

Hokah Municipal Building, Houston County



THE GREAT DEPRESSION brought hard times to Hokah, a southeastern Minnesota farm town on the Root River, but also a major opportunity.

Hokah had lost its town hall to fire in 1913, and locals had no place for public events. In 1937 city leaders learned that the Works Progress Administration would build a hall if the city could finance 40 percent of the cost. The council won voters' approval for a bond sale, and the WPA agreed to construct a multipurpose, Art Deco building on Main Street. It would feature a gymnasium/auditorium with a balcony on the upper level and shower rooms, city offices, a dining hall, and two stalls for fire trucks on the lower level.

Hokah's leading citizen, Herbert Wheaton, the flamboyant editor of *The Hokah Chief*, was an ardent Republican who used his newspaper to bash Democrats and Farmer-Laborites. For Wheaton, the WPA was a wasteful "make work" program that served as the butt of jokes.

The completion of WPA's town hall in 1939 forced him to reconsider. Speaking as the recently elected mayor, Wheaton announced that he was thrilled with "this magnificent new municipal building." He praised state WPA director Linus Glotzbach who told the crowd at the dedication ceremony that an unemployed worker on a WPA project "is as much entitled to be proud of his earnings as any other workman." Reporting on the event, Wheaton wrote that Glotzbach had "cleared up considerable misunderstandings in local circles."

Hokah citizens christened their new town hall by singing "A Hot Time in Old Hoky Tonight," followed by a dance. Since then, hundreds of dances and other community celebrations have been held in the building. It has also been a sports venue, home to high school basketball games and amateur boxing matches. Occasionally, it has been used for funerals, including Wheaton's in 1954.

In recognition of its central role in Hokah's history and its distinctive architecture, the building was recently added to the National Register of Historic Places. The upper level still hosts a full schedule of community events. City offices and the fire department have moved out of the lower level, opening up space for the Hokah Public Library and a food shelf. The town hall remains a beehive of daily activity, a living tribute to the New Deal.

—Greg Gaut and Marsha Neff

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GREG GAUT and **MARSHA NEFF** write about history from their home in Winona. Their article on the Winona Post office in *Minnesota History's* Summer 2013 issue won the Minnesota Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians' David Stanley Gebhard Award.

Putting the finishing touches on the new building; WPA photograph, about 1939.

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