

Recreation and Sport as an Antidote to Economic Woes The Great Depression in Canada

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This paper examines the use of recreation and sport as an antidote to the economic difficulties of the 1930s - recreation and sport instead of work, and recreation and sport as work. Many communities used recreation and sport instead of work: the most highly publicized were the Calgary Leisure Time League and the Montreal Day Shelter for Unemployed Men. However, evidence in the correspondence of the Canadian Council on Child Welfare indicates that many other Canadian cities had programs for the unemployed and homeless to deal with their “enforced idleness.” Early in the decade, the Council expanded its mandate to include investigating the services available for the unemployed and promoting the provision of such services when they were not available. The most tangible evidence of this effort was the 1932 trip, funded by the Council, made by the chairman of its Recreation Division, William Bowie, to speak to interested groups about providing recreation services for the unemployed. The correspondence and Bowie’s report of this trip give an excellent picture of the state of recreation and sport services for the unemployed in the early years of the Depression from the perspectives of both the local officials and Bowie himself. Many of these programs focused on unemployed men in urban areas. The predicament of unemployed women was largely ignored, as was the plight of the rural unemployed.

As part of the solution to the unemployment problem, the federal government developed a program of relief work camps for the unemployed. While at first glance these camps may be considered comparable to the civilian Conservation Corps in the United States, evidence suggests that they were certainly not as conducive to the workers’ well-being and skill development as the U.S. camps were. They have even been described by some as “slave camps.” The camps were severely lacking in recreation opportunities. Both the Council on Child Welfare and the Y.M.C.A. attempted to influence the federal government to improve recreation services to these men, but they met with limited success. While recreation and sport was not viewed as essential inside the camps for men during their leisure, they, through their labour, were developing part of the delivery system for parks and recreation. Relief work built recreation facilities in several national and municipal parks. Thus recreation facilities were the product of programs for the unemployed, even though the unemployed were

seldom able to benefit from this product during the 1930s. Again, these programs targeted unemployed men; there is no mention of federal relief programs for unemployed women.

Another set of strategies which addressed the needs of the unemployed and considered recreation as work were the programs that grew out of the federal government's 1937 Unemployment and Agricultural Assistance Act and its successors in 1938 and 1939. Based in large part on input from Ian Eisenhardt, director of the British Columbia Pro-Rec program, the federal government established the Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Program. This program funded training of unemployed young people, both men and women, in several areas including forestry, mining, agriculture and various occupations. It attempted to make them fit for work. Inherent in the program were recreation and sport opportunities on two fronts: firstly, the training programs for all fields were to include physical recreation opportunities in the training camps; secondly, the training of physical recreation leaders was a distinct occupational training program. This latter part of the cost-shared program was entered into by five provinces, beginning their first provincial recreation and sport leadership training programs. The male and female graduates of these programs went into communities in their respective provinces to lead physical activity programs. Thus, these recreation and sport training programs were initially programs for the unemployed, and then developed into community-based programs which had recreation and sport opportunities for both men and women as a product.

The programs first focused on the most viable products of the Depression - unemployed and homeless men. As the Depression continued and intensified, and relief programs were not an adequate solution, other legislated programs which were much broader in scope were established. At all stages of this process, recreation and sport was part of the solution to economic difficulties.