

3SHORTGRASS.DOC

In the other Depression in the 1930s, government programs began to finance projects on farms and ranches. A cowboy said the other day, for example, that WPA workers built an outdoor toilet on his grandfather's ranch close to the house, the fanciest toilet he'd ever seen, with the initials "W.P.A." printed in the concrete floor.

Most of what circulated around my shine stand at the Mertzon barbershop centered on bad jokes, making crude names of the initials. Nevertheless, serious government-sponsored or subsidized work came directly or indirectly to these parts, from the huge Highway 67 project to small jobs like filling trench silos out in the country.

The ranch I grew up on included a 200-acre dryland farm to occupy nights in the summertime after the ranch chores ended. Among the bad parts, like combining oats at night or harvesting maize in August, was that boys on neighboring places knew you farmed, which was a disgrace for a cowhand.

One season, encouraged by the Department of Agriculture agents, my stepdad ground red top cane into silage to bury underneath the earth in a big trench. The purpose was to preserve the silage for hard times and to handle a little cash from the program.

The task required a big crew – too many hands to fit in Mother's kitchen. So an ol' trapper and ex-cowboy hired on as the cook and set up down at the barn to be added to the payroll as the first cook the ranch ever hired except at a shearing camp.

He looked to be 90 or a hundred years old on a hard luck scale for a century marker.

His chuck looked worse than he did. Mother was aghast at reports of eggshells in the burned skillet and soggy biscuits half done from Dutch ovens. I delighted in making up stories from the milk cow pen back to the house on Old John's recipes, but it didn't take much imagination to describe eggs being scrambled in half-done fried potatoes, or red beans ala rocks and dissolved dirt pellets.

My stepdad stayed too busy bossing 20 men and keeping the grinders and machinery going to worry about one cook. The important point now and then was that 20 men had jobs. All ages from high school on to the cook had summer wages that wouldn't have developed without government aid.

Behooves scholars and experts to say how we became such hard shells with government aid in our history. However, the other day at the post office a greybeard carried on at the window to the point you would have thought postage rates financed the war in Iraq.

"By gawd, you can't win a war with a civilian army!
No, by gawd, you can't win a war with civilians," he raved.
From behind him, that far back in the line, you couldn't
tell whether the one permanent postmistress and the
temporary hired for Christmas subjected to his lecture were
going overseas, or working as recruiting officers, or
serving part time on the draft board.

Once he wound down, the agent took care of my package
in short order. I had already written on the back of the
yellow notice instructions for her to write 12 times: "By
gawd, you can't win a war with a civilian army, by gawd,"
to get that wisdom down before the Mertzon post office made
a wrong move.

I told them and I'll tell you, slouchy clothes and old
army caps for costumes make a man plenty smart on Christmas
week. Laugh, but it isn't funny how hard it is to corner an
audience out in a lobby. Much better to back them into an
office, then unleash. A little shot of eggnog helps make a
point that time of day, too.

Government aid works different this Depression in the
shortgrass country. We have to read about unemployment
benefits being handed out without having to earn it. The
fossil fuel prospecting and producing of same provides

plenty of work. Sure, some are on the rolls. There always are a few.

But the summer of the big trench silo project, lots of dreams circulated around the camp at night. The young boys hoped to join the Civilian Conservation Corps. The Corps paid as much as a private received in the Army, twenty-one dollars a month, board and clothing allowance. Part of the allowance was sent home to the lad's parents.

The older men vowed they were going to go to work for the big money, helping build the highway, like driving equipment they'd never ridden upon, much less driven.

But ol' John wasn't going be diverted from his main career. I'll never forget him saying he was going to go back to trapping soon as people would allow him to quit cooking.