services to isolated areas, the elderly

and homebound, and to children home from school for the summer. When the bookmobiles first began, none of the schools had libraries, so it was vitally important to the school reading programs. Dorothy Beck operated the bookmobile for 47 years and wore out at least four buses in her journeys around Rabun. Her route increased to include Stephens, Habersham, and White counties when the library joined the Northeast Georgia Library System in 1956. Some days she traveled as much as 300 miles. When funds were not allocated to operate the bookmobile, it had to be parked until funds came available again.

Dorothy Beck told a story about a woman on her route that had four children and no television or telephone. The bookmobile visited her home once a month, and she often met the bookmobile with a wheelbarrow to carry the books her family had read and to check out another month's supply. Former Library Director, Jewel Eller, was quoted as saying, "The bookmobile fostered a habit of reading in a lot of families." As society became more mobile, the bookmobile's circulation numbers decreased, and it ceased operation around 1990.

In 2006, through a combination of county and state funding, and some money from library sources, the current library building was expanded by 3,300 square feet into an attractive and functional space that continues to serve the needs of readers.



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We're on the web!
www.rabunhistory.org



Historical Marker Project

The late County Commission Chair, Stan Darnell; Mary Elizabeth Law of the Historical Society; and County Administrator Jim Bleckley at the newly installed bronze marker on the Rock House in downtown Clayton. This is the first in a series of plaques planned and paid for by the Society for historic buildings. If you have a building you would like to be considered, please contact us at rabunhsy@windstream.net or 706-782-5292.