

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
AND ITS ACHIEVEMENT IN PORTRAYING AMERICAN
CULTURE, 1935-1939**

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An Abstract
Presented to
The Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Gregory G. Poole
August, 1985

ABSTRACT

Historians have long debated the innovative and revolutionary nature of the New Deal and the merits of its relief program, the Works Progress Administration. In discussing the more prominent aspects of both, they have given insufficient attention to the federal government's patronage of the arts during the Depression years. This study aims to shed light on one of the WPA's most significant cultural achievements, the Federal Writers' Project.

This work is divided into four sections. Chapters 1 and 2 deal briefly with the background and administration of the Federal Writers' Project. The impact of the Depression on writers and other professionals and the establishment of a writers' project for them are the objectives of the first two chapters.

The final two chapters focus on the works produced by the Federal Writers' Project. Chapter 3 is concerned with the American Guide Series, the project's raison d'etre. Chapter 3 provides a careful analysis of the American guides, including their strengths and weaknesses, and their importance as research sources

for the historian today. Chapter 4 deals with the auxiliary projects produced by the writers. The experimental volumes and research efforts included collections of ex-slave narratives, "life-histories" of contemporary Americans during the 1930s, and creative works by writers on the project. The auxiliary works strengthened the project's contribution to cultural history in the 1930s and recorded the contemporary life of the Depression.

It is important that the works produced by the Federal Writers' Project still be utilized by historians wishing a unique view of the past. This thesis aims at better informing those who are interested in the Federal Writers' Project and its works.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Gregory G. Poole entitled "A Brief History of the Federal Writers' Project and its Achievement in Portraying American Culture, 1935-1939." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.


(Major Professor)

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:


Second Committee Member


Third Committee Member

Accepted for the
Graduate Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deep appreciation is due to many who were instrumental in the preparation of this thesis, especially Dr. Charles Calhoun, whose invaluable advice and criticisms often steadied my faltering footsteps. His help is greatly appreciated.

To Drs. Preston Hubbard and Richard Gildrie a special thanks is warranted for their contributions in the classroom and on the thesis as well.

The author also wishes to thank the fine staff of the Woodward Library who were able to procure valuable sources for use in this work. The librarians of the Tennessee State Archives were helpful as well.

And finally, many thanks to my fine typist, Marsha Lewis Bailey, without whose help this thesis would not have been completed.

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CHAPTER 1

The Birth of the Federal Writers' Project

The economic crisis of the 1930s rocked the publishing world with considerable violence. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the writing fraternity, which included creative writers, editors, and newspapermen, had increased steadily from 38,750 in 1910 to 40,805 in 1920, to 64,293 by 1930. Prosperity accompanied the increase particularly during the 1920s.¹

At the top of the profession were those famous authors with established careers whose names guaranteed sales of what they wrote. As examples, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, and Zane Gray commanded respectable annual incomes of around \$70,000 from royalties. Thomas R. Coward, in his article, "Does Authorship Pay?" made a composite picture of a popular novelist in the 1920s, whose new book had just sold 50,000 copies, and who was eager to pursue every offer:

¹Edward Weeks, "Hard Times and the Author," Atlantic Monthly, 155 (May, 1935), p. 550.

Royalty at 15% of \$2.50	\$18,750
Motion picture rights	\$25,000
Sale of serial rights on next novel	\$15,000
Miscellaneous, short stories, all written but previously rejected	\$ 3,000
Contract for 6 short stories.	\$ 6,000
Lectures.	\$ 2,500
English foreign rights, second serial.	\$ 2,500
Motion picture contract for editorial work	\$ 5,000
	<u>\$77,750²</u>

Below these "stars" came a group of creative writers, magazine journalists, and technical writers, whose average income in the 1920s was between \$10,000 and \$15,000. Still, the majority of professional writers in the 1920s had earnings from \$5,000 down to \$800 a year from their published works and drew the remainder of their livelihood from other sources.³

Then came the depression. It affected writers according to their standing in the profession. Those who had earned \$70,000 faced no threat of hardship. One commentator estimated that there were fewer than

²Thomas R. Coward, "Does Authorship Pay?" Literary Observer (August-September, 1934), p. 139.

³Weeks, op. cit., p. 551.

twenty authors in that category by 1934.⁴ Those in the other two groups had increasingly less security. Older established writers now faced dismissal from newspapers or magazine staffs on short notice. Freelance writers faced a diminished demand for articles and short stories. For example, after twenty-five years of writing and twenty-five novels, Sherwood Anderson admitted he found himself always in need of money, "always just two steps ahead of the sheriff."⁵

Some unemployed writers took jobs as school teachers or found occasional jobs at newspapers. Others took more drastic measures; Katherine Anne Porter, for example, stayed in Mexico, for her health and also for economy's sake, in exile from her friends in New York. "New York seems so far away," she wrote to her friend, Matthew Josephson. "It seems unreasonable to think I should not see it again for long and long. It baffles me that I have never been able to live there, when I love the place so much."⁶

⁴Ibid., p. 552.

⁵Sherwood Anderson, Memoirs (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), p. 238.

⁶Matthew Josephson, Infidel in the Temple (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 104.

Even writers who found employment as journalists or editors did not escape the depression. Many newspapers folded and others had to resort to consolidation as advertising dwindled. In twenty-three cities, the total of newspaper advertising for 1933 hit the lowest point since 1918, and 40 percent below the 1928 peak. Publishing journals were continually filled with petitions of bankruptcies and cancellations of daily editions. The rate of bankruptcies in the field reached 48 percent and by 1935 only about 120 cities had more than one newspaper. In New York an estimated 1,500 journalists were unemployed.⁷

All of this, however, did not change the popular image of the writer's condition. A poet wrote

that the public saw them as trash. Living meant going to the office. Writing for magazines was jeered at, unless it was for the Saturday Evening Post. That meant acceptance, money and the proper capitalist virtues.

Privation and sufferings were the writers' proper lot, argued a syndicated columnist.

No writer is worth shucks until he can and has taken punishment. He is supposed to go hungry and ragged and cold, to drudge at

⁷"Unemployed Writers," Monthly Labor Review, 40 (May, 1935), p. 1137.

chores he loathes, to suffer endless humiliation and rejection doing the thing he loves in infrequent stolen moments. It makes a writer.⁸

The New York Times concluded its criticism of "lazy" American writers by asking, "Can it be that they spend too much time attending literary teas?"⁹

Financially secure in the editorship of Saturday Review of Literature, H. S. Canby pontificated that authors should not be given a salary, since "profits in themselves do not stimulate good literature." Unfortunately, the editor did not disclose any basis for his concluding claim that "no good and celebrated story-teller or playwright, even in 1932, can fail of a decent reward."¹⁰

The New York Times suggested that writers could gain literary inspiration from Victor Hugo's diet of orange peel scraps and claws of crayfish, or George Eliot's red pickled cabbage, onions, and coffee.¹¹

⁸Monty Penkower, The Federal Writers Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 15.

⁹New York Times, April 19, 1931, Pt. III, p. 1.

¹⁰H. S. Canby, "Should Writers Go On a Salary?" Saturday Review of Literature (November 26, 1932), p. 270.

¹¹New York Times, September 10, 1930, p. 2, Col. 3.

Nevertheless, the depression lingered, and professional writers, after 1933, began to look to Roosevelt's New Deal for solutions to their unemployment problems. There were signs of hope. Harry Hopkins, the social worker and advisor to Roosevelt, argued that "white-collar" people in the country were just as deserving of relief as manual laborers. "Was it common sense," asked Hopkins, "to take musicians, lawyers, artists, doctors, actors, and writers, and put them to work with pick and shovel?"¹² Hopkins was an early champion of the arts in the United States. "Hell," he snapped, "they've got to eat just like other people."¹²

Along with assorted policies and programs to revive the economy, the New Deal experimented with federal programs to provide jobs for the unemployed. The first agency that sponsored relief programs across the country was the Federal Emergency Relief

¹²Harry Hopkins, "Food for the Hungry," Colliers 46 (December 7, 1935), p. 62. The interested reader should also consult Hopkins' famous work, Spending to Save. See also Robert Sherwood's Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History, a contemporary portrayal by a famous playwright and activist. Brilliantly, pro-New Deal is A. M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s The Coming of the New Deal (1959).

¹³Josephson, Infidel in the Temple, p. 347.

Administration (FERA). Established in May, 1933, FERA subsidized work projects through direct grants to state relief agencies. Hopkins, who served as its administrator, wanted to include nonmanual as well as manual workers on the agencies' rolls. Included in this skilled group of needy citizens were white-collar workers such as secretaries and clerks, professional people such as nurses and teachers and those who worked in the arts: actors, artists, musicians, and writers.

Hopkins faced no easy task. The creation and administration of work projects remained with state officials, not FERA. The only control Hopkins could exercise was through his power to approve or disapprove the proposals that state agencies submitted with their reports for grants. Hopkins and his assistant, Jacob Baker, encouraged state relief agencies to submit projects for skilled and educated workers. Only a few agencies responded with imaginative plans. Still, during its two years, FERA experimented with three programs of assistance to a particular group of educated workers, the professional writers: the reporting projects within FERA, the California experiment with journalists, and the

production of a state guidebook for Connecticut.¹⁴

The reporting projects within FERA operated at federal and state levels, in FERA's Washington headquarters and in a few state offices, the largest of which was in New York City. Writers digested the flood of information coming from the relief programs and prepared press releases based on this material. Writers also composed research papers for FERA officials that analyzed the government relief activities. The reporting division in the Washington office was under Henry Alsberg, a freelance writer and journalist, who later became the director of a federal writers' project launched by the WPA.

In California, Hugh Harland, a journalist with the Los Angeles Times persuaded the state FERA to permit him to operate a program that would give jobs to journalists out of work. Harland supervised an office in Los Angeles which operated like a newspaper's city room. Working for weekly wages, reporters

¹⁴Edward A. Williams, Federal Aid for Relief (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), p. 98. See also Joseph C. Brown, Public Relief, 1929-1939, pp. 1-38. A more recent reference can be found in Frank Freidel's Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal (1974).

received daily assignments, wrote copy, and prepared pamphlet length histories and essays about contemporary Los Angeles and its environs. The project benefited from favorable publicity in the Los Angeles press, with good cause. Harland argued that the experiment proved that the writers preferred productive work over the relief dole.¹⁵

Connecticut's State Planning Board approached FERA officials about the sponsorship of a small project in which writers would prepare a guide to publicize Connecticut's tricentennial celebration in 1935. The result of the project was a 309 page soft-bound travel guide published by the Emergency Relief Commission in 1935. Entitled The Connecticut Guide: What to See and Where to Find It, the book contained two parts. One section, entitled "Answering the Traveler's Questions," gave general information on the state's history, architecture, archeology, geography, and population. The section entitled "Journeys" included fourteen detailed accounts of trips a motorist might take. The accounts combined historical notes about what the motorist would see along the route, with information about the current scene. The Connecticut

¹⁵Los Angeles Times, August 29, 1934, p. 1.

Guide was a financial success and gave encouragement for a future federal writers' project.¹⁶

Unfortunately, Hopkins could not impose on the states a nationwide program for unemployed writers because of the autonomy of FERA in each state. But the FERA experiments in California and Connecticut were important because they included writers under the coverage of federal relief for the unemployed.

Another New Deal agency, the Civil Works Administration (CWA), considered aid to writers as cultural workers even though it did not subsidize a writers' project. It did allocate funds to the Treasury Department which administered a project for painters and sculptors, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). This program lasted only from December, 1933 to April, 1934. Under its director, Edward Bruce, the project subsidized about 2,600 artists who decorated public buildings. After funds ran out in 1934, the Treasury Department established a section of painting and sculpture that lasted until 1942.

¹⁶William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administration History of the Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), p. 658.

These experiments prompted many government officials, including Edward Bruce, to consider the policies the federal government might develop for creative writers and about the ways in which they might participate in federal programs.

That the government might develop a plan to aid unemployed writers pleased most, but several critics warned about difficult policy issues, chief of which was developing the right kind of program for writers, similar to those already established for artists. Many shared the opinion that putting writers to work on a government project would be more difficult than putting artists to work on murals for public buildings because the creative process in writing was a more individualistic effort not disposed toward organization or supervision.¹⁷

The policy questions that received the most attention concerned censorship of the literary products of any governmental writing project and the danger of the regimentation of writers into a propaganda enterprise. How would the necessary freedom for creative writing be reconciled with the equally necessary controls which seemed part of any government

¹⁷Canby, loc. cit.

project launched in the public interest? The poet, William Carlos Williams, voiced serious reservations about the prospects for a government writers' project achieving literary excellence. He doubted that the project would be free from censorship and thought the difficulties almost "insuperable." Nevertheless, Williams felt a "department of fine arts" was worthy of discussion and noted: "Wonders might come from such a move as you propose, for letters are the wave's edge, in all cultural advance which, God knows, we in America ain't got much of."¹⁸

Critics and advisers were more enthusiastic in submitting ideas for programs than in grappling with governmental organizations and specific regulations for a project. One idea submitted with variations by several writers was for publication of magazines as outlets for creative writers. The poets, Conrad Aiken, Babbette Deutsch, John Gould Fletcher, the novelist, Theodore Dreiser, and the critic, Jay Sigmund, advocated use of regional and national journals, published under the auspices of a federal

¹⁸William Carlos Williams, Autobiography (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 339.

program.¹⁹ Others proposed scholarships or merit awards, large scale translation projects in which language students would translate foreign works and writers would recast the prose in clear and readable English, and employment of writers as teachers in adult education.²⁰

On February 19, 1934, the Authors' League, fearing delay, suggested to CWA officials in Washington a project that would be of "social usefulness" to the government as well as to readers and writers. The plan, "a survey of varying aspects of everyday life as it is lived in all parts of the United States," was the first of many that were later adopted as the American Guide Series proposal of the Federal Writers' Project. According to the League's plan, which was designed for trained writers, each writer would receive an assignment to supply an hour-by-hour account of one day in the life of a person in his community.

¹⁹The Nation 138 (February 14, 1934), 171, felt that the plan was a good one, but if this "unemployed literature" were published at government expense, "the depression will become a holocaust".

²⁰Editor and Publisher 66 (February 3, 1934), p. 44.

Historians would consider the purely historical aspects of the community, and other writers would comment on its ethnological aspects. If all went well the project could employ 500 writers for ten weeks.²¹

But these were merely suggestions. They did not develop into a proposal as to whether writers could participate in a "division of fine arts", nor, indeed, did such a division appear. Bruce moved to the Treasury Department in early 1935, and it seemed that the federal government would be unable to aid writers. Two organizations outside the government keenly interested in promoting federal relief programs for writers kept the issue alive. One was the Authors League of America (ALA) and the other was the League of American Authors (LAA).

It was the Authors League that had proposed the plan for the employment of writers. The Authors' League with its headquarters in New York City had organized in 1912 as an organization designed to secure greater copyright protection for authors. By the 1930s it had between 4,000 and 5,000 members who worked in the four guilds of the creative arts, artists, dramatists, screenwriters, and journalists.

²¹New York Times, February 18, 1934, p. 2, Col. 4.

Many of the nation's established authors were members of the Authors' League of America. And many Authors' League members wrote their congressmen to express their wish that something be done for the destitute.

Early in 1934, a committee of the Authors' League--Unemployed Writers Association, demanded help for the writers from the federal government. Led by its chairman, Robert Whitcomb, the group first requested in a letter to Lawrence W. Robert, the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, that the Treasury's Public Works of Art Project be expanded to include writers. This would enable them to escape the relief classification of "clerk." Citing Census Bureau statistics that between 1920 and 1930 the number of professional writers in the country had increased from 40,000 to 62,000, the Unemployed Writers Association pressed its point that most of these 22,000 additional people needed jobs. New York City's unemployed writers alone, the committee argued, numbered almost 5,000.²² A fund which the Authors' League had established to aid destitute members was

²²New York Times, February 16, 1934, p. 7, Col. 2.

dwindling because of the many requests for aid.²³

Frustration boiled over into a small demonstration in front of the New York offices of the Public Works of Art Project in February, 1934. The group of about forty called on Colonel Walter A. Delamater to ask for government recognition of writing as a profession and for a PWAP project employing writers at their own work. Delamater's reply was that "we are in no position to start a project such as you ask. Letter writers," he continued, "write books, plays, and novels in their own homes." Delamater further claimed that the project had at least 1,000 writers employed on research jobs and at local universities. He told them that all they could do with their demands was to "go to Washington and ask for a subsidy."²⁴

The Authors' League of America was not the only organization that was seeking federal assistance for unemployed writers. A group similar in name but different in philosophy was the League of American Authors (LAA). More radical than the Authors' League,

²³New York Times, April 17, 1934, p. 23, Col. 2.

²⁴New York Times, February 16, 1934, p. 14, Col. 2.

the group materialized from a convention of leftist writers which met as the first American Writers Congress in New York in May, 1935. While the American Communist Party sponsored the meeting, the writers who attended espoused all degrees of leftist political philosophies. The delegates to the congress discussed the role of the writer in American society and the use of literature as an instrument to bring about revolutionary change. The League of American Authors operated chiefly in New York City through the militant labor organization, the Workers' Alliances, and through several writers' unions affiliated with the recently organized Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO).²⁵

By the summer of 1935, the three writers' experiments that FERA had pioneered and the interest which both the Authors' League and the League of American Authors expressed produced conditions favorable for acceptance by the New Dealers of a federal relief project for needy writers. Writing in 1941, Merle Colby aptly expressed how the different ideas developed into a program. "Like many another sound and workable idea, the Federal Writers' Project

²⁵Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), p. 297.

floated like a seed into the air. Unlike many ideas good and better," he continued, "this seed found, during the summer of 1935, enough social soil, rain and sunshine to sprout and take root." The "social soil" in this case was another New Deal relief experiment to help the unemployed--the Works Progress Administration.²⁶

President Roosevelt's relief program came back from Congress on April 5, 1935, in the form of an Emergency Relief Act. In between titles which authorized labor, construction, and engineering projects, was an enabling clause that provided "assistance to educational, profession, and clerical persons, a nationwide program for useful employment of artists, musicians, actors, entertainers, writers and others in these cultural fields."²⁷

The funds now available for relief set off a feud among the President's advisers over who should head the powerful organization which channeled money to the unemployed. In a typical maneuver, Roosevelt

²⁶Merle Colby, "Presenting America to All Americans," Publishers' Weekly 139 (May 3, 1941), p. 1828.

²⁷New York Times, April 6, 1935, p. 2, Col. 1.

started with three chiefs. Secretary of the Interior, Harold C. Ickes, became chairman of an advisory committee on allotments that judged each proposed project for its value as relief and for the amount of productive work the taxpayers would receive. The former FERA chief, Harry Hopkins, headed the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The project was charged with the duties of coordination, investigation, and reporting, which, Roosevelt believed, would make it mainly a "bookkeeping" organization. But Roosevelt included a phrase in the executive order creating the Works Progress Administration that permitted it to "recommend and carry on small useful projects."

Positioned between Ickes and Hopkins was Frank Waller, a long-time adviser to Roosevelt. Waller was technically the director of a division of applications and information, but his main task was to keep peace between Ickes and Hopkins. Hopkins, in May, 1935, convinced Roosevelt that small useful projects which emphasized white-collar work instead of manual labor could get more money more quickly to people who needed it.²⁸

²⁸Robert E. Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), p. 67.

A grant which gave \$300 million of relief appropriations for white collar projects gave Hopkins an opportunity to push ahead with a scheme for cultural relief. He assigned the task of organizing the four cultural projects to Jacob Baker, the assistant administrator of FERA. Baker, who had worked with Hopkins since 1933, was an engineer and had worked as an engineering consultant for a Chicago firm during the 1920s. Baker had established a publishing firm in 1926, Vanguard Press, that specialized in educational books. In 1935, while initiating massive engineering projects and supervising the Surplus Commodity Credit Corporation, he was selected to plan cultural projects.²⁹

Among other advisers, Henry Alsberg was chosen to develop the plans for a writers' project. While little known outside of his birthplace, New York City, Alsberg was extremely capable for the task.

Born in 1881, he entered Columbia University at fifteen years of age. After graduating from Columbia Law School, he practiced law for three years before entering Harvard's graduate English department. After

²⁹New York Times, July 4, 1935, p. 18, Col. 1.

securing a spot on the editorial board of the New York Post, Alsberg became a foreign correspondent for several European newspapers.

Returning to the United States in the late 1920s, Alsberg became a successful play director with the Provincetown Players. In 1934 he came to Washington to work with CWA. The result of his work was America Fights the Depression, which revealed hack work and hasty arrangement. Yet the volume accomplished its purpose, and Baker succeeded in getting Alsberg appointed as supervisor of the reports and records issued by FERA, where he served primarily in an editorial capacity.³⁰

Next to Alsberg in the Federal Writers' Project hierarchy was the fifty-year-old George Cronyn, the associate director. On the theory that a novelist should accumulate diverse experiences before attempting to write, he had been an apple-grower, a rancher, and a plumber. Baker was pleased that Cronyn had been the business manager of Story magazine and editor of a business monthly entitled System. Cronyn had also served on the editorial staff of two encyclopedias,

³⁰New York Herald Tribune, October 7, 1934, p. 4, Col. 7.

the Columbia and the New Standard. Cronyn had taught English at Montana State University before turning to the composition of two novels, The Fool of Venus and Fortune and Men's Eyes.³¹

The third member of the planning committee for a writers' project was Reed Harris. A few years earlier, as the editor of the undergraduate Columbia University Spectator, Harris had come to the public's attention by being expelled for reprinting a report against the excessive prices, poor quality of food, and mistreatment of waiters in Columbia's dining halls. After the American Civil Liberties Union came to his defense, he was reinstated, but withdrew in protest. With the publication by Vanguard Press of his harsh attacks against the professional racketeering aspects of college football, he was hired by Jacob Baker.³²

Alsberg, Cronyn, and Harris, along with Claire Laning, constituted the planning group for the Federal Writers' Project. The committee was under pressure to present for WPA approval by August, 1935, a book-length plan spelling out purposes, goals,

³¹Penkower, op. cit., p. 24.

³²See the Columbia Spectator, April 1-21, 1932, and Harris' book entitled King Football printed in 1932.

administrative organization, and the estimated cost for the Federal Writers' Project. The group recommended a plan which would offer work to 6,500 professional writers, editors, and researchers for one year at the estimated cost of \$6,285,220. The project would serve two functions: (1) wage earning positions would maintain writers' skills and spare them the humiliating dole; and, (2) the Federal Writers' Project would organize the writers' work to serve socially useful and practical ends.

The major question regarding the proposed Federal Writers' Project was whether the project should try to improve the quality of American letters through the subsidization of a select group of creative writers or whether it should strive to provide as many relief positions as possible for needy writers. The limited program of subsidies to creative writers could produce worthwhile literature in keeping with the idea of a "division of fine arts." There were concerns over the potential problems with regard to the selection of the writers and the threat of censorship but the possibility of emphasizing creative work seemed more closely related to the other cultural projects in theater, art, and music.

In contrast with the idea of subsidization for creative writing was the obvious concern in the Works Progress Administration for relief, first and culture, second. The Federal Writers' Project's task was not simply to determine who were needy writers; the task was to identify needy writers who qualified for the Federal Writers' Project employment because they were on relief rolls.

As it turned out, the term "writer" was too narrow to encompass all those who worked with the Federal Writers' Project. No doubt the idea to call the experiment a "writers' project" complemented other project ideas for artists, actors, and painters. They possessed skills which might involve them with research and writing. The Federal Writers' Project employed poets, novelists, editors, teachers, architects, critics, journalists, cartographers, photographers, and secretaries. There were people trained in the publishing field; people from advertising and public relations, libraries, and even ministers.

Since the planning group based the Federal Writers' Project's program on the type of people who needed employment rather than on a limited or selected group of writers, it was important to find work which

used the various skills of unemployed, educated workers. It must also follow the WPA dictated that any relief work performed must be usefully directed toward community or cultural improvement, and that it not compete directly with private industry.

The planners recommended that the Federal Writers' Project absorb the reporting division of the FERA. Some workers would prepare news bulletins and reports about the WPA to use as publicity. The planners next suggested the preparation of an encyclopedia of government functions to unravel for government workers and the public the "alphabet agencies" of the New Deal. For the Federal Writers' Project's chief activity, the committee recommended the preparation of several volumes of American travel guides.

The idea for a series of guidebooks had several sources. The earlier suggestions were made by the poet, Marianne Moore, and the critic, Ridgely Torrence, in 1934. Both writers thought the government could support a program in which writers produced state histories and travel guides. The success of the guide produced by Connecticut's FERA experimental writers' program further impressed the Federal Writers' Project planning group. Final encouragement came when Henry

Alsberg found that his friend's wife, Katherine Kellock, had an avid interest in guidebooks for the United States.³³

Just after World War I, Kellock had worked for a Quaker relief service in the south-central area of the U.S.S.R. On a two week vacation, she visited Tashkent and Samarkand and used the 1910 edition of travel guides published by the German publisher, Karl Baedeker. The "Baedekers" had been written originally between 1851-1859 and periodically revised until 1910. Despite their age, they were extremely accurate for travelers in the 1920s. Kellock remembered the guides after her return to the United States and approached several publishers with the idea of writing a "Baedekers" for parts of the United States.³⁴

³³Katherine Kellock, "The WPA Writers' Portraits of the United States," American Scholar 9 (October 1940), p. 473.

³⁴Actually, there existed a Baedeker guide, published in 1909. It had warned foreign visitors about the lack of public lavatories and noted that pistols could be left at home since the Indians had been subdued. A few more informative guidebooks were outdated, such as King's Handbook of the U.S. (1891) and Rider's guides to New York (1924) and the capital. The U.S. Geological Survey put out a Guidebook of the Western States (1922) in five pamphlets, and the National Park Service offered handouts to its visitors. There were also such recent works as the studies of Louisiana by Lyle Saxon, Cornelius Weygandt's volumes about Pennsylvania, and Edward Dunn's Double Crossing America by Motor (1933).

The Depression had dampened the publishers' interest in new projects. The Federal Writers' Project might be the agency that could produce the travel volumes. Kellock explained to Alsbery the plan for the guides. She could not help in planning sessions because of a position with the Resettlement Administration, but Alsberg remembered her extensive knowledge of tour guides and later enlisted her for the Federal Writers' Project Washington staff where she became editor of the tours section in early 1936.³⁵

The planning committee advised the WPA's Professional and Services Division that "the United States was the only large civilized country in the world where a comprehensive guidebook cannot be obtained."³⁶ To remedy this situation the planners recommended that the project prepare a series of five guides which corresponded roughly to five regions of the nation. The guides would combine historical backgrounds with contemporary tour directions to cover each region. The Federal Writers' Project, the planners hoped, would climax the series with a

³⁵Jerre Mangione, The Dream and the Deal. The Federal Writers Project, 1935-1943 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 62.

³⁶Kellock, loc. cit.

one-volume guide to the United States. The preparation of the American Guide Series quickly became the chief concern of the planning group and indeed dominated the history of the Federal Writers' Project.³⁷

The Associate Director, George Cronyn, was optimistic about the proposal of the American Guides, although he had reservations about bringing out one national and five regional guides. He thought the plan would cause bickerings over state groupings and the space awarded to each state and city. He advocated a guidebook for each state and selected major cities. If those proved successful the regional guides would follow and then the one-volume national guide. Individual state guides would be easier to produce and would conform to the WPA organization.

Other attractions of this approach were that the guides would appeal to states that wanted to increase tourism. It would be easier to convince state administrators and the public of the usefulness of the guides rather than of the cultural or artistic value of subsidized creative literature. The planning group, before it submitted its final report, adopted

³⁷Ibid., pp. 474-75.

Cronyn's blueprint.³⁸

By September, 1935, the committee had submitted its scheme for the Federal Writers' Project and awaited WPA approval. Hopkins closely questioned the planners. They explained how the writers' project would work with the WPA in the states. Hopkins wanted the guides to be completed in one year; Cronyn thought it would take at least three or four years. But Hopkins stressed the importance of viewing the Federal Writers' Project first as relief work and second as a cultural experiment. The first concern was to provide employment to as many qualified writers as quickly as possible.³⁹

By September, 1935, Hopkins and the four national directors thought the four cultural projects were ready for their public debut under the administration of the WPA. Hopkins, on September 28 and 30, sent letters to all state WPA officials who, in turn, gave authorization and procedure outlines for the four projects. Although the four projects were to organize

³⁸Ibid., p. 475.

³⁹Searle F. Charles, Minister of Relief: Hopkins and the Great Depression (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963), p. 136.

along district and state lines similar to the parent WPA, the bulletins noted special features. Full technical authority would go to a national director rather than to individual state administrators. While most WPA employees worked the 120 hours per month prescribed for work relief, cultural project employees would work a 96 hour month.⁴⁰

Hopkins outlined the chain of command which incorporated the cultural projects, the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Arts Project, and the Federal Theater Project, into the WPA. Jacob Baker, who had been acting in the capacity through the summer, became Hopkins' representative to the cultural projects, known collectively as the "Federal One."

The WPA's announcement signaled the acceptance by New Deal policymakers of the principle that in time of economic depression, the federal government had the obligation to aid white-collar and professional unemployed workers. Few individuals within the government criticized the policy in 1935 because it was untried and not yet clearly defined. There was debate about the best way for the project to use

⁴⁰Grace Overmyer, Government and the Arts (New York: W. W. Norton, 1939), p. 124.

educated or highly-skilled workers rather than opposition to the idea itself. In fact, the size of the WPA and the extent of its activities overshadowed the very small projects for actors, artists, musicians, and writers. The arrival of the Federal Writers' Project was a quiet affair, noted only in the country's major newspapers. The New York Times noted that Alsbery had received his official appointment on July 25, 1935; his title was the National Director of the Federal Writers' Project.⁴¹

In the beginning the press was generally cool and sometimes disparaging. Criticism came mainly from those who preferred to see relief funds allocated to construction and labor projects rather than to white-collar and cultural workers. In addition to the WPA shovel leaners, the action could now have pencil leaners, one editorial complained in the Washington Post.⁴²

Harry Hopkins had encountered the same criticism during the days of FERA. To many, this "federal boondoggling" was both frivolous and wasteful. Some

⁴¹New York Times, July 27, 1935, p. 15, Col. 5.

⁴²Washington Post, October 11, 1935, p. 7.

critics did not understand the extent of unemployment among writers and artists. They argued that the number of unemployed white-collar workers was small compared with the number of unemployed workingmen, and that special relief projects for such a small group would necessarily be wasteful. In reality, however, studies showed that while white-collar workers managed to stay off relief rolls longer than laborers, their numbers on relief rosters had increased steadily up to 1935. In that year, white-collar workers represented 11 percent of the total on relief.⁴³

On another account the Washington Post, while praising the WPA, doubted the wisdom of the Federal Writers' Project. "The noblest victories which genius has won have been accomplished under conditions of misery." To this philistine myth it added the old chestnut that "luxury and ease have been handicaps to creative effort" and predicted that "even that degree of subsidization which the WPA can provide is more apt to be a blight than a help."⁴⁴

⁴³Overmyer, op. cit., p. 128.

⁴⁴Washington Post, November 17, 1935, Pt. II, p. 3.

Newspapers also expressed impatience with a project which, during a dire depression should be concerned with anything as intangible as culture. Some complained that with so much poverty few would be able to travel, let alone spend money on a guidebook. Although newspapers continued to press the boondoggle charge, among other criticisms, into late 1935, some papers changed their attitude. The Washington Star, which came to see the Federal Writers' Project as part of the answer to journalists' unemployment problems, advised, "Don't Doogle This Boon".⁴⁵

The creation of the Federal Writers' Project in the autumn of 1935 culminated a year and a half of discussion and study by individual and private writers' groups and extensive planning by New Dealers closest to the cultural projects.

From the start, Alsberg understood the enormous opportunities that the project represented. Yet, not even he could have suspected that from the project would come a seven-year body of work that could hasten the process of national self-discovery as no other literature could.

⁴⁵William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940 (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 123.

CHAPTER 2

The Administration of the Federal Writers' Project

When Harry Hopkins, in the autumn of 1935, announced the establishment of the WPA's program for cultural projects, he emphasized that each national director would retain ultimate responsibility for his project. At the same time, he made the "big four" of the cultural experiments aware that they had to operate their projects within the WPA organization, not separate from it. This meant that both the national offices of the cultural projects and the WPA organizations in the states would share in supervising the work for artists, actors, musicians, and writers. Although the state units of the writers' project would produce guidebooks, these offices would be part of their state's WPA federal authority which would determine policy and uphold the standards for the work produced.

The state level WPA authority was responsible for the project's business that concerned relief, finance, and administration. The Federal Writers' Project, then, was in the WPA's state organizations, but, because of the national director's authority,

not of them. This dual responsibility made the four cultural projects unique in work-relief programs. The system was never perfected, and many of the Federal Writers' Project's most serious problems resulted from tensions between federal and state relief officials.

The division of authority between the national Federal Writers' Project and state WPA was not the sole administrative problem for Henry Alsberg; he needed to adjust to changes in national WPA administrators, policy, and organization. Originally the cultural projects operated as subdivisions of WPA's Professional and Service Division, headed by Bruce McClure. McClure, in turn, answered to Jacob Baker, Assistant WPA Administrator. Then, in the summer of 1936, a conflict erupted between Baker and the four national directors. Baker wanted state WPA officials to control the projects. Holger Cahill and Hallie Flanagan argued that the arrangement would destroy their projects, and they threatened to resign.¹

At the request of Cahill and Flanagan, Eleanor Roosevelt interceded with Harry Hopkins. Hopkins told her that the arts project gave him more trouble than

¹Overmeyer, op. cit., p. 15.

the other WPA projects. "The people who run them," he said, "are very hard to get along with. They are very abrupt, they're very imperious." Skillfully, Mrs. Roosevelt told Hopkins that she had met Cahill and Flanagan and found them "quiet, polite people" who were convinced of their position. She wondered if Hopkins had based his judgment on reports from Baker, and if perhaps the difficulty might be with Baker. Hopkins, convinced of this view, replaced Baker with Ellen S. Woodward, a New Deal politician from Mississippi and an effective administrator. Woodward became assistant administrator for the Women's and Professional Division in July, 1936.²

The Division, on October 7, 1936, recognized the four cultural projects as a special unit, Federal Project Number One, or "Federal One." Woodward appointed Lawrence S. Morris to oversee Federal One.³ Woodward directed the Women's and Professional Division until January, 1939, when her successor, Florence Kerr, from the division's regional office in Chicago, took

²Tamara K. Hareven, Eleanor Roosevelt: An American Conscience (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1968), pp. 81-82.

³New York Times, October 8, 1936, p. 4, Col. 2.

charge. Kerr remained the ranking officer until July, 1939, when Congress reorganized the WPA as the Work Projects Administration and returned control of the relief programs to the states. That change began a distinctly different kind of operation for the writers' project. From the autumn of 1935 until mid-1942, the authority of the national office was reduced to that of an adviser, and the separate state writers' programs, with varying degrees of competence, carried on work relief for unemployed writers.⁴

Once Alsberg and his Federal Writers' Project staff found their proper niche in the WPA organization in Washington, the national director turned to crucial administrative issues with the state projects. His immediate problem was the selection of state directors. The director of state writers units had two chief duties. He supervised the day-to-day operation of the project office, and he directed the production of the state guidebook. The WPA instructions required that Alsberg name state directors with the approval of the state WPA.⁵ To find acceptable people, Alsberg

⁴William McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1949), p. 6.

⁵Works Projects Administration, TN. Writers' Project File. Nashville, TN: State Library and Archives.

solicited recommendations from state newspaper publishers, university officials, political organizations, writers' groups, and commercial publishers. Soon each city of 10,000 had at least one writer or field worker. These writers were employed in over 3,000 counties.⁶

There was no dearth of applicants for the state directorships. Telegrams and letters flooded the Washington office with suggestions from state officials, state universities, and other organizations. Since the directors received their appointments from the state WPA upon Alsberg's nomination, political intrigue at all levels was inevitable.⁷ For instance, the WPA administrator in Virginia surprised Alsberg by asking him what kind of a person he wanted for the directorship. Alsberg replied, "An editor, or journalist or someone who can stand on his own feet without bothering you too much. If you have someone in your WPA organization with those qualifications that wouldn't be bad."⁸

⁶"Mirror to America," Time 31 (January 3, 1938), p. 55.

⁷Ibid. Time, while praising the Federal Writers' Project, criticized the inadequacies of the early years.

⁸Magione, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

In Pennsylvania, when Cronyn asked the WPA administrator to approve of two candidates, the administrator refused to endorse one on the grounds that the names had been suggested by a Republican, the president of the University of Pennsylvania. Then, on learning that the job paid \$2,000 per year, the Pennsylvania WPA administration sneered that Cronyn could not hire a dishwasher for that salary and insisted that the position was to pay at least \$4,000. Cronyn and Alsberg, intimidated by the administrator, went along with his demands, even that of accepting his own candidate, Logan B. Sisson, who proved to be so unsatisfactory a state director that within a year he was removed and replaced by his assistant, Paul Comly French, another one of the administrator's candidates.⁹

Whenever Alsberg discovered a novelist who was interested in directing the Project in his home state, Alsberg would consider the novelist's first choice, then try to get the state WPA administration's approval without antagonizing him. In Oklahoma, Alsberg's searches led him to William Cunningham, a poet and novelist, whose latest novel was The Green Corn

⁹Ibid., p. 74.

Rebellion. Cunningham received the job, but later when the Oklahoma state guide was held up for a variety of reasons that were beyond the Writer Project's power to control, Alsberg may have wondered whether he had been wise in turning down the candidate of the Oklahoma Senator Thomas Gore. His desire not to permit senators to interfere with his appointments was genuine, but in a direct confrontation with a senator it was apt to crumble.¹⁰

In Maryland, his attempt to appoint his own candidate was interrupted by a telephone call from the state WPA administrator who reported that Senator Radcliffe was recommending a historian named Karl Singewald for the position. Singewald's only qualification as a writer was that he had edited an obscure work entitled Maryland in the World War: Military and Naval Service Records, which had taken him fifteen years to complete. Alsberg protested that Singewald was obviously not qualified to be a state director but the administrator insisted that he be given first consideration. The administrator asked Alsberg to meet with Singewald.

¹⁰E. Current-Garcia, "Writers in the Sticks," Prairie Schooner 12 (1938), p. 295.

Following the interview, Alsberg reported to the administrator that he and Cronyn considered Singewald to be a good researcher but "very shy and very retiring and nearly deaf," and therefore incapable of administering the Maryland Project.

When Alsberg repeated his impression of Singewald to Senator Radcliffe (at the state administrator's request), the senator sharply disagreed with him. The senator felt that he was the best man for the job. To Alsberg's objection that he lacked administrative ability, the senator replied that Singewald was perfectly capable of managing people and was a forceful man. The conclusion was that Singewald would become the head of the Maryland Project.

In a few months, Alsberg's fears of Singewald's lack of qualifications proved to be dismally correct. Trying to make the best of the situation, Alsberg quietly relieved Singewald of his administrative duties and unofficially placed an assistant in charge of the Project.¹¹

This proved to be true in other states as well during the first months of the Federal Writers'

¹¹Ibid., pp. 295-296.

Project. The Tennessee director was so incompetent that his senilities kept two stenographers busy for over one year before he was replaced by the assistant director, William McDaniel.¹²

In Missouri, the political might of the Pendergast machine was so blatant that Alsberg was obligated to accept the machine's candidate with little or no discussion. His own choice for the job was Jack Conroy, who the year before had published a highly praised novel, The Disinherited. However, the post went to an amateur writer and society figure, Geraldine Parker, who caused such a problem that the Washington office was forced to close the Missouri Project for several months.¹³

Another political appointment was that of Elizabeth Sheehan in Nebraska. Sheehan, allegedly the ex-mistress of a powerful newspaper publisher in Lincoln, was a close political ally of Senator George Norris. She proved to be paranoid as well as incompetent. When Lawrence Morris investigated the reports of her disruptive conduct and recommended

¹²John Minton, Tennessee and the New Deal (New York: Garland Press, 1979), p. 181.

¹³Robert Bendiner, Just Around the Corner (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 195.

immediate dismissal, Sheehan promptly alerted her publisher friend, who, in turn, wrote to Norris. The result was that Morris was ordered out of the state and the Senator let it be known that "as long as Nebraska had a writers' project, Sheehan would have her desk."

In the meanwhile, Sheehan was paying little attention to the operation of the Project. Convinced that one of her assistants, Rudolph Umland, was a dangerous radical who was plotting to get her job, she hired a private detective agency to investigate his background. The only information she could turn up was that a brother of Umland had participated in a 1933 march of the unemployed which was led by a leading Communist of the 1930s.

Sheehan wrote letters to the President and others stating that Umland was a Communist. When it became obvious that the Nebraska Project could not function under her direction and that the administration was unwilling to dismiss her for fear of offending Senator Norris, Alsberg ordered Sheehan, along with her desk and secretary, transferred to her home. There she continued to receive her salary until the close of

the Nebraska office in 1942.¹⁴

In Wyoming the indifference of the state WPA administrator resulted in the appointment of a well-known Republican politician as state director. The politician made the most of his opportunity to embarrass the WPA administrator further by ignoring the responsibilities of his position and by turning in unsatisfactory expense accounts. When finally he was fired, he announced his candidacy for state treasurer and was easily elected. Alsberg appointed the ablest editor on the Wyoming staff to replace him, Agnes W. Spring. She, too, turned out to be a Republican, but supported the New Deal policies.¹⁵

One of Alsberg's main concerns was the finding of directors in the states where there were few well-known writers. When no qualified state director could be found for the state of Washington, Alsberg acted on the recommendation of the WPA state administration and appointed R. W. Lahr as acting director. Lahr proved unable to hold the post and

¹⁴Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁵Mabel Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture for the WPA," Harpers 177 (May, 1939), p. 654.

was soon replaced by James W. Egen, a popular writer and former sports editor, who had been recommended by the Author's League of America. Egen began to work with tremendous speed but when the project's manuscripts were sent to the Washington office, it was shown that only a small part was any good. In an investigation it was shown that Egen had encouraged the staff to write fiction instead of fact. The Washington office charged that most of it was "pure fiction" prepared without research, written in the office to save time. Egen denied the charges even after nearly all of the material was rejected by the Washington office and managed to keep his job for another three years without publishing a single work during that time.¹⁶

In North and South Dakota, Alsberg hired two young journalists with little experience. Lisle Reese was offered the job of directing the South Dakota Project in October, 1935. At twenty-four, he was making a living operating a news bureau. He felt he had no literary talent, but since the job called for more

¹⁶Ibid., p. 655.

"nerve than talent" accepted the offer.¹⁷ During the next seven years he was surrounded with a hardworking staff of ex-newspapermen, country editors, printers, a doctor, lawyer, a sheepherder who had published a book, some photographers and artists, and "almost anyone who could operate a typewriter."¹⁸

In Edith Schlesinger's North Dakota staff there was not a single writer. Some were barely literate. The only writing assistance was from two recent college graduates who could write clear English. The research staff included an ex-school teacher, clerks, a minister, and "some bright young kids who could not find jobs elsewhere." She attempted to make sense of the mass of instructions sent from Washington. "The mimeographed material that kept pouring into the office

¹⁷For some, this proved to be the case. In Arizona, for instance, E. J. Kelley, a member of the Writers' project had been assigned to write about the life of the cowboy. He dropped in on a meeting of cattlemen in a Douglas, Arizona, hotel to find out what modern cowboys were like. He had expected to be bored, but when he left the meeting he submitted this report. "While I was sitting there, one cowman pulled a .45 and aimed it at the fellow who sat next to me. This man had evidently been shot at before for he dropped to the floor and the bullet hit a third man. Two other bullets shot chunks out of the ceiling." Mangione, op. cit., p. 87.

¹⁸Current-Garcia, op. cit., p. 297.

was written by urban-minded editors with urban areas in mind. We had to work out our own procedures."¹⁹ In spite of all the difficulties, the North Dakota guide was issued in 1938 before many of the more populated states published their guides.

Fortunately, the selection and replacement of state directors did not always depend upon political considerations, and the dangers such appointments presented to the quality of the guides were reduced after the central office secured the talents of writers like Vardis Fisher, Lyle Saxon, Ross Santee, John Davis, and John T. Frederick.

Vardis Fisher, no doubt the most outspoken and individualistic of these, had already achieved fame with the Testament of Man series and would soon be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his Children of God.²⁰ Fisher had little faith in the New Deal and was reluctant to take the directorship in Idaho at first. However, with a wife and two children to support, Fisher decided he could not refuse and would have to accept the job, even after he had received a second

¹⁹Ibid., p. 298.

²⁰Flora Joseph, Vardis Fisher (New York: Twayne, 1965), p. 15.

telegram from Washington saying that it would not pay \$12,600 as indicated in the original offer, but \$12,200. On learning of the appointment, a state director who had recommended him sent Fisher a facetious telegram, which stated,

Congratulations on your new position. Don't take it seriously. It is not intended that we should achieve anything, but only that we should put the jobless to work so they will vote for FDR. Take it philosophically and if they send you a telegram from Washington, 150 words, send them one 300 words long or call them long distance collect.²¹

Ignoring this advice, Fisher worked twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, logging the roads of Idaho in a new 1936 Nash automobile (at \$15 a day and four to five cents a mile), and wrote nearly all the copy for the excellent state guide. He was sustained by his consuming desire to bring out the first state guide or "break his neck" in the attempt.²²

Fisher's creative colleagues also stamped their guides with verve and literary style. Lyle Saxon, whose authoritative books on the land of the bayous

²¹Vardis Fisher, Orphans in Gethsemane: A Novel of the Past in the Present (Denver: Swallow Press, 1960), pp. 73-74.

²²Ibid., p. 233.

had earned him the title of "Mr. Louisiana," wisely decided to delegate all administrative matters to an associate. Another local colorist, the artist-turned-cowboy, Ross Santee, became director for Arizona after its first appointee had wasted three months writing "folksy" letters to ingratiate himself with the local government. Santee wrote to Alsberg, "Anyone who can wet-nurse 150 saddle horses, know where they run, know all the quirks of each particular horse, ought to be able to wrangle a bunch of writers."²³

Two other gifted local colorists served as project directors. John Davis, journalist and author of nearly 200 short stories and magazine articles headed the Texas unit, and John T. Farrell, founder of Midland (1915), directed the Illinois Project.²⁴

The second director of the Massachusetts Project was historian Ray A. Billington, who taught a full schedule of courses at Clark University three days a week and devoted three other days to his Project duties. According to Billington, he was hired primarily because of his indisputably Anglo-Saxon name,

²³Current-Garcia, op. cit., p. 296.

²⁴Ibid., p. 298.

explaining that the directorship should have gone to Bert Loewenberg, a historian on the Massachusetts Project, who was an able administrator, "but this was in 1936 with the election not far away and anti-Semitism was strong in those days. So I was hired."

For Billington the most difficult aspect of the job was coping with the political divisions within his staff. He suspected that between one-half and one-third of the personnel either were members of the Communist party or were radical in nature. The spokesmen of the radicals and Communists was one of Billington's assistants, Merle Colby, who was later transferred to the Washington staff. Although Billington and Loewenberg were considered liberal, they were constantly annoyed by the Communist faction.²⁵

Harold G. Merrian of the Montana Project first declined the job, but the need for extra money finally induced him to agree that for \$90 per month he would give his Saturdays and Sundays to the Montana Writers'

²⁵Ray A. Billington, "Government and the Arts: The WPA Experience," American Quarterly 13 (Winter, 1961), pp. 466-467.

Project. Nine months later, he submitted the first draft of the Montana guidebook and then resigned, discouraged by the bureaucracy and the lack of writers in the state.²⁶

Several diligent women also served as directors of the Federal Writers' Project, although most did not have the prior reputations or attainments of their male colleagues. Fourteen women were appointed as state directors in the formative months of the project. Forty percent of all employees on the Federal Writers' Project were women. Most had been suggested by the WPA administration or influential politicians. Even so, many were capable administrators.

One of the few local historians in Florida, Carita Corse, held that state's directorship for more than six years. Especially impressive was the long service of Eudora Richardson who took over the Virginia Project after it had floundered for over one year. A writer and member of the State Board of Public Welfare, she brought it up to par with the best of the state projects. The rate of survival in the

²⁶Introduction to Montana State Guide Book (New York: Hastings House, 1955), p. VII.

directorships was far higher among women than among men. However, there were far fewer women in such parts and they were often the beneficiaries of highly skilled associates and state editors, who regularly bore the burden of administrative or literary duties.²⁷

Historians fared poorest as state directors. Their insistence on thoroughness was out of step with the guides proposed. In Massachusetts where the director, Clifford Shipton, exhibited an aggravating condescension toward his workers, a field worker charged that his fidelity to instructions stifled originality. Finally, two associates took over the administrative machinery and led it until Shipton obtained a more suitable post with the State Historical Records Project.

Some colleagues preferred to follow their own interests, often with dubious results. An authority on Nevada mining camps, the septuagenarian T. D. Van Devort, assumed that his state had no points of contemporary interest for the tourist, and he sought to transform his guide into a history of Nevada's mining industry. He remained on the project as a history

²⁷Penkower, op. cit., p. 41.

editor with the help of his old friend, Serkey Pitman. Ross Cockridge, an authority on Indiana's folklore, spent most of his time drumming up publicity for the project by presenting performances (at \$1,000) composed in part of dramatic recitation and folk songs.

Although the central office ordered Cockridge to concentrate on the guide, he failed to assume this minimal responsibility and eventually resigned.²⁸

Once appointed, a state director needed to determine how many competent writers, researchers, editors, and other educated individuals were on relief in his or her state. Also, he judged how much guidebook material might come from areas of the state where most relief writers lived. If he found an area rich in local history and interest and with a large number of relief writers and skilled researchers, the director appointed a district supervisor and opened district offices.

The size of a state influenced the decision to open district offices. Kentucky's most active district was historic Lexington, the center of Kentucky's horse-breeding industry. Tennessee's most active

²⁸Ibid., p. 43.

districts were centered around Nashville which was the center of the state government and a good location for exploring middle Tennessee. Large district offices were also established in Memphis and Knoxville.²⁹

The Texas Project attempted to conquer its geographical problems with a number of district offices. Some smaller New England states, despite their rich materials for travel books, operated efficiently with only one district office. Whenever possible, the Federal Writers' Project districts coincided with districts for the Women's and Professional Division.³⁰

Financial matters consumed much of the new state director's time. Some funds, for example, to cover office rent, supplies, and in-state travel came from the state WPA budget. Other allotments for out-of-state travel expenses related to the guides came directly from Alsberg's offices.

Financial security never really existed. The Federal Writers' Project, as with the WPA, was dependent on the annual congressional appropriations.

²⁹Minton, op. cit., p. 180.

³⁰Alsberg to all state directors, November 4, 1935. Located in the Tennessee State Archives. File on the Tennessee Federal Writers' Project.

Between appropriations, Federal One depended on Hopkins' ability to convince Roosevelt and the successive directors of the Bureau of the Budget, Daniel W. Bell and Harold D. Smith, of the value of the cultural projects. State directors needed to be businessmen and diplomats to mesh funds from different sources, to interpret the forms which poured from the WPA bureaucracy, and to protect their projects from petty intrigues and jealousies within the WPA.

It was not unusual for a state director to incur hostility from a state Works Progress Administrator who preferred construction work over white-collar endeavors. Routine requests for supplies and equipment might disappear in a mound of WPA paperwork or the individual state budget division could fail to pay all the workers scheduled to receive relief checks.³¹

When state directors sent in their early reports noting the number of writers eligible for project work, the statistics showed a disturbing pattern. While there were hundreds of workers eligible for the project in metropolitan areas and in heavily populated states,

³¹McDonald, op. cit., p. 11.

the supply of certified workers in rural states was meager. In short, the nation's writing talent, at least that part on relief, seemed to be maldistributed. The problem for the Federal Writers' Project was that some states would bear a heavy financial load for these writers and without writers units in all states, it would be difficult to complete the American guide series. Still, the Federal Writers' Project could not transfer relief workers from state to state because WPA regulations discouraged transfers. Few states, moreover, wanted to support those from other states. The Federal Writers' Project was not unique in this problem of distribution of talent; it became a characteristic of all four cultural programs.³²

The Federal Writers' Project sent each state director a quota for relief workers based on the estimated number of writers on relief rolls in the state. In rural states, such as Tennessee, the quota went unfilled. The units in urban centers, such as Massachusetts, Illinois, and New York, used their quotas quickly and pressed for increases. This discrepancy did not necessarily mean that the Federal Writers' Project had erred in allotting its quotas.

³²Ibid., pp. 12-13.

States had different and often widely varied relief requirements. Rural states generally made it more difficult than did urban states for people in the cultural professions to qualify for relief. In a few instances this proved the case as one investigator discovered on a field trip to the Federal Writers' Project offices in the South in January, 1936. The investigation discovered that Tennessee's WPA director, Colonel Harry S. Berry, had interfered with the establishment of district offices in Nashville and Knoxville and that several staff members received positions by virtue of Berry's political power. Under false titles such as "Special Supervisor for the Federal Writers' Project," Berry conveniently placed friends in secure positions.³³

After gathering evidence, the investigator sought out the unsuspecting director of the State Women's and Professional Division. With his cooperation, they worked out face-saving adjustments that guaranteed the Writers' Project freedom from interference by the state WPA and assured removal of the ineligible appointees.³⁴

³³Minton, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

³⁴*Ibid.*

Nationwide, the project had to contend with bureaucracy and red tape. Obtaining typewriters presented a special problem; in a number of states, the guide manuscripts had to be written in longhand for months. Forms had to be filled out perfectly or they would be returned weeks later for the slightest error. In addition, directors were deluged with daily telegrams, letters, and bulletins from Washington. One state director soon learned to pass them on to her secretary and instructed her, "If they have changed anything today tell me."³⁵

While Alsberg and his colleagues learned to live with bureaucracy, they were less successful in preventing editorial delays in Washington. For two years the central office not only proofread everything but did complete rewrites of doubtful passages.

Alsberg finally proposed a decentralized system to clear the problem. To relieve his associates from their traveling throughout the country, Alsberg appointed regional directors for the Federal Writers' Project. The regional directors were permanently stationed field-representatives who received limited

³⁵Ulrich, op. cit., pp. 653-654.

authority from Alsberg to inspect and aid neighboring state units. Alsberg appointed Frank Manuel, experienced in the Boston office, to direct regional affairs in New England.³⁶ William T. Crouch, the director of the University of North Carolina Press, was chosen to check on activities in the Southwest. Lyle Saxon was chosen to supervise in the South, and John T. Frederick, the Illinois State Director, was to operate in the Midwest. Vardis Fisher, the Idaho State Director, was given the Rocky Mountain states.

The project's regional organization, once established, served well. The regional directors read state copy voraciously and turned out presentable material. Couch, as the director of the North Carolina Press, invited the project to mount a display at the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, and Frederick occasionally reviewed the Federal Writers' Project volumes over his award-winning CBS "Book Review" program. More important, it was Couch who saved the Tennessee project by appointing William McDaniel.³⁷

³⁶Bernard De Voto, "New England Via WPA," Saturday Review of Literature 18 (May 14, 1938), p. 3.

³⁷Minton, op. cit., p. 184.

The Federal Writers' Project might have become a more efficiently administered organization had it not been for conditions imposed upon it by the WPA. Many of the bureaucratic problems developed because of the temporary nature of the relief program of which the Federal Writers' Project was a part. Neither the WPA nor any of its components could make plans beyond the next session of Congress. Still, in important ways, the Federal Writers' Project could plan for the future. It committed itself to the completion of the American guide series and held contracts with publishers for the guides.

Those in command realized that much of the inefficiency and bureaucratic wrangling was an unavoidable part of the vast WPA experiment. The Federal Writers' Project frequently made short-term decisions based on the pressing demands and commitments related to the guides. Still, those on the Federal Writers' Project believed the guides were worth the administrative problems.

CHAPTER 3

The American Guides

When Alsberg and his planning committee, in the summer of 1935, focused attention on what writers on relief could produce, the idea of travel guides for the United States quickly gained preeminence. Then, after the Federal Writers' Project began, Alsberg and the staff realized that the guide series would be the mainstay of the project. The staff did not foresee that the guides would overshadow all other program work. There were additional volumes on ethnic groups, folklore, Black studies, education, recreation, and an anthology of creative pieces, but material used in these secondary projects came from the research needed for the guides.

For its guide series, the Federal Writers' Project intended to combine historical accounts, in the Baedeker tradition of travel books, with the practicality of the American Automobile Association's tourist information. The travel books were to answer the question: "What is America? How did it happen? Where did it happen?" In answering these questions, the guides provided a critical self-portrait of the

United States in the 1930s.¹ Katherine Kellock remarked "the need to find something to say about every community and the country around it forces close scrutiny for what makes each community differ from the others."²

The guide series in many ways seemed the most practical project the Federal Writers' Project could undertake. The Federal Writers' Project's first concern was to provide some income for all types of educated people with varying degrees of ability who needed assistance and could not move away from their homes. Guide preparation used the skills of "leg-men" to check facts, of researchers in museums and archives, and of copywriters and editors.

While no single guide to the United States was available from commercial publications, there was ample travel literature that the Federal Writers' Project might imitate. But imitation proved impossible. Authors of commercial travel essays covered a region, state, or city at leisure and based their observations on years of experience. Leisure and experience were

¹Bendiner, op. cit., pp. 195-96.

²Kellock, op. cit., p. 474.

not available to Federal Writers' Project writers. The books were written largely by amateurs, all stationed permanently in their home areas, who often had a narrow perspective on the importance of their areas in relation to state and nation. And unlike travel editors and seasoned commentators, those who composed the guides worked with uncertainty about the future of their employer, the WPA.

Federal Writers' Project administrators soon grasped the difficulties of producing guides as a relief experiment. George Cronyn expressed the problem in an editorial that summarized the project's first hectic year. He wrote "that since the state guides are not temporary displays of talents on relief, but permanent printed records of work done, which will be exposed to critical scrutiny, the judgment of the future will take no account of the circumstances under which they were produced but only of their accuracy and excellence."³ This concern for contemporary and future judgment caused the Federal Writers' Project chiefs to set exacting standards for guide copy. Achieving these standards frequently caused friction between the national office and the state units.

³New York Times, October 26, 1936, pt. II, Col. 1, p. 3.

The national project staff first decided on the general organization of the guides. Each volume would have three sections: an introductory part composed of essays; a middle section devoted to the state's largest cities and important towns; and a third section of tours. This scheme introduced the reader to a state through articles on government, religion, history, the arts, and other topics. Ideally, a traveler read the essays before beginning his trip.

The second section provided accounts that incorporated information on transportation, recreation, and points of interest. The third section was the most complicated. It contained descriptions of the landscapes and towns along main routes. Each tour was arranged in such a way that a traveler could note the mileage from a given tour's starting point and discover in his guide a thumbnail sketch of what the tourist saw. In addition, each volume had a collection of photographs, maps, a list of important events, a chronology of the state history, and an index.

Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State

(published in 1939) might be considered a typical example of the volumes in the American Guide Series with the exception that this guide does not include

an essay on religion, but surprisingly neither do those for Massachusetts and New York City. Many include an excellent essay on religion, including the Tennessee and North Carolina guides. Nevertheless, the Florida guide followed the standard format, had the necessary essays, and incorporated the various types of information according to the rules of the Federal Writers' Project.

In the "Preface" the Florida project director, Carita D. Corse, predictably praised the state writers' project.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the work has been the general awakening of interest in many phases of Florida life heretofore treated only in technical publications. This common interest promises rich educational returns.⁴

John T. Tigert, the President of the University of Florida, paid appropriate homage to the guide.

For the many Floridians who may wish to read a comprehensive story of their land, as well as the million or more visitors who come to us each year, the Florida Guide will be a source of pleasurable information.⁵

Section I, "Florida's Background" offered

⁴Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. VII.

⁵Ibid., p. V.

seventeen essays. The first essay, "Contemporary Scene," described the contrasts in the "Sunshine" state, now that

throughout more than four centuries, from Ponce de Leon in his caravels to the latest Pennsylvanian in his Buick, Florida has been invaded by seekers for gold and of sunshine; yet it has retained an identity and a character distinctive to itself.⁶

The result was a pattern of infinite variety, replete with contrasts, paradoxes, confusions, and inconsistencies.

Florida is pictured in this essay as a land of pastoral simplicity, a flood-lighted stage of frivolity, and a behind the scenes struggle for existence. The unknown author describes what he labels "roadside culture." Ten thousand miles of roads that crisscross the state have streaked it with what might be described as roadside culture, with each section revealing a characteristic quality.

In the staid plantation territory of northern Florida, placards on gate posts chastely admit, "Guests Accepted," and tourist camps offer "Cabins for Travelers Only." Everywhere are "dine and dance" places, which, as the highways extend southward into the established tourist belt, more and more resemble midways.⁷

⁶Ibid., p. 3.

⁷Ibid., p. 5.

Following this was an essay on the "Natural Setting," which described geography, geology, plant and animal life, natural resources, and conservation. There are twenty-five pages devoted to conservation. Florida already faced problems with the environment in the 1930s, a fact its guide recorded. The greatest environmental problem was the preservation of Florida's rather scarce fresh water supply from the ravages of pollution and contamination.

The next piece covers Florida's archeology and Indian history. This essay traces the history of archeology in the state beginning with the investigations of F. H. Cushing of the Federal Bureau of Ethnology in 1895-1896. The most noted of Florida's archeologists in the 1930s was Clarence Bloomfield Moore, who added a flood of knowledge on Florida's pre-Columbian Indians.⁸

The final section provides a brief but thorough history of the Florida Indians. The final paragraph deals with the Seminole in the 1930s. The Seminole is "tried in civil courts but shown the utmost leniency in his transgressions." A truce between the Seminole and the United States Government was signed

⁸Ibid., p. 36.

in 1934, highly publicized as bringing to a close the longest war in history.⁹

The "History" essay was a primer to Florida's past from the discovery period in 1513 to the late 1930s. The essay recounted the state's history as a Spanish colony and as a British colony. There is an excellent discussion of the role Florida played in the "wars of the empire" and the American Revolution.

There followed a summary of Florida's role during the antebellum period and Florida's development as a tourist center during the Gilded Age. The guide writers were less objective about contemporary life in Florida. The growth of labor unions had increased during the 1930s and brought about local outbreaks of violence in Jacksonville, Lakeland, Miami, St. Petersburg, and Starke. The essayist praises the liberal trend taken in the passage of a Workman's Compensation law and the creation of a Florida industrial commission and a state welfare board.¹⁰

⁹Ibid., pp. 46-47.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 62-63.

The next set of four essays examined Florida's economy. "Transportation" outlined the history of travel in Florida from the early days as an American territory to the modern era of the highway systems and airports. For the historian searching for a history of the railroad development in the South, the description of Florida's railroad history is unsurpassed.

"Agriculture" described the move toward specialized farming and the farmers' importance to the food market of the country. The problems of the farmer are discussed in the essay. One problem was a "bewildering" variety of soils and crops which demanded scientific measures that could not be undertaken by tenant and small farm owners. Another problem was the unstable national market for winter produce and the costly freight differentials which lowered the farmer's margin of profit.¹¹

"Industry and Commerce" traced the growth of the several and varied industries in Florida. But even during the Depression, the tourist industry remained

¹¹Ibid., p. 86.

the state's largest industry.¹² "Labor" was an unbiased account of the trade union movement among the tobacco industry and longshoremen.¹³

The last nine essays in Section I provided an outline of Florida's social and cultural history. "Education" traces the development of education from the seventeenth century Spanish mission schools to the modern university system of the 1930s. The essayist praises the progressive trend of education in the 1930s. One of the progressive educational units in the state was the P. K. Yonge Demonstration School which based the curriculum on the children's capabilities, needs, and desires, rather than on a prearranged system of courses.¹⁴

After the "Public Health and Social Welfare" essay came an essay on Florida's newspapers and communication. This essay provided sketches of individual newspapers and provided a unique view of

¹²In 1935, the tourists spent an estimated \$300 million, while the citrus crop was valued at \$153 million. Other industries discussed in detail include the cattle, lumber, and fishing and seafood industries.

¹³See pages 94-98.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 102.

Florida history through the newspapers. For instance, in 1844, the Apalachicola Commercial Observer published eleven scientific articles written by Dr. John Gorrie, inventor of the first patented ice cream machine. The articles were signed "Jenner," his pen name.¹⁵

"Folklore" is an amusing treatment of the folk tales and superstitions native to Florida. The folklore to a great extent is a heritage from the native Floridians, the Blacks, the Latin Americans, and the Seminoles. From these four strains were woven a pattern of beliefs and superstitions that dictated many of the ways of Florida life.¹⁶

In the "Literature" essay the writers take a fascinating look at the writings with Florida as a theme. Literature dealing with Florida began in 1557 with the Relation of the Gentleman of Elvas, which gave a factual account of the De Soto expedition.¹⁷ In this essay was published for the first time an English poem dealing with the lure of Florida. The poem, written in 1612, deals with a drunken sailor

¹⁵Ibid., p. 122

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 128-135.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 136.

talking to a friend in a tavern:

Have you not heard of Floryda
 A countre far be west,
 Where savage pepell planted are
 By nature and by hest,
 Who in the mold
 Fynd glyotemyrnge gold
 And yet for tryfels sell?
 with hyl.¹⁸

Florida was the home of several famous writers including Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Cullen Bryant, Stephen Crane, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ernest Hemingway, and James Weldon Johnson.¹⁹

The 116-page middle section contained essays on twelve cities and towns. These essays varied in length from six to sixteen pages depending upon the subject. Each account listed public transportation facilities, traffic regulations, recreation facilities, types of accommodation available, and the city's important annual events. Because the Federal Writers' Project was a government agency, it could not rate or recommend hotels or restaurants. Thus, the lists merely gave examples of the predominant type of accommodations such as hotels, tourist courts, or rooming houses. Then came a short analysis of the city's contemporary

¹⁸Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 142-148.

life and history. The account concluded with a description of "Points of Interest," a series of paragraphs keyed to a numbered city map.

"Jacksonville" (population 129,459) portrayed the state's largest metropolis as a bustling center of commerce, finance, and industry. It depicted the different residential areas and noted the dominant characteristics of each. The "Points of Interest" gave short descriptions of Jacksonville's churches, parks, public monuments, historical sites, and important commercial buildings. One interesting church was the Church of God and Saints of Christ, a Black church,

one of the many 'santified churches' of the South. They believe in devils and attribute every misfortune, disease, and bodily ill to the working of Satan. Rites and ceremonies are performed, together with exorcisms and evocations to drive out the evil spirit.²⁰

Contemporary points of interest are discussed, such as Durkeeville, a low-rent, slum-clearance project for Blacks, undertaken by the city in cooperation with the Federal Housing Administration.²¹

The third section of each state guide contained the tours. There were twenty-two tours in the Florida

²⁰Ibid., p. 192.

²¹Ibid.

guide, while the Tennessee guide only contained sixteen. No state guide contained over twenty-five tours. Many of the tour routes crossed areas already described in the city and town section. Each town first listed its total mileage, the towns along the route, road conditions, and major landmarks. Then, in a series of paragraphs, it gave detailed descriptions of what the motorist might see. The start represented "0 miles" with subsequent stops at their given distance from the starting point.

In the Tennessee guide, on Tour 5, a trip from the Kentucky Line to Nashville (0 miles) represented the point where U.S. 41W crossed the Kentucky Line, near the present-day Oak Grove, Kentucky. At "3.1 miles" was Ringgold, then a popular summer resort, with modern bathhouses and campgrounds. At "8 miles" was a listing for New Providence (population 904). There is a mention of the "Old Stone Blockhouse" built in 1788-1789 by Colonel Valentine Sevier. The entry carried a detailed description of the blockhouse, and quotes a letter by Colonel Sevier to his brother, General John Sevier, detailing the Indian attack of 1794.²²

²²Tennessee: A Guide to the State (New York: Viking, 1939), p. 493.

At "10 miles" was the entry for Clarksville, the seat of Montgomery County. "Clarksville (444 altitude, 9,242 population) in a tobacco-growing district is on a peninsula at the confluence of the Cumberland and Red Rivers."²³ There is a full description of the town:

Facing the courthouse square are modern red-brick business blocks side-by-side with gray brick and stone buildings of the nineteenth century. On the broad asphalted streets are the tracks of a former street car system. Many old homes of the antebellum period are on the banks of the rivers and on shaded avenues. Eleven loose-leaf tobacco sales floors and several tobacco-packing houses, a snuff factory and a nicotine plant furnish outlets for the country's crop. Among other plants are a cannery, a creamery, a foundry and machine works and numerous small garment factories.²⁴

Whether historical or legendary, every fact in the tour is important. Each deserves the chance to be appreciated. It seems that virtually anything, however inauspicious, may be scenic or significant, and thus reward attention. Clarksville's "points of interest" include:

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., p. 494.

1. The Clarksville Foundry and Machine Works molded cannons and cannonballs for the Confederate Army.
2. The Old Castle Building originally housed the Masonic University of Tennessee. The name changed to Stewart College in 1855 in honor of its president, William M. Stewart. In 1879 the institution was the home of Southwestern Presbyterian University, which is now in Memphis; in 1927, it was bought by the state and the Austin Peay Normal School was established in it.
3. A State Agricultural Experiment Station, a farm for the study of the adaptability of new crops in the middle Tennessee soil. The care and cultivation of suitable plants are studied in the labs, on the farm are an administration building, a superintendent's residence, cottages for laborers, greenhouses, and barns.
4. The Wilson home was occupied for several years by Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Wilson, parents of President Woodrow Wilson, while Dr. Wilson was a member of the faculty of Southwestern Presbyterian University.
5. The Allen Tate Home, overlooking the Cumberland River. In this house Allen Tate and his wife, Carolina Gordon, wrote much of their poetry and prose. General Lafayette was entertained here as a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Green Rayburn in 1824.²⁵

²⁵Ibid., p. 495.

At "31.2 miles" is Ashland City, the seat of Cheatham County. A humorous story highlights this description: "In 1859, Ashland City became an incorporated town, but through the negligence of the county officials the charter was forfeited and not until several years later was it restored."²⁶

At "50.8 miles" was the home of E. B. Smith, one of the three occupied by Jesse and Frank James during their last period in hiding. Tour 14 concludes at the city limits of Nashville (55.5 miles).²⁷

Making all the guides fit the pattern was no easy task. Usually someone from the national office had to teach the state units the techniques of research, writing, and editing. There was the further problem of compressing and organizing the mass of information into the guide's format. There was no precedent for writing guides in the vast files of New Deal relief projects. Alsberg began by sending detailed instruction manuals to the state offices. The packets flowed from the national office as quickly as Cronyn, as chief editor, and the other editors could prepare them.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p. 496.

The revised editions of the manuals sent in late 1936 and early 1937 gave clearer directions for writing guides than the versions of 1935 and 1936. Written on short notice and sent to state directors while the directors struggled to establish their offices and to select competent workers, the impression and minutiae of the early manuals wrought confusion.²⁸

Even with the deluge of directors, manuals, correspondence, and suggestions that came from the Washington staff, each state director decided the best way to research and then present his state's history, natural features, and problems. The director first assigned field reporters to visit points of interest in the state's counties and cities. Ideally, each reporter read for background from state and county histories, almanacs, or encyclopedias. Often, in the rush to meet deadlines, a reporter did his background reading during free time. Field reporters had other duties. They combed state archives, local libraries, courthouses, and newspaper vaults for material and conducted interviews with long-time citizens to check details about customs or legends.²⁹

²⁸McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, p. 181.

²⁹Ibid., p. 182.

As it turned out, the Federal Writers' Project's sister project, the Historical Records Survey (HRS) provided the most assistance to state directors and their workers. Much of the material originally unearthed by the Historical Records Survey appeared in the American guide series volumes. One unique problem faced by researchers was the dust on previously inaccessible records. The dust on records in the basement of a Manhattan post office led to an epidemic of skin rashes and lung infections until the WPA furnished workers with coal mine respirators.³⁰

The field reporters submitted their notes to the director who pieced the facts and accounts together and organized the material into introduction articles, city essays, and tours. Next, the director sent out the field reporters or went himself to check for accuracy in mileage and organization of material from the motorist's viewpoint. Then the copy came back for more editing before going to the national Federal Writers' Project office.

Early in the project, the introductory pieces caused headaches for state directors and forced Alsberg and Cronyn to devise a method to check for accuracy.

³⁰New York Times, July 13, 1936, p. 5, Col. 1.

Essays on geology, archaeology, economics, flora and fauna, education, and other special topics needed a reading by experts in addition to normal editing in the state offices. The solution introduced in 1935 was to enlist aid from "volunteer consultants," that is, specialists who donated knowledge and service. Thereafter, the state director sent essay drafts to the proper consultants who read the material for accuracy and suggested corrections or additions.³¹

Since the national office used the same method, the project's consultant list was impressive. The historians, Charles A. Beard, Tyler Dennett, and Samuel Eliot Morison, criticized some of the historical pieces. Such diverse authors and critics as Lewis Mumford and Waldo Brown did temporary editing on the New England guides. Henry S. Canby, Van Wyck Brooks, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher read selected literary essays. University presidents criticized the education essays and college professors helped in archaeology, architecture, economics, geology, and anthropology.³²

³¹New York Times, October 26, 1936, p. 11, Col. 7.

³²Ulrich, op. cit., p. 656.

In states where field reporters could not visit many small communities, "volunteer associates" helped the Federal Writers' Project. Volunteer associates supplied notes on small towns or remote points of interest. Usually they were competent individuals, not in need of relief, who had interests in local history and sympathy and enthusiasm for the guides. And the volunteer associates, like the reporters, followed the rule that

anything in the community that is common to all or many communities in American should be given little space. Anything of interest that is peculiar to the community or its region should be treated more fully.³³

Most of the notes sent by volunteer associates needed extensive editing. Still, they were often the only source of reliable information and were particularly valuable in the rural state projects.

The strength and weaknesses of the guide copy depended on how the guidebook manuscript was handled when it arrived at the national office. Several editors were needed to read and comment on state copy. No matter how elaborate and careful the system, the work increased so quickly that the task of following state

³³Ibid., p. 658.

copy through the national office became burdensome.

The central staff, after dealing with the many problems of the writing of the state guides, finally had to focus on the issue of publication. Work on a guide to Washington, D. C. provided its members with their first experience in this area. The choice of the nation's capital arose from the knowledge that the book would cover one of the most popular tourist areas, while all research and writing could be done in Washington. The financial officer for the Federal One saw it as "an experiment to justify the program"; the Washington guidebook would serve as a model for all future state guides. The volume reflected a politically astute selection as well, he noted, for it alone could have gained the support of Congress when funds became necessary for subsequent publication. By presidential letter on August 7, 1936, \$14,000 became available for that purpose through the Emergency Appropriation Act.³⁴

For various reasons, the Washington volume could not serve as a model for others. Because Washington, D. C. is unique in that its main industry is government, no other guidebook would resemble this offering.

³⁴New York Times, August 8, 1937, p. 3, Col. 5.

Editors, moreover, had not edited enough copy, perhaps because of the newness of the enterprise. Most important, because the Washington guide came under federal jurisdiction, the decision regarding its form fell entirely into the hands of the Government Printing Office (GPO), a fact which did not serve the interests of the project.

The GPO, which did \$18 million worth of government printing annually, specialized in putting out small pamphlets, primarily for congressional use. In addition, it did its work more slowly than any good commercial shop even when charging 20 percent extra for alleged speed, and the entire process cost as much as 40 percent more than it would have through outside printers. Alsberg's wish that the layout department and other progressive forces be given a greater say in its publication to avoid the "standards of 1895" went unfulfilled.³⁵

The guides for Washington suffered from the inadequencies of such governmental printing. It was printed in one format, no color, uniform binding, heavy

³⁵Cedric Larson, "Uncle Sam, Printer, Publisher and Literary Sponsor," Colophon I (1939), p. 85.

ink, and coated paper.³⁶ Though the Federal Writers' Project could be praised for offering the public a fine volume at the low cost of \$3, the New York Times noted that Samson himself would have hesitated to go sightseeing with such a burden.³⁷

Despite the book's weight, critics heralded it as a possible forerunner of the guides which, when taken together, might "enable us for the first time to hold the mirror up to all America."³⁸ A cross-section of the city that included the marbles of the Capital and the disease-infected alley tenements nearby served as clear evidence that the government as patron had avoided the neutrality of the former travel guides. The architecture essay with its lambasting of the Federal Triangle ("Hoover's Folly") and the New Deal Interior Building, received singular praise.

³⁶With 1,160 pages of coated paper, the volume was almost three inches thick and weighed 5.5 pounds; it surpassed in thickness and weight such best sellers as Anthony Adverse and Gone With the Wind.

³⁷New York Times, November 17, 1936, pt. II, p. 2.

³⁸New York Times, January 10, 1937, pt. III, p. 10, Col. 2.

The experience in publishing the Washington guide convinced the national office that an alternative procedure would be far more preferable. The GPO monopoly had to be replaced by a cheaper and faster method, one that would also suit the Washington office's artistic point of view and supply publicity for future sale. As the first of the state and local guides stood ready for print and administration critics called for results, the situation called for a definite ruling about publication.

As a manuscript reached completion, the project headquarters and the state director searched for a sponsor. The sponsor, not the Federal Writers' Project, entered the agreement with a publisher. The sponsor could be an official (a governor or secretary of state), a nonprofit, public, or government institution (a state university, highway commission, or state historical society), or a local government unit or nonprofit corporation chartered specifically to underwrite Federal Writers' Project publications.

The chief responsibilities of sponsors were to guarantee sales of a certain number of copies and to secure the copyright. The project would serve as agent between sponsor and publisher and whenever possible

deal with inquiries from publishers without bothering sponsors. There were regulations covering how sponsors could spend any profit made from guide sales. Sponsors could use the receipts to defray future publication costs, to aid their state units by contributions to non-labor expenses such as office rent, or to defray the cost of additional research for a revised edition of the guide.³⁹

The publication of Massachusetts: A Guide to Its Places and People in August, 1937 initiated the system in which commercial publishers worked with sponsors. The Massachusetts sponsor, Frederick W. Cook, Secretary of the Commonwealth, had suggested that a New England guide belonged in the hands of a New England publisher. It worked, for Houghton Mifflin, a Boston firm, made the best offer.

When the manuscript for the Massachusetts guide went to Houghton Mifflin, the Federal Writers' Project staffers were glad that they had succeeded in devising a method of commercial publication, pleased that another guide was about to reach the public, and relieved that

³⁹"Distributing the WPA Guides," Publisher's Weekly 137 (May 11, 1940), p. 1837.

the ordeal of producing the Massachusetts guide had finally ended.⁴⁰

Houghton Mifflin's nationwide publicity and a promotional campaign heralded the arrival of the Massachusetts guide. The volume sold out of its first edition of 20,000 copies and enjoyed a brief renown as a nonfiction best-seller in the Boston area. The success prompted Houghton Mifflin to offer to publish the other New England guides as an appeal to regionalism. The idea of package agreements appealed to the national staff. When the Federal Writers' Project approached publishers thereafter, it offered several guides of states geographically contiguous or several manuscripts ready for publication at the same time.

Conforming to the pattern, Oxford University Press published most of the midwestern guides, including Indiana (1941), Ohio (1940), and Michigan (1941), and several of the southern guides including Florida (1939), Virginia (1940), South Carolina (1940), and Maryland (1940). The pattern was not constant for Oxford also accepted Wyoming (1941) and Pennsylvania (1940).

⁴⁰Billington, op. cit., pp. 472-73.

Viking Press published several midwestern guides including Iowa (1938), Nebraska (1939), and Kansas (1939), but also took New Jersey (1939), Mississippi (1938), and Delaware (1938). Random House and Simon and Schuster published the New York City guides. The Tennessee guide was published by the small firm of Hastings House, which also published the majority of western guides including California (1939), Colorado (1941), and Texas (1940), and city guides for Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Sometimes the placement of a guide depended on special circumstances. Houghton Mifflin took the New Orleans guide because of the Louisiana state director, Lyle Saxon, whose books Houghton Mifflin had published. The New Orleans volume sold more than 15,000 copies and was one of the most successful efforts of the Federal Writers' Project.⁴¹

The New England guides, first to be completed as a regional unit, received almost unqualified praise. The reviews of the Massachusetts guide set the tone for those of its counterparts. One critic praised the photographs and the art and architecture essays

⁴¹Penkower, op. cit., p. 139.

but regretted that the flora and fauna essays were perfunctory and that the single maps left much to be desired when compared with Baedeker's for Paris and London.⁴²

Some of the offerings of the mid-Atlantic states competed strongly for the most favorable reviews. New York Panorama, the first volume of the New York City Guide, received special favor. The reviewer for the New York Times expressed his wonder that the color, squalor, and vitality of the city could have been so well captured in one volume.⁴³ If this guide represented a sample of government boondoggling, the Nashville Tennessean declared, "we could use a great deal more of it."⁴⁴ The New York City Guide was considered a "genuinely valuable book," and the American Institute of Graphic Arts chose Delaware's guidebook as one of the fifty best books of the year.⁴⁵

⁴²New York Times, April 24, 1938, p. 7, Col. 2.

⁴³New York Times, September 7, 1938, p. 24, Col. 7.

⁴⁴Nashville Tennessean, October 2, 1938, p. 4, Col. 1. For an analysis of the New York City guides see Chapter IV below.

⁴⁵New York Times, July 7, 1939, p. 15, Col. 2.

The rediscovery of America, a note running through much of the literature of the late 1930s, provided most critics with their prevalent theme in reviewing these volumes. Lewis Mumford termed the conception and execution of the state guides a great patriotic effort.⁴⁶ The Journal of the National Education Association, noting the project's concern with natural history and folklore that otherwise might have disappeared or remained unexplored, termed the guidebooks "a genuine folk movement."⁴⁷

While the guides received the praise of reviewers, the best volumes came from those states that were fortunate enough to have an abundance of professional talent. One of the finest examples of writing can be found in the Deerfield entry in the Massachusetts's guide. Deerfield, "a beautiful ghost," tells readers of its guide. "I dared to be beautiful, even in the shadow of the wilderness," but also, "and the wilderness haunts me, the ghosts of a slain race are in my

⁴⁶Lewis Mumford, "Writers Project," New Republic 92 (October 20, 1937), pp. 306-307.

⁴⁷"The Federal Writers Project," The Journal of the National Education Association, 27 (May, 1938), pp. 140-141.

doorways and clapboards, like a kind of death."⁴⁸

By contrast, at Coney Island,

riders are whirled, jolted, battered,
tossed upside down by the Cyclone, the
Thunderbolt, the Mile-Sky Chaser, the
Loop-O-Plane, the Whip, the Flying
Turns, the Dodge, Speedway, the
Chute-the-Chutes, and the Comet.
Above the cocophony of spielers,
cries, and the shrieks and laughter,
carrousel organs pound out last year's
tunes, and roller coasters slam down
their terrific inclines. In dance halls
and honky tonks, dancers romp and shuffle
to the endless blare of jazz bands.⁴⁹

As for Chicago,

in and around the Loop, rising high
about great museums housed in vast
marble piles, looms a serrated mass of
towers, spires, shafts, and huge cubes,
a jagged mountain range of brick, stone,
steel, concrete, and glass. To the south,
beyond the busy docks along the Calumet
River are great black mills, factories
and furnaces, filled with the roar and
rumble of machinery, their gaunt stacks
belching black clouds by day, red
flames by night.⁵⁰

The sales of the first state guides reflected
the laudatory reviews and the central offices' all-out
efforts. At a time when any publishing house considered

⁴⁸Massachusetts: A Guide to Its Places (Boston:
Houghton Mifflin, 1937), p. 233.

⁴⁹New York City Guide (New York: Random House,
1939), p. 189.

⁵⁰Illinois: A Descriptive and Historical Guide
(Chicago: McClurg, 1939), p. 302.

itself fortunate to market 2,500-3,500 copies, most guidebooks fulfilled this aspiration and satisfied concerned sponsors. The Vermont book sold 2,000 copies in its first week of publication; by 1940 it had passed 6,000 and its Maine counterpart had reached 7,000 sales. The New York City guide sold 3,279 copies in three months.⁵¹

Two points must be mentioned in discussing the merits and defects of the American Guides. First, the writers were often affected by the ambiguity of the project's aims. The conflicts between work relief and culture resulted in publications of often uneven quality. But many books of merit and significance were published despite the writers' immersion in the bureaucratic and political maelstrom. Secondly, the American Guides reflected local and regional prejudices. For instance, the governor of Massachusetts, Edward Hurley, loudly objected to the coverage of the Boston Police Strike, the Sacco-Vanzetti Case, Boston censorship, and Puritanism presented in the Guides.⁵²

⁵¹Penkower, op. cit., p. 135.

⁵²New York Times, August 25, 1937, p. 3, Col. 1.

Nevertheless, the guides also reflect a new national unity that had sprung up in the nation during the 1930s. These books derive regional prejudices and a new sense of nationalism from the structure of the project, the nature of American politics, and the intellectual currents of the 1930s. Writers were also recruited and employed in their home states; many had a limited picture of the nation as a whole. Others achieved local prestige as state historians or writers of local color fiction, and were particularists by profession; this was especially true in the south, midwest, and northwest.

The dual focus of the books parallels the federal-state structure of American government and politics. Project workers were part of the state-oriented WPA organizations in spirit and practical affairs. The writers felt an obligation to demonstrate that their states and regions were integral parts of the national union, and they further realized that some local pride, financed by the federal government, would be appreciated by election-conscious Congressmen. The intellectuals who spearheaded the "New Nationalism" of the 1930s, such as Lewis Mumford and Howard Odum, based their views on the new conception of the local and regional

components of national unity. Folklorists and regional literary groups also had some influence on the federal writers.⁵³

The American guides were not entirely the products of a sustained effort to produce memorable books. Had the Project been placed on a permanent, non-relief basis, the quality of the books would have been much higher. However, the American guides cannot be dismissed lightly. They cast considerable light on the social, economic, political, and intellectual ideals of a whole generation of American literary craftsmen.

One possible drawback to the guides is the implication that the town technique is an inadequate presentation of history. This may have somewhat blurred historical perspective due to the attempt to present a full picture of American life in a guide format. This causes a frequent distortion of the past or an antiquarian-like fascination with certain aspects of American history.

The guides approached history in relation to place. As Robert Cantwell argued, in only a very few instances had American history been written in terms of community.⁵⁴

⁵³Mumford, op. cit., p. 306.

⁵⁴Robert Cantwell, "American and the Writers Project," New Republic, 98 (April 26, 1939), p. 323.

History previously had been written in terms of biography and its dominant political and economic movements, but until the guides it had never been written so fully in terms of localized communities, in which political and economic movements had their play.

While it is extremely important to read in Charles Beard or Frederick Jackson Turner of the opening of the West, it is another kind of experience to read of the rise and fall of Chillicothe, Ohio, in relation to the railroads or of Galena, Illinois, in relation to the world market for lead. In the 1840s and 1850s, the railroads supplanted the canals as the main method of transportation the guides dramatized how many careers were destroyed in the process and how many towns disappeared as a result of the transportation revolution. History books discuss the rise of the Mississippi Delta as the world's leading cotton producer in the antebellum years, but this rise had never been made as concrete as in the Mississippi guide.

History in relation to place also had the effect of transforming the roles of the leading actors. As Robert Cantwell pointed out,

the historian can research countless biographies of U. S. Grant, and get less insight into his early career than is supplied by a history of

Galena. No biography communicates the sense of the boom-town environment in which he functions, or pitted him so clearly against the hard-drinking, violent, 'get rich-quick' society that formed his character.⁵⁵

By reading the entry for Galena, one feels the speculating spirit that prevailed in the nineteenth century.

In literature, the presentation of America in relation to place can be found in the poetry of Whitman's Leaves of Grass, the early books of Van Wyck Brooks, and the essays of H. L. Mencken. The tour sections can be compared to the "catalogue" and descriptive elements of Leaves of Grass. Like the America that Whitman witnessed it is a slightly alarming picture, largely because of the impression it gives that carelessness and accident play such a large role in American history.

The guides comment on local peculiarities, exotic traditions, and in a Whitmansque fashion, odd local place names and their origin. But even Whitman's America lacked the amiable, sardonic quality that shows through these histories of towns, roads, and houses. This is witnessed by the American love of secret rooms. The guides

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 324.

probably contain more information on this special architecture than was ever written--for instance, in the old Betsy Thompson House on Dividing Creek Road, Maryland; at Beverly Farms nearby; in Bowman's Plantation in Virginia; and in the Old Brick House near South Mills, South Carolina. The guides showed that America was full of secret rooms, invisible closets, hidden stairways, and false halls that they seem at one time to have been as essential to a well-planned house as a kitchen. It is difficult to think of New England Puritans as thrifty, practical people when you discover them equipping their houses with trapdoors and sliding panels.⁵⁶

There is something secretive about the Americans portrayed in the guides but it is counteracted by an odd sense of humanity. They composed irreverent jingles for tombstones, made jocular names for their villages and farms. Like Leaves of Grass, the guides were a catalog of remarkable instances of America's ability to take extraordinary happenings in the stride, and their unwillingness to admit to surprise. Like Ann Whitall of Red Bank, Virginia, who was spinning quietly in her attic when a cannonball crashed through the wall. Then she simply moved the spinning wheel to the cellar and

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 324-325.

went on spinning.⁵⁷

Even the warfare mentioned in the guides seem to have no relation to military strategy; for instance, when the Tories killed Daniel Schenck of Pleasant Valley, New York, his wife took his gun, followed him and shot the Tory who had killed him; and when the British captured John Burrowes of Matawan, his neighbors rowed over to Flatbush, to capture the mayor of New York City.⁵⁸

The Americans portrayed in the guides were sometimes violent, but they had an almost childlike awe of people more romantic and eccentric than themselves. In each village they kept alive local legends.

One well-known local legend recounted in the American guide was that of the Bell Witch. Between the factual listings for points of interest from the Kentucky Line to Nashville is the recounting of the story: "The Bell Witch Farm has long been so called because it is widely believed that a witch hag rode John Bell and his family here during the early part of the nineteenth

⁵⁷Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 272.

⁵⁸New York: A Guide to the Empire State (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 198, 306.

century."⁵⁹ The final two sentences of the entry are a strange mingling of legend and fact. "The Bell Witch disappeared when John Bell died. The original farmhouse has been torn down."⁶⁰

"None of the generalizations," wrote a critic, "about Americans seems to fit the people described in the guide."⁶¹ About the best is that of the anonymous writer in the North Carolina Guide, who says that the North Carolina farmer is composed, stubborn, independent, has an evident feeling of equality, "may politely defer to someone he thinks knows more about something than he does, and above all respects a smart lawyer."⁶²

Throughout the guides are brief biographies of prominent, notorious, or eccentric individuals who were part of a community whose marks still remain. The biographies in the guides have no rigorous standard to determine inclusion; people are mentioned whether they

⁵⁹Tennessee: A Guide to the State, op. cit., p. 392.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 393.

⁶¹"What the Writers Wrote," New Republic, 92 (September 1, 1937), p. 89.

⁶²North Carolina: A Guide to the Old North State (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 67.

succeeded or failed, whether their inventions worked or not, whether they won or lost their duels, made money legally or illegally. The only test was that some living evidence of their presence, if only a legend or the name of a street, still persists in their own towns, so the reader finds a wide range, gamblers, storekeepers, misanthropes, innkeepers, spies, murders, Indians, surveyors, people who planted orchards, or people who built fishponds on the roofs of their houses, or a man who built solar power machines or like the Presbyterians of Squabbletown, Pennsylvania, became memorable only because of the ferocity of their struggle with the Baptists.⁶³ There is a mention of David Brinkman, the young evangelist from Georgia, whose mark on the Georgia culture consisted of the disconcerting signs found along highways, "Prepare to Meet Thy God."⁶⁴

Another interesting biography was that of Nordica, the musician from Backus Corner, Maine. This seems typical in its offhand acceptance of incongruities in

⁶³Pennsylvania: A Guide to the Keystone State
New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 198.

⁶⁴Georgia: A Guide to Its Towns and Countryside (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), p. 439.

relation to the life of the country as the guides record it. "Turn right at Backus Corner," dictates the Maine guide. "Go down a dirt road, turn right again and you come to a one and a half story cottage where in 1859, Lillian Norton was born. Her high voice was light and sweet," the guide stated, and she had a varied matrimonial career. She assumed the name of Gigli Nordica. Her first husband sailed off in a balloon and was never seen again, and she died in Java after being shipwrecked off Thursday Island.⁶⁵

The introductory essays of the guides made up approximately one-third of each book. These informative and readable accounts of the history, culture, and people of the state or city are the best expressions of the intellectual and social ideas of the project writers. It is difficult to ascertain which of the essays were written collectively and which were the work of individuals, since they were all unsigned. Several states tried to compromise with the official anonymity of the Project by including signed essays by well-known non-project writers and a few guidebooks contained lists of project writers.

⁶⁵Maine: A Guide 'Down East' (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), p. 158.

Several subjects were ignored or skirted over in introductory essays. As already mentioned, many did not have an essay on religion, while others presented balanced accounts of state religious history. Labor history and the details of labor-management conflicts are more comprehensively handled than the development of industry, although agricultural development is discussed in detail in many guides. The story of banking and finance is ignored completely. The New York City guide contains a long and quite interesting piece on jazz, placing nearly every trumpet player, but contained no history or financial section dealing with Wall Street. Social history is often treated inadequately, while local politics are not often clarified.

The guides were the product of people who generally shared New Deal, pro-labor sympathies. As such, these volumes did draw attention to machine politics, injustices to black and white sharecroppers, and various strikes and unionization developments throughout United States history, while often overlooking what they felt to be the causes of these injustices, such as Wall Street and management.⁶⁶ "These writers we are going to employ

⁶⁶Alfred Kazin, On Native Ground (New York: Doubleday, 1952), p. 341.

are all but hot for unionization," Orrick Johns told the WPA official interviewing him for the New York City directorship. "They mean business and will fight for employment and for the rights of collective bargaining."⁶⁷

The Writers' Project included men and women of every political faith. Many of them were amateur revolutionists who believed that the next American revolution was near. As a result, the balanced portrait that emerges from these pages is of a people. Roosevelt's "forgotten man" was given meaning, along with a rediscovery of a land rich in diversity.⁶⁸

When the guides attempted to describe current history, they did it without much art. The reader gets the impression that the editors fought hard for the inclusion of controversial episodes, such as strikes.

But sympathy for the economic "underdog" is implied in almost every history, labor, and industry essay. Every guide approves of the New Deal improvements, although the degree of enthusiasm for the Roosevelt administration was not uniform. Many project writers

⁶⁷Orrick Johns, Time of Our Lives (New York: Stackpole, 1937), p. 192.

⁶⁸Harold Rosenberg, "Anyone Who Could Write English," New Yorker, 49 (January 20, 1973), p. 100.

felt that they had been given an opportunity to document the validity of the New Deal, and many essays present the Roosevelt Administration as the inevitable result of the pre-1932 conditions of American life.

The state and local guides have definite regional cohesion, a result of both subject matter and the organization of the project. In the South, the guides document the impact of the depression and New Deal on a region with a different social structure and social and economic problems. The North Carolina and Mississippi Guides are excellent examples of Southern contributions to the American Guide Series.

Three major themes can be found in the Southern guides: (1) Southern tradition and folkways, (2) conditions of Southern life in the 1930s, and (3) the future of the "New South". Southern writers had a more highly developed sense of regional diversity than their counterparts in other states. In the preface to the Mississippi guide, for example, the editors promise that they will depict the aspects of Mississippi life ignored by William Faulkner and Stark Young.⁶⁹

⁶⁹Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State (New York: Viking, 1938), p. 3.

Southern project writers understood the culture and life of their region. Unlike many of the guides, the Southern guides have excellent chapters on religion and folk history. Labor disputes are not given a disproportionate place in the Southern guides.

The treatment of Black life and race relations in the guides illuminates attitudes of the Southern writers and the relation of the Blacks to the New Deal. For instance, the essay on Black life in the North Carolina guide is the same length as the essay on Indians. Segregated schools are praised. The concept of white supremacy is cogently presented, and the essay concludes with the statement that a great deal has to be done for blacks. The folklore essay does not discuss the origin and development of Black folklore or its influence on white culture. The project writers seem to be presenting the attitude of an "average" middle-class Southerner toward racial problems.

The guides strongly imply that in the tradition of vitality and diversity of the United States there must be a separate but equal New Deal for Blacks. This is made especially clear in the Mississippi Guide. In the Mississippi book, two consecutive chapters are entitled "White Folkways" and "Negro Folkways." The

first is written from the "inside," it is narrated in a light, humorous vein with touches of the vernacular by a writer who pretends to be "an average" Mississippi farmer. The narrator delights in the everyday life of Mississippi whites.

The "Negro Folkways" essay, on the other hand, is written from the "outside," the narrator is detached and impersonal. Black life is dryly and often critically summarized. In a later chapter, Black folk music is discussed and praised. However, like the North Carolina guide, the Mississippi guide describes improvements in Blacks' status and hints at the need for future amelioration.

These Southern guides are valuable in that they show the complex and often paradoxical attitudes of Southerners toward the social implications of the New Deal. They present an excellent source material on the relation of the faith in American vitality to the Southern social structure.

The Southern guides, like the other books in the American Guide Series, do not deal adequately with sociology, yet they present a generally comprehensive picture of southern culture, history, and the impact of economic dislocation, industrialization, and such New

Deal agencies as the Tennessee Valley Authority. The descriptions of Southern cities and towns are among the best in the entire series, and the drawings and maps are used more creatively than in most of the guides.

In general, the state guides present a balanced picture of the component parts of the nation. Federal writers were impatient with the past, fascinated by contemporary life, and hopeful for the future. The American Guides thus represent an extremely valuable sourcebook not only for a view of America before the 1930s, but important as a presentation of American culture during the Great Depression.

CHAPTER 4

The Auxiliary Projects

Preparing and publishing the American guides absorbed the energies of the Federal Writers' Project's staff and state units until 1939. Still, directors at both levels thought about experiments that would follow the completion of the series.

As national director, Alsberg had responsibility for finding new tasks that would merit the continuation of the Project. He wanted to find practical use for the research materials which did not appear in the guides. The other project books reflected Alsberg's decision to explore new ways to portray the American culture. The encouragement of experiments, although not always clearly organized or carefully planned, widened the scope of the project's work beyond the guides.

Alsberg encouraged state projects to compose books and pamphlets to use their research materials that did not appear in state guides. Nation-wide from 1937 to 1941, the state offices published 537 special books and pamphlets.¹ Many pamphlet titles represented a series

¹Federal Writers Project, Catalogue (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), p. 5.

of small booklets. Tennessee writers, for example, under the editorship of James Aswell, published in 1940 a collection of folktales titled God Bless the Devil.² New Jersey writers produced a set of free school bulletins entitled "Stories of New Jersey" that included seventy-two titles.³

The number of special studies depended on the size of the state project and its ingenuity in securing local sponsors and negotiating publishing arrangements. The Tennessee project completed one other publication besides the state guide and the folk tales--Tennessee, written entirely by the state writers in 1941.⁴

The special studies covered a variety of topics. There were hundreds of town guides, usually about one hundred pages in length. Florida, for example, made its Miami Guide available for \$1; Kentucky's Lexington and the Blue Grass Country sold for \$1.50; Massachusetts

²Minton, op. cit., p. 187.

³Catalogue, op. cit., pp. 103-104.

⁴Vermont and Delaware finished two studies; Virginia, seventeen; New York City, twenty; Pennsylvania, twenty-one; Oregon, twenty-four; Illinois, thirty-seven; and Ohio led the states with forty-eight. Catalogue.

Springfield Guide was free; and Texas published Corpus Christi Guide and Houston Guide and sold them for \$1.00 each. Many state projects had recreational and conservation pamphlets and there were valuable state monographs on ethnic groups, including The Armenians in Massachusetts, New York City's The Italians of New York, and Arizona's pamphlets on Indian tribes.⁵

The most famous of the "city guides" was the New York City Guide, published in two volumes; one, a collection of essays called New York Panarama and the other, a volume of tours. In the guide, New York City is viewed as a living organism, the same theme that first appeared in American art with Melville's Pierre and the realist painters.

The book focuses on the life and culture of the great metropolis. Project editors, aware of the assumed radical nature of the Federal Writers' Project and the New York City Program in particular, tried to disassociate the federal government from the implications of the book, a rather impossible desire. "It should be obvious that, in the discussion of twenty-six widely

⁵Catalogue, op. cit., pp. 1-31.

diverse subjects by many different authors, various individual opinions are bound to find expression. These are not necessarily the opinions of the WPA."⁶

There are a number of "individual opinions" in the book. The essay on literature describes the radical League of American Writers as "formed on a broad basis of opposition of fascism and imperialist war." It is a carefully worded statement, but meaningful, nonetheless. Later, a writer demonstrates at least partial acceptance of the Communist belief when he criticizes The Nation for inconsistent liberalism in "the social political field."⁷ A caption on a photograph of Rockefeller Center has political overtones "For those who can afford it," the caption writer says.⁸

The first essay in the Panarama, "The Metropolis and Her Children" written by the poet, Vincent McHugh, is regarded as one of the finest examples of project writing. The New Yorker felt that it was overwritten and criticized such metaphors as "the four boroughs like

⁶New York Panorama (New York: Random House, 1938), p. VI.

⁷Ibid., p. 46.

⁸Ibid., p. 176.

lily-pads about the basking trout of Manhattan."⁹ However, McHugh's conception of the "healthy dynamism of a developing metropolis," and his vivid portrayal of the "infinite pueblo of the Bronx," emphatically state the main theme of the work of the Federal Writers' Project, the diversity, vitality, and unlimited capacity for growth for the American nation.

These publications did not receive editing by the national Federal Writers' Project staff because of their local appeal and because the staff could not handle all the studies. While these works did not receive the critical acclaim given state volumes, the studies were important because they kept writers with employment and increased support from local audiences. Moreover, the books and the pamphlets reached huge audiences. In an account made in 1941, national staff member, Merle Colby, reported that the number of copies of special studies, including pamphlets, totaled 3,248,181. The printing for the American Guide series reached 268,967. The diversity and extent of books and pamphlets produced by state units showed the high degree of technical skill

⁹"Talk of the Town," New Yorker, 14 (October 1, 1938), p. 12.

that many state offices reached during the lifetime of the project.¹⁰

A group of regional travel volumes provided the transition for the staff from their work on the guides to the experimental areas. U.S. One (1938) followed the East coast highway from Maine to Florida; The Ocean Highway (1938) covered the coastal area from New Brunswick, New York to Jacksonville, Florida; Intracoastal Waterway (1937) treated the area from Norfolk, Virginia to Key West, Florida; and the Oregon Trail followed that historic route from the Missouri River to the Pacific.

One regional work that showed a great degree of technical competence was the best seller released by Hale, Cushman and Flint of Boston, New England Hurricane. This work is a graphic, gripping account of a devastating hurricane that struck the New England states September 21, 1938. The purpose of the book was to investigate the effects of a natural disaster on Americans already beset with the depression. The editors carefully avoided prose or sensationalism. The story of the hurricane's

¹⁰Colby, op. cit., pp. 1827-1828.

ravages are told simply and directly; the facts and pictures speak for themselves with a mixture of unrhetorical sympathy for the killed, injured, and homeless. No attempt is made at sensationalism or pseudo-journalistic "human interest" stories. What makes the New England Hurricane exciting to readers was the inclusion of articles from project workers who experienced the wrath of the storm. Their eyewitness accounts included the story of one young man who had to wade flood-swollen streams to secure help for his family stranded in their home;¹¹ the terror another worker experienced as he watched the hurricane destroy his beachside home;¹² and the danger a young woman felt as she tried to reach home from her project office while dodging fallen wires, flying glass, and uprooted trees.¹³

The success of the regional guides encouraged new studies such as Cape Cod Pilot, which is a contribution to American literature as well as to American folklore. This work was written by Josef Berger under the pseudonym

¹¹New England Hurricane: A Pictorial Record (Boston: Hale, Cushman and Flint, 1938), p. 98.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 69.

of "Jeremiah Digges." The editors point to the unique quality of the book in their preface, "The book deviates from the form of the guide series for it attempts to present guide material as a personal experience."¹⁴

Berger's compelling narrative is a colorfully written compilation of Cape folklore, history and guide material. Berger uses local language in his descriptions; for example, "The town of Barnstable, like a mackerel seiner with a full trip of fish, carries the biggest part of her story below the waterline."¹⁵ The tone of the book and Berger's insight into the human and natural aspects of his subject are reminiscent of Thoreau's Cape Cod and the descriptions of New Bedford and Nantucket in Melville's Moby Dick.

His presentation of "an earthy lesson on the dignity of death" and his statement that "there are more facets than I can hold to light; the water is bluer than any man can paint it," indicate the Cape Cod Pilot's direct relation of the tradition of the romantic landscape in

¹⁴Jeremiah Digges, Cape Cod Pilot (New York: Viking, 1937), p. III.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 13.

American art and literature.¹⁶

But Berger's analysis of the effect of Coast Guard stations and New Deal construction and social welfare projects on the Cape area make the book sharply contemporary. Berger has a vivid sense of the historical development of communities, an unusual attribute for a federal writer. Berger is mainly concerned with presenting an analytical tour of the Cape, not with the meaning of the past for the present.

Perhaps the most pioneering of all the project's subsidiary efforts became the Black studies, first begun for the state guides and then taken up in their own right. Original plans for the guide series contained no directions to study Black history and culture, but as early as the autumn of 1935, Alsberg and Cronyn had discussed the idea of devoting a section in each guidebook to "Negro Culture in America." Their enthusiasm developed after they attended a dinner meeting at Howard University with fifteen prominent black leaders of Washington to discuss methods of research. Cronyn sent a draft of a plan for Black studies to Jacob Baker and recommended that the project secure as "Negro Affairs

¹⁶Ibid., p. 64.

editor," Mary Church Terrell, a notable linguist, teacher, author, and prominent worker in Washington social causes.¹⁷ About the same time the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in New York asked the city's writers' project to employ more than the three Black writers then on its payroll. The NAACP also asked the project to research the place of Blacks in New York's history and contemporary life. Nothing came from this request.¹⁸

At informative meetings in late 1936 at the home of Sterling Brown, a young English professor and poet at Howard University, influential Black leaders persuaded Brown to accept a position on the Federal Writers' Project where he would work for fair representation of his race and propose special studies dealing with the Blacks in American life. Those who advised Brown were John P. Davis, National Negro Congress leader and an articulate New Deal critic; Ralph Bunche, a young leader of the NAACP; and Alfred E. Smith, chief assistant to Harry Hopkins for Black affairs in the WPA. They acknowledged the employment of several Black

¹⁷Mangione, op. cit., p. 262.

¹⁸New York Times, September 14, 1935, p. 3, Col 8.

professionals in Harold Icke's Department of Interior and many emergency relief agencies. Yet, they were aware of the failure of the New Deal to respond more positively to the plight of Blacks and they felt that more needed to be done. Realizing this, Alsberg established a division of "Negro Affairs" and named Brown as "Negro Affairs Editor."¹⁹

Until work could begin on special studies for Blacks, Brown's chief task was to decide how to incorporate information about Blacks in state and city guides and from what perspective. Alsberg's sincere concern for writers caught in the Depression and Cronyn's dispassionate editing of material pertaining to Blacks impressed him. Brown also worked with Alfred E. Smith to keep the WPA officials informed of project activities and wrote publicity releases for books that used material about Black Americans. Unofficially, Brown served as counselor for Black writers in the Federal Writers' Project.²⁰

Brown, by early 1937, felt he was able to give direction to the project research in Black history and

¹⁹John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of the American Negro (New York: Knopf, 1980), pp. 512-513.

²⁰New York Times, January 31, 1938, p. 7.

to judge the quality of copy coming into the national office. He and his small staff wrote criticisms for the guide manuscripts that mentioned Blacks. At the same time, he wrote an essay on Washington's Black population for Washington: City and Capital released in 1937. In this volume, Brown was responsible for the piece that chronicled the periodic slave revolts, race riots, the underground railroad, achievements of the Freedman's Bureau, and post-Civil War gains by the local Black populace in education, culture, politics, and religion.

Having spent years investigating the land records of the District of Columbia and the genealogies of families, Brown could not resist noting that during Lincoln's presidency, a group of freedmen migrated to Vache, Haiti, became miserable, returned on a ship the President sent for them, and "settled in Arlington in a place known as 'Freedmen's Village', very near a tract left by George Washington Parke Custus to his colored daughter Maria Syphax."²¹

And Brown's research in family and land records

²¹Washington: City and Capital (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), p. 68.

prompted him to analyze the tactic by which realtors destroyed Pierre L'Enfant's plan for a front and back garden for each Washington home. By the establishment of the alley system, the editor lamented, realtors mutilated L'Enfant's plan, assured themselves high investment returns, but produced tenement living at its worst.²²

Securing fair treatment in state guides for contributions of Blacks proved less easy than was the case with the Washington guide. Many state WPA units required their writers' projects to create separate units for Blacks on relief rolls. While insisting on separate and small units for Blacks, state directors in many Southern states curiously postured that they could portray with impartiality the role of the Black in their state's history and society.

Brown and Cronyn waged long and arduous editorial battles with the Alabama project. Mrs. Myrtle Miles, the Alabama director, while a reliable director, could not conceal her prejudice. The one researcher assigned to Macon County, the location of Tuskegee Institute, she

²²Ibid., p. 78.

insisted, should not be a Black person because of the "considerable racial sensitiveness in Tuskegee and the vicinity." Cronyn and Brown took particular exceptions to the fact that the Alabama writers had omitted Booker T. Washington on the grounds that "he was not a native Alabamian" and only "paid a courtesy visit" to the state on occasions when he visited his mother.²³ Passages from Washington's autobiography substantiating his long residence were produced but the director refused to allow the entry. The Washington office informed her that an Alabama history which did not cover Alabama's Black population with its relative proportion, as well as her white population, could not be considered as fully representative of Alabama.

On other points of dispute about the Black's place in Alabama's history, Cronyn, Brown, and Alsberg told Miles that part of an essay was factually incorrect which stated "that the Blacks in three or four decades before the Civil War were economically and spiritually better off than in twenty years after the War."²⁴

Simply persuading the state directors to submit

²³Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South (New York: Hastings House, 1949), p. 1231.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 53.

materials on Black life was sometimes a major accomplishment. The North Carolina director, Edwin Bjorkman, explained that "the feeling against any extensive treatment of the Black is so strong in all large North Carolina cities, with the only exception of Durham, that it has been almost impossible for us to make the various district offices to dig out and transmit the required material."²⁵

And to secure information on the type of accommodations available in Arkansas, writers first had to overcome such attitudes as that of the president of the Newport, Arkansas Chamber of Commerce, Marian Dickens. Dickens replied to an inquiry about the possible discrimination against Blacks sent by Beulah S. Haagi, a researcher for tours in the Little Rock writers' unit. Dickens wrote, "I do not think that there is any section of Arkansas that the negro would be discriminated against as long as he knows his place and most of our Southern negroes do."²⁶

Sterling Brown, by 1938, had persuaded Alsberg that the Black as an influence in American life was worthy

²⁵Penkower, op. cit., p. 141.

²⁶Franklin, op. cit., p. 516.

of special project monographs. Brown exercised more editorial control over these works than over the essays in the state guides, and, on the whole, they are more satisfactory. His most rewarding effort was The Negro in Virginia, written by the state's Black unit.

The purpose of The Negro in Virginia was to tell the story of Blacks in Virginia from the time when the first twenty arrived at Jamestown in 1619 to the date the book was written. That purpose was achieved when the book was published in the Spring of 1940, almost two and one-half years after completion of the first draft. During that period the manuscript was revised at least four times with a final revision by Eudora Ramsey Richardson, the Virginia State Director, in which she cut the wordage by about twelve percent.

A number of individuals took part in the numerous revisions: Sterling Brown; Brown's assistant, Ulysses Gilee; Mentor Howe, research editor of the Virginia Writers' Project; John H. Russell, a historian and the author of The Free Negro in Virginia; Roscoe Lewis and Eudora R. Richardson.

The book was well received when it came out and was widely regarded as a "classic of its kind."²⁷

²⁷Mangione, op. cit., p. 261.

H. L. Mencken's American Mercury commented: "The product of many hands, Negro and White, it is so brilliantly edited that it reads as though it might be the individual work of a singularly competent historian."²⁸ It made the Book of the Month Club list for June, 1940 and was cited by one critic as "one of the most valuable contributions yet made to the American Negro's history. The method of this book should be a model for the other histories that need to be written."²⁹ The Negro in Virginia was unique for its utilization of the testimony of ex-slaves. It was, according to Roscoe Lewis, a synthesis of library and field work.

It was fortunate for the Black studies project that Eudora Richardson became director of the Virginia's Writers' Project. She could edit and write, and she was a liberal for her time in her view toward race relations. Some of her friends called her radical when compared to the man she replaced. Her predecessor, H. J. Eckenrode, wrote in 1938:

The reason that the negro slave did not rise in rebellion in 1862-1865 was that

²⁸Ibid., p. 262.

²⁹Ibid., p. 259.

most of them were too well satisfied to do so. The Southern planters had evolved a type of slavery so excellent that it was in many respects, better than freedom, as many negroes were astute enough to perceive. Under the new slave system the physical well-being of negroes was so well-cared for that the splendid specimens of men and women we see today replaced the feeble, pot bellied savages from the West Coast of Africa. They (slaves) did not feel the restraints of slavery as galling for those restraints were reasonable. Flogging was carefully regulated and was not cruel; indeed it was not very painful.³⁰

As mentioned previously there were errors to be found in the work. Many of these do not substantially alter the general history of slavery as presented in the book, but some have the effect of giving a distorted picture of certain aspects of slave life. Since The Negro in Virginia has been considered a valuable sourcebook, it is important to view some of the types of errors it contains.

Some of the interview material is attributed the wrong source. For instance, a story attributed to Byril Anderson (p. 42) actually comes from an interview with Marriah Hines; a Louise Jones story (pp. 87-88)

³⁰H. J. Eckenrode, "Negroes in Richmond in 1864," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, 46 (July, 1938), p. 194.

comes from Nancy Williams; stories attributed to Betty Jones (p. 93) and Henrietta Perry (p. 64) are also from the Nancy Williams' interviews; a Gabe Hunt (p. 133) is from the Robert Williams' interview; a long story about "Cox's Snow" attributed to Tissie White (pp. 30-31) is a heavily edited tale from Sis Shackelford's interview.³¹

Several errors occur in giving the location of ex-slaves. In the preface to an Armaci Adams story (p. 209), she is said to have been living in Rocky Mount, Virginia, at the end of the Civil War. Her pencil copy interviews from the Roscoe Lewis Papers clearly indicated that she was living in Norfolk, at least two hundred miles from Rocky Mount.³²

Expurgation is censorship by omission. An example is the story Fanny Berry tells about Sakie, a house slave who resisted her owner's sexual advances by pushing his "hindparts" into a pot of boiling lye. This story was cut before the final draft of The Negro in Virginia.³³

³¹The Negro in Virginia, reprint edition (New York: Arno, 1969).

³²*Ibid.*, p. 116.

³³Kenneth S. Goldstein, "Bowdlerization and Expurgation: Academic and Folk," Journal of American Folklore, 80 (October-December, 1967), p. 375.

Bowdlerization is censorship by modification. A case in point is the interview material from the ex-slave, Priscilla Joiner. She is represented in The Negro in Virginia by a brief paragraph, although her name was left out of the ex-slaves in the book's index.

My old mistress was the best woman in the world. She may have owned slaves, but she never sold any. She brought me up just like one of her own children until I was 12 years old. Then she paid for me to go to a colored school with my own people.³⁴

Priscilla Joiner was one of her mistress's own children.³⁵ Some expurgation and bowdlerization was committed to avoid violation of the then current standards of obscenity, but most seems to have been done to avoid offending the Southern racial etiquette.

Much editing appears to have been done in order to make the material "read better." The interviewer and editor did not always quote the interviewee verbatim but summarized the answer or the entire interview in a more entertaining style than the question and answer format allows. An example of this type of editing follows:

³⁴The Negro in Virginia, op. cit., p. 46.

³⁵Ibid., p. 45.

Dat day of Lee's surrender I never wil
fergit, for all dem seven chillun come
runnin out of de house in de yard wher I
was en say, 'John, John, you is free;
You's free John' An I made out like I
was cryin' kivered my face wid both han's
and setch a hollorin: I didn't want to
leave my mistress.³⁶

The "finished" form appeared in The Negro in Virginia:

Didn't know nothing bout it till Lee's
army surrendered at de apple tree. I
never will fergit dat day cause all
Marse's seben chillun came runnin' out
de house a yellin, 'John, John, you is
free, John! De war is over an dat make
you a free man!' An I made out like I
was cryin and kivered my face wid both
hands an hollored dat I didn't want to
leave missus, but I was gloryin jus de
same.³⁷

The problem of how to record dialect was one that
was never fully resolved. Although general suggestions
were made in regard to dialect recording, they were not
always followed.

On May 2, 1937, John Lomax, the National Advisor
of Folklore and Folkways for the Federal Writers'
Project, wrote Richardson and made a number of
suggestions in regard to dialect. The speech of the

³⁶Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Bondan, and
Robert K. Phillips, eds., Weevils in the Wheat:
Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves (Charlottesville,
Virginia: University Presses of Virginia, 1976), p. 35.

³⁷The Negro in Virginia, op. cit., pp. 208-209.

ex-slave should be recorded; the stories should not be told in the language of the interviewer. Words should not be put into dialect where this would change the pronunciation. He gave a list of dialect forms that should not be used, and he stressed that the flavor of Black speech should be preserved and that the dialect used should not make the stories difficult to read.

Richardson responded to Lomax's letter on May 18 and included a copy of dialect instructions that Roscoe Lewis had sent to his workers. Lewis had incorporated most of Lomax's suggestions in his instructions and had added some suggestions of his own. He gave examples of the use of apostrophes where syllables were omitted or slurred, goin' instead of going, 'iligion instead of religion, his'n instead of hisen. And he included a list of thirty-one acceptable dialect forms.

Sterling Brown sent out a memorandum on June 20, 1937, for the guidance of workers in all the states involved in the national project. He stated, "In order to make this volume of slave narratives more appealing and less difficult for the average reader, I recommend that truth to idiom be paramount, and exact truth to pronunciation secondary." Brown felt, however, that it was important to note accurately "turns of phrase

that have flavor and vividness." For example, "durin' of de war," "piddled in de fields," and "skin of woods." Certain words, such as "patrollers, mistress, and master" should have standardized spellings. Brown also listed dialect words that he thought should not be used.³⁸

Before instructions were sent to the field workers in Virginia, the workers had their own systems of recording dialect. Project worker, Susie R. Byrd, jotted down notes to the typist on her pencil copy of an interview with Fannie Berry:

To Typist: (1) leave off g's uniformly: i.e. talkin', comin', hirin' etc. (2) Use et for it uniformly. (3) Done, instead of dun or don; (4) Girl, instead of gurl, (5) Was, uniformly, or wus. Either is o.k. for this dialect. (6) Missus, uniformly, instead of mistress or mississ.³⁹

In an article in The American Historical Review, C. Vann Woodward discusses the Federal Writers' Project's ex-slave interviews. Woodward points out the value of the interviews as well as some of the problems involved

³⁸Thomas F. Swopes, "The Federal Writers Project Slave Interviews: Useful Data or Misleading Source," The Oral History Review, 2 (1977), p. 34.

³⁹Susie R. Byrd, "Notes on Interviewing Ex-Slaves," in Weevils in the Wheat, p. 384.

in using them.⁴⁰ At this point, this writer will examine the interviews found in The Negro in Virginia in light of some of Woodward's general remarks on national interviews.

The picture given of Virginia slavery by the interviews is that of slavery in the Piedmont and Tidewater. Eight of the interviewees had been slaves in states other than Virginia. (Five of these in North Carolina, not far from the Virginia border, and one just over the state line in West Virginia.) Ninety-five informants grew up in Virginia. The home location of the remaining fifty-four informants is unknown but probably follows the same ratio as that for the informants whose home areas we do know. The reader can assume that about 90 percent of the informants grew up in Virginia. Many of the ex-slaves interviewed in other states were not native-born but were brought in as slaves, often from Virginia.

About ninety of the informants lived in cities or larger towns at the time they were interviewed. This fact adds some slight bias to the data, but it should

⁴⁰C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources: A Review Article," American Historical Review, 79 (April, 1974), pp. 47-81.

be kept in mind that most of the informants had migrated to the cities after the Civil War. There still is a good spread of informants through the Virginia Piedmont and Tidwater as far as home location is concerned.

The Virginia ex-slaves as a group were older at the time they were interviewed than the national group:

<u>Age at Emancipation (1865)</u>	<u>% of Informants</u>	
	<u>National</u>	<u>Virginia</u>
1-5	16	7
6-10	27	19
11-15	24	20
16-20	16	24
21-30	13	21
Over 30	3	2
Unknown	-	7
	<u>99</u>	<u>100</u> ⁴¹

At least 67 percent of the Virginia ex-slaves experienced ten years or more of slavery, versus 56 percent of the national group.

⁴¹The figures for the national collection represent the narratives collected by private sources since the Civil War. They are taken from Norman Yetman's "The Background of Slave Narrative Collections," American Quarterly (Fall, 1967), p. 534.

Woodward maintains that males and former house servants are over represented in the national collection.⁴² This stands in sharp contrast to the Virginia collection, where females constitute 60 percent of the sample. Only about 37 percent of the interviewees indicate whether the ex-slave was a field or house slave, but almost two-thirds of this sample were field slaves.

House Slaves

3 males
11 females

Field Slaves

13 males
10 females

Woodward says,

In all probability the most serious sources of distortion in the project narratives came not from the interviewees but from the interviewers, their biases, procedures, and methods, and the interracial circumstances of the interview. The overwhelming majority of the interviewers were Southern whites.⁴³

But as far as known all but nine of the interviews in The Negro in Virginia were conducted by Black workers.

Ex-slave Israel Massie said, "Lord, child, ef ya start

⁴²Woodward, op. cit., p. 472.

⁴³Ibid., p. 473.

me I kin tell ya a mess 'bout reb times, but I ain't tellin' white folks nuthin 'cause I'm skeered to make enemies."⁴⁴

And ex-slave Jennie Patterson commented,

Some of us slaves had ol'e mean an' wicked marsters an' mistress dat would beat unmerciful. I don tole you I was feared to tell all I done seen in my lifetime, an' I aim tellin' white folks but so much even now in dis new day an' time.⁴⁵

As techniques go, Susie R. Byrd had about as good a field technique as modern-day ethnographers. She made numerous visits to the same informants, ingratiated herself with them, got a number of them together at one time to create a more spontaneous situation, then took notes and sometimes made phonograph records. Byrd often worked with Claude W. Anderson; the two of them were responsible for almost half of the interviews conducted.⁴⁶

It is perhaps difficult to draw specific conclusions in regard to slavery based on the interview material, since the same topics are not always covered in each

⁴⁴The Negro in Virginia, op. cit., p. 203.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 218.

⁴⁶Byrd, "Notes on Interviewing Ex-Slaves," op. cit., p.

interview. But a close reading of the interviews does leave one with some impressions which, if not absolutely quantifiable, are reasonably accurate. And, as Woodward points out, there are still important questions the answers to which are not quantifiable.⁴⁷

Woodward says that historians should not discard the slave interviews as worthless

unless they are prepared to be consistent and discard most of the other sources they habitually use. Not while they still use newspapers as sources, or for that matter, diaries, letters, politicians' speeches and the Congressional Record and all those neatly printed official documents and solemnly sworn testimony of high officials. Full of paradox and evasions, contrasts, and contradictions, lies, pure truth and complete fabrication as they are, such sources are very important to historians. The slave narratives have their peculiarities, as do all types of historical sources, but they are not all that different from the norm.⁴⁸

Roscoe Lewis said in regard to the reliability of the ex-slave interviews,

The old people perhaps have mixed fact and fancy, have sometimes related others' experiences as their own and have tended now and then to exercise the best of their histrionic talents in playing up to the most

⁴⁷Woodward, op. cit., p. 476.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 475.

appreciative audience that has ever sat before them. All in all, however, the sum total of the ex-slave stories recreates a picture without which posterity would have been the poorer.⁴⁹

The ex-slave interviews are as reliable as most other historical documents; the use of the narratives by scholars must be tempered by an extensive knowledge of the time in which the interviews were collected as well as the time about which they relate.

One other important work completed by the "Negro Affairs" unit was a work entitled Drums and Shadows, an anthology of Black folklore. Written by the Georgia writers group, it is a study of the remnants of African culture that has survived among the blacks of the Georgia coastal area.⁵⁰

The small "Negro Affairs" section of the project was only one of several small divisions in the national office. Related to Brown's unit, in that it studied an aspect of Black life, was the small folklore section. Alsberg persuaded the Library of Congress in 1937 to

⁴⁹The Negro in Virginia, op. cit., p. 28.

⁵⁰Daniel Fox, "The Achievement of the Federal Writers Project," American Quarterly 13 (Spring, 1961), p. 16.

lend its folklorist, John Lomax, as a consultant. Lomax, a Texan, had pioneered in techniques of collecting and interpreting folk music and folklore and had helped make folklore a respectable discipline in American scholarship. Although Lomax stayed with the Federal Writers' Project only a few months, he convinced Alsberg of the value of a professional folklorist. Some months later, in August, 1938, Alsberg hired Benjamin Botkin for the vacated post. Like Lomax, Botkin was building a career. His first book, Folksays, was just published and he was on leave from the University of Oklahoma and studying on a fellowship when Alsberg enlisted him.

Botkin emphasized more than any folklore activity the compilation of the slave narrative collection, a record of anecdotes, reminiscences, folktales, and life histories by former slaves. The uncollected Slave Narrative Collection, now located in the Library of Congress, was another example of Alsberg's willingness to experiment and was consistent with his conception of the proper way to capture the American past. Although it was subordinate to the American Guide Series and did not receive public attention or scholarly use in the 1930s, the collection began to receive notice by historians and folklorists in the 1950s.

The quantity and quality of interviews for the Slave Narrative Collection varied from state to state depending upon the interest and diligence of directors and the availability of qualified workers. Some of the best material came from Arkansas, Florida, Alabama, and Texas. Other Southern staffs, including Tennessee's staff, displayed ambivalence toward the slave narratives. In a reflection of the racial attitudes in the South in the 1930s, they held that to record what happened in the pre-Civil War era through interviews with elderly blacks was acceptable; to enlist Black workers to do the interviews as equals on relief programs was not.⁵¹

Enthusiasm for the Slave Narrative Collection waned after early 1939 when serious doubts arose as to whether the Federal Writers' Project would produce a book from the experiment. The reorganization of the project in 1939 persuaded the Library of Congress to accept the project's 1,000 documents and 2,000 narratives. And it was Botkin who, in 1945, sufficiently organized the collection to extract a manuscript that the University of Chicago Press published as Lay My Burden Down. The

⁵¹Norman R. Yetman, "Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," American Quarterly, 19 (Fall, 1967), p. 551.

book appeared with Botkin as editor and gave the Federal Writers' Project credit for the research in the preface.

Lay My Burden Down was about the only recognition accorded the Slave Narrative Collection until the late 1950s. As the story of American slavery became of more concern to researchers and received more attention, use of the collection increased. The ex-slaves speak for themselves so purely that today's oral historians recognize the book as an important forerunner of their technique.⁵²

The book's excellence is due in large measure to Botkin, who had an immense body of material from which to select, but had a philosophy of choosing only the purest form of the narratives. A pioneer folklorist, he knew the pitfalls for the interviewer and informant. He rejected as "lacking not only in flavor but in reliability all narratives written in the third person."⁵³

Any narrative that showed signs of having been

⁵²William Stott, Documentary Expression and 30s America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 59.

⁵³Benjamin Botkin, ed., Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), p. VI.

retouched by the writer's prejudices and sympathies, he did not use. When an informant was "guilty of flattery and exaggeration, of telling what he thinks the interviewer wants to hear," such narratives were cut. As a result, the reader finds a fine oral history, "the interviewer succeeds in eliminating himself entirely and the reader is brought face to face with an informant."⁵⁴

The ex-slaves' experiences were more complex, more human, than mere "autobiographical propaganda" against tyranny. As Botkin said, the narratives answered the question "how does it feel" to be a slave and to be free, but most of these old people's feelings were mixed. All but a very few of them hated being slaves. Yet they could not simply reject that period of their existence, since it was their childhood and youth when life lay before them, when they had parents, when their experience was keenest. ("I tells my childrens, ain't no days like the old days when I was a shaver.")⁵⁵

Whether the experiences were bad or good (and they were not always bad), memory of them was irresistible.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. VIII.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 123.

A man says of a whipping he received three-fourths of a century before, "I has that in the heart till this day," but he seems to speak only in sadness, not bitterness.⁵⁶

And this is what the narratives most remarkably make one feel; deliverance from the pain of living and the sadness of that deliverance. The ex-slaves had come to terms with their lives. They analyzed them and understood.

I was born in slavery, and I belonged to a Baptist preacher. Until I was 15 years old I was taught that I was his own chattel property and he could do with me like he wanted to, but he had been taught that way, too and we both believed it.⁵⁷

To hear the ex-slaves speak is to have a sense of what it must feel like to have lived enough to be at peace with the world, oneself, and God.

White folks come to me sometimes.
You just ought to hear me answer them.
I tells them just like I would colored folks.

'Them your teeth in your mouth?'

'Whose you think they is? Certainly they're my teeth.'

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 96.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 17.

'Ain't you sorry you free?'

'What I'm going to be sorry for? I ain't no fool.'

I tell them, some of 'em want to argue with me and say I ain't. 'Well, the Lord sure has blessed you. Sure has blest me. Don't know that.'⁵⁸

Related to the Slave Narrative Collection in the sense that it was a contribution to social history, was These Are Our Lives, a volume that many critics considered the project's most important experiment in studying American culture. These Are Our Lives was the Federal Writers' Project's attempt to portray the quality of American life with more depth than was possible in the state guides.

From 1938 to 1939 over 1,000 Southerners told life stories to workers. These Southerners lived in rural impoverished and segregated regions, worked on farms, in mills, oil fields, coal mines, and other people's home. These Are Our Lives is the story of Southerners in the 1930s. The idea was to get readable and faithful representations of living persons, which taken together gave a fair picture of the structure and working of Southern society. Before 1939, this method of portraying

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 142.

the quality of life of a people, of revealing the real workings of institutions, customs, and habits had never been used for the people of any region of the country.⁵⁹

William T. Couch, who served as the project regional director in the southeast in 1938-1939, developed the idea. Couch, in the introduction to the book, expresses the purpose of the project's work. "The South had played a large role in the literature of the Depression, but that portion which is fictional, excellent as it is as fiction, could not claim to be accurate as in the sense indicated here."⁶⁰

Popular non-fiction had not attempted the task contemplated in this work. Sociology has furnished the classifications and much of the information on the basis of which this work had been shaped. But sociology had been content in the main to treat human beings as abstractions. Certainly, sociologists had used case histories, but for the most part their use had been limited to narrow segments of experience collected and arranged to illustrate particular points.⁶¹

⁵⁹These Are Our Lives, As Told By the People
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939),
p. III.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. X.

⁶¹Ibid.

Useful as such segments of experience are they cannot possibly convey as much information and real knowledge as a story which covers the more significant aspects of the whole life experience, including memories of ancestry, written from the standpoint of the individual.⁶²

Crouch's vision of the work the Federal Writers' Project should undertake grew out of his reaction to currents of thought, such as the "new nationalism" and agrarianism.

The dominant criticism of American life in the 1920s focused on the shallowness of middle-class life, the excesses of prosperity, and the backwardness of large segments of the population. The South, along with Main Street and Winesburg, Ohio, provided critics with symbols of much that was wrong in life in the United States.

In the 1930s, the South continued to symbolize the nation's problems. As one historian observed, "The Bible Belt seemed less absurd as a haven for fundamentalism, more challenging as a plague spot of race prejudice, poor schools and hospitals, sharecropping and wasted resources."⁶³

Much of the writing that made the South in the 1930s a symbol for the Depression focused on the plight of

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Dixon Wecter, The Age of the Great Depression (New York: MacMillan, 1948), pp. 159-160.

the Southern tenant farmer. Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road (1932), inaugurated new interest in tenant farmers. The world he created was inhabited by degenerate, stunted, and starving people. Couch found little to admire in the book. Caldwell's pleas for collective action on the part of tenant farmers for governmental control of cotton farming failed to impress Couch, who remarked,

If tenant farmers are at all like the Jeeter Lesters and Ty Ty Waldens with whom Mr. Caldwell has peopled his South, I cannot help wondering what good could come of their collective action. Nor can much be expected from government control if the persons controlled are of the type that Mr. Caldwell had led us to believe now populate the South.⁶⁴

The Vanderbilt Agrarians held the same views toward Caldwell as did Couch. They were dismayed by Caldwell's portrayal of the South. The Agrarian manifesto, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (1930) rejected industrialism and idealized a simpler assessment of the region's people. They insisted that "the South must recognize the conditions of the kind Mr. Caldwell describes actually exist in this region

⁶⁴W. T. Couch, "Landlord and Tenant," Virginia Quarterly Review, 14 (1938), p. 310.

and must do what it can to correct them." Couch took issue with the Agrarians who "assert that virtue is derived from the soil but see no virtue in the negro and the poor white who are closest to the soil."⁶⁵

Couch wanted to give Southerners in all occupations and at all levels of society a chance to speak for themselves. Collecting life histories was one way of doing this. He reasoned that if Southerners tell their own stories this would demonstrate that Southern life was more complex than easy generalizations had led people to think.

The material gathered reflected the voice of the people. Field workers removed from the decision-making about the life history program collected the actual materials. In areas like the Southeast where there were few unemployed writers, the project employed literate middle-class individuals who were unemployed. Themselves victims of the Depression, they were not far removed from the people they wrote about. Most had been born and reared in the South and some like Bernice Kelly Harris wrote histories of the people they had known all their lives. "The general urge for a sympathetic listener,"

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 309.

wrote Harris, "made it possible for me to conduct these interviews with little difficulty. In this respect a writer on the project sometimes became involuntary father-confessor."⁶⁶

The life histories submitted by field workers often had to be edited by more competent writers on the project. Field workers possessed qualities that more than compensated for their lack of writing skills. William McDaniel, the director of the Tennessee Project, remarked of one relief worker, "Her greatest attribute is that she is one of the people. She shares their views, religion and mode of living and through that it gets into her stories the essence of their community life."⁶⁷

The University of North Carolina sponsored These Are Our Lives and its press published the book in the Spring of 1939. In the work, under assumed names, the interviewees were divided into subject groups. One such

⁶⁶Bernice Kelly Harris, Southern Savory (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), p. 184. This memoir is a fascinating account of growing up in the South during the 1920s and 1930s.

⁶⁷William McDaniel to Couch, January 10, 1939. Works Progress Adm. Tennessee Writers Project File, Tennessee State Archives.

division was the Southerners engaged in the tobacco industry. The life of a tobacco farmer in the 1930s was a very difficult one. John Mason, a tenant farmer, told a project writer that tobacco was a "thirteen month crop"; he had to prepare a seedbed for the next years' crop even before he sold the previous years' crop.⁶⁸

In the late 1930s the hard work of cultivation brought uncertain returns. The effects of nature or plant diseases could destroy a crop. If the crop could be cured and prepared successfully, the tobacco would be auctioned off at a tobacco warehouse. The crop was auctioned for a price that fluctuated according to

last summer's weather in South Georgia, the buying instructions issued by the big three tobacco manufacturers that morning, the farmer's knowledge of grading the position of his tobacco on the auction floor and whether the buying line happens to approach it from the east or west and the fortunate chance that he took one of the buyers fox hunting last spring.⁶⁹

Growing tobacco was even harsher for the tenant farmers and sharecroppers who owned no land. A nonperishable cash crop, tobacco was suited to the tenant system, in which the landowners supplied the land and

⁶⁸These Are Our Lives, As Told By the People, op. cit., p. 139.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 127.

the tenant worked for a share of the crop. As the Depression deepened, more farmers lost their land and were forced to become tenants and sharecroppers. Even by Depression standards poverty was extreme. One writer estimated that the average family income for sharecroppers was \$400.⁷⁰

The farm laborer and his family were near the bottom of the social pyramid. Beneath them in economic and social status were only such groups as the unemployed not on relief, blacks, and criminals. No wage and hour laws protected the farm laborer.

An example of the hopelessness of the tenant and sharecropper was Sally Reams, a black woman, aged 52, who, with her family and husband dead, faced her last chance to own a farm. She and her husband managed to acquire a farm of fifty acres and paid for it. Then they bought another fifty acres adjoining and were trying to pay for the additional fifty when two years later, George, the husband, was killed in a car accident. Sally was not able to make the payments on the additional fifty acres and at the time of the writing, feared she would lose the first fifty as well as the second. But she

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 142. This is taken from the interview with Harry Sloan.

was not bitter. She made no charge of unfairness. From her account, she and her family were once fortunate, but later she had been the victim of a series of misfortunes.

George was killed by a careless driver. The feller that was driving the truck wasn't worth nothin. So we couldn't get no damages out of him. They say he was put in the pen for five years. I don't know. It didn't do us no good; it didn't bring George back. Looked like I had a lapful of trouble these last few years. A hailstorm destroyed the crop one year; my house and furniture got burnt up; my boy died of pneumonia; the land we paid for had to be morgaged. I lost my husband. But I keep hopin' for better days.⁷¹

A poor white tenant farmer, over fifty, with a large family and dim future revealed something of the prevalence of politics in the 1930s in his unabashed statement, "I'm a Democrat. I stand for the WPA, the NYA, the NRA, the AAA, the FHA and crop control."⁷² His faith in the programs was apparent even though his benefit from them was not.

An old woman, too ill to continue work in her town's only mill, kept her small house neat, fed her interviewer

⁷¹Ibid., p. 17.

⁷²Ibid., p. 11.

a gracious, if meager, dinner of pinto beans and biscuits, and wistfully hoped for a better day when, after twenty-five years of mill work, she might receive a pension.⁷³

And one angry man, after a life of haphazard schooling, of crisscrossing the country on ill-fated ventures, of one broken marriage and a second which produced several children, and now on relief with the WPA, spoke for many whose lives the Depression shattered. "I couldn't be," he mused, "what I wanted to be."⁷⁴

The chief weakness of the histories is that they are told to people who were trying to prove themselves as writers. Though the histories were written from the standpoint of the individual, some were distorted by another standpoint, that of the young writer looking to be noticed.

The story, "A Little Amusement" starts with James, a poor factory worker, gazing at two Duroe hogs he is fattening,

when a woman turned in the lane and stopped
at the big Spanish oak whose branches shaded
the hogpen in which James' hogs grunted

⁷³Ibid., p. 164.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 380.

contentedly. The woman might have been a bookkeeper, teacher, stenographer, clerk, or perhaps a social worker. James looked up at her and made no speculation as to why she was standing there. He observed only that she was dressed in Sunday clothes and that she seemed friendly.⁷⁵

The history presented here is disjointed and several questions rise to the surface. Who is the mysterious woman on whom so much speculation is lavished? Surprisingly, she is not the subject but the author. She chats with James and Lizzie, his wife, getting intimate details of their poverty, childlessness, his reformation from drink, and a daily four ounce bottle of peragoric; she never exposes so much as her name, but she has a place in the narrative.

These Are Our Lives received widespread acclaim. In his New York Times review, W. J. Meacham called it one of the most important works written "since the cultural renaissance dawned below the Potomac."⁷⁶ Time said the work gave "the Writers Project its strongest claim to literary distinction."⁷⁷

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 179.

⁷⁶W. J. Meacham, "Thirty-five Southerners Tell Their Life Story," New York Times Book Review (May 21, 1939), p. 10.

⁷⁷These Are Our Lives, Time, 33 (May 1, 1939), p. 87.

years later, Alfred Kazin agreed and cited These Are Our Lives as a lasting testament to the project's work in social history.⁷⁸

The issue of what should be the proper relationship between a government relief program and the artistic individual was more difficult to resolve on the Writers' Project than on the other three cultural projects. The painter's artistic impulse came alive in his art, and art, however controversial, was what the Federal Art Project fostered. The actor's talent required the discipline of play production and play production was the Federal Theatre Project's mainstay. Performance satisfied the artistry of musicians and performance was the Federal Music Project's concern. But the Writers' Project granted no similar satisfaction to individual writers. Writing and editing guidebooks, so one argument went, frequently dulled rather than sparked creativity. Nevertheless, it was the guide series, not imaginative literature, which was crucial to the project's continuation.

In one sense, the writers' project did stimulate creative writing, but only indirectly. Jobs with the

⁷⁸Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York: Doubleday, 1952), p. 382.

project provided many writers a modicum of economic security, which, in turn, allowed them to write in their free time. An example was the talented author, Richard Wright. Wright was one of the most famous and influential authors who received help from the Federal Writers' Program. Working in Chicago, Wright wanted to move to New York to participate in Harlem's cultural renaissance. His talent so impressed Alsberg that in 1937 they transferred him to New York. During his career as a federal writer, he published his first collection of stories called Uncle Tom's Children.⁷⁹

John Steinbeck worked on the California Project for a short period. And while the Writers' Project could not claim credit for inspiring The Grapes of Wrath (1939), at least it helped Steinbeck in the early years of his career.

The New York City Project possessed the largest collection of writers, including Maxwell Bodenheim, Lionel Abel, Harry Roskolenko, Kenneth Patchen, Edward Dahlberg, Vincent McHugh, Kenneth Fearing, Norman MacLeod, Claude McKay, and Philip Rahv. The Chicago

⁷⁹Richard Wright, The God That Failed (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), pp. 103-146.

unit had Stuart Engstrand, Arna Bontemps, Nelson Algen, and Jack Conroy. The services of Kenneth Rexroth and Raymond Larsson distinguished San Francisco's project rolls. Other state projects could claim noted personnel; Conrad Aiken, Josef Berger, Merle Colby, and George William were on the Massachusetts's project; Weldon Kees and Mari Sandoz were on the Nebraska project; and John Cheever was on the New York State project.⁸⁰

When the Federal Writers' Project tried to encourage creative writing directly, difficulties arose. The WPA never intended its project for writers to grant subsidies to individual writers. Several people on the national staff and in the state offices felt that the Writers' Project should encourage imaginative literature. Even though he knew it was not the Project's chief concern, Alsberg unofficially encouraged artistic efforts.⁸¹

Alsberg patiently nursed small-scale plans to publish the works of those on the Federal Writers' Project. He first tried to secure a sponsor for a national magazine; the scheme collapsed through the lack of support. Then Alsberg persuaded the New York based

⁸⁰Mangione, op. cit., Chapter 4.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 99.

Guilds Committee for Federal Writers' Project Publications, a non-profit corporation, to sponsor an anthology of pieces done by project members on their own time. Viking Press published the selections as American Stuff in 1937.

Alsberg's forward to American Stuff anthology characterizes the quality and scope of this writing:

We found that the average unemployed writer was concerned not with the remoter aspects and far islands of existence, but with the realities of the America, here and now. This is the American scene, very often as it appears from the roadside ditch, the poverty-stricken tenement or shack, or the relief station. The style is sometimes crude, the technique often perhaps inexpert or diffuse; but there is sincerity in it, a solid passionate feeling for the life of the less prosperous millions.⁸²

American Stuff included poems, essays, and short stories written by fifty project staff members from twenty state units and the national office. The volume reflected the Project's study of the American scene. Alsberg notes that the writers represented in the anthology "are preoccupied with life as they have known

⁸²American Stuff: An Anthology of Prose and Verse by Members of the Federal Writers Project (New York: Viking, 1937), pp. I-II.

it, with what they have seen, and felt, with the toughness which constitutes the American experience for millions of people today."⁸³ Critics thought American Stuff had merit, especially Richard Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," although a few felt that the quality of the selections was uneven.

Of the poets who are represented in the anthology, Horace Gregory, Kenneth Fearing, and Muriel Rukeyser achieved the greatest measure of success. Each poet caught a single vein and angle of the period. In Gregory it is the voice of the masses, the emergence of the crowd that affects.

Regret, return, do not return, retreat
 The mouth piece siren at my ear
 Speaks from a million faces
 in the sweet shouting,
 We are alive and do not die,
 not die, give us the power
 not to die, but to return
 at each imperishable hour.⁸⁴

In Fearing, the agitation of the city. The city of the 1930s strikes as the people:

What have you won, plunder,
 when the 20-to-1 comes in;
 What have you won, salesmen,
 when the dotted line is signed;

⁸³Ibid., p. VIII.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 177.

irresistible lover, when her
 eyelids flutter shut
 at last, what have you really won;
 And what is gone, soldier,
 Step-and-a-half, marine
 who saw the whole world;
 hot tip addict, what is always
 just missed; picker of crumbs, how
 much has been lost, denied, what
 are all the things destroyed.
 Question mark, question mark, question
 mark, question mark.
 And you, fantasy, Frank and dream world
 Dora and hallucination Harold
 and delusion Dick and Nightmare
 Ned.
 What is it, how do you say it, what does
 it mean, what's the word.
 That miracle thing, that thing that can't
 be so, quote, unquote, but just
 the same it's true.
 That third-rail, million-volt exclamation
 mark, that ditto, ditto, ditto,
 That stop, stop, go.⁸⁵

Muriel Rukeyser was among the most socially
 conscious of the younger poets of the 1930s. In her
 poetry she portrayed the problems of political and
 economic injustice. In "City of Monuments," she
 contrasts the condition of the rich and poor.

Blinded by chrominum or transfiguration
 We watch, as though a microscope
 decay;
 down the broad streets the
 limousines
 advance in passions of display.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 187.

Air glints with diamonds, and these
 clavicles
 emerge through orchids by whose
 trailing spoon
 The sensitive cannot mistake
 The implicit anguish of the poor.
 The throats incline, the marble men
 rejoice
 Careless of torrents of despair.
 Split by a tendril of revolt
 Stone cedes to blossom everywhere.⁸⁶

What the collection presents is a collection of strange but fascinating short stories, song, poetry, and sketches. From the Writers' Project in South Carolina came a folktale entitled "A Gullah Story" written in the dialect of the blacks of coastal South Carolina. In the same vein were included Black spirituals, convict songs, and market songs of Harlem. An interesting combination of poetry and prose is found in Merle Colby's "Mutiny." Similar to Berger's Cape Cod Pilot, it was a series of excerpts from ships' logs and diaries, concerning strikes or revolts on the high seas.

Edna Lou Walton, reviewer for the New York Times, pointed out that the writers who contributed to American Stuff were all realists in their portrayal of life in the 1930s. They did not write escapist literature or

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 190.

use a romantic style, nor were they proletarian writers filling their work with Marxian propaganda about a perfect workers' state. "WPA writers," concluded Walton, "knew their craft and know present day America."⁸⁷

American Stuff was a one-time experiment on the part of the Federal Writers' Project. There could be no series of anthologies similar to the guides because the Writers' Project had no such authority. After 1939, during the tenure of the Federal Writers' Project, there were no new attempts to subsidize creative literature.

The direct influence that the Federal Writers' Project exerted on creative literature and individual authors is more difficult to judge. The Project did not reflect or influence the concern in the 1930s with proletarian literature. Instead, what artistic efforts it did sponsor indicated a literature of realism that portrayed contemporary American society's ugly or bitter side as well as the favorable side.

The work that the Federal Writers' Project completed as experiments was always subordinated to the guide series, but it was valuable in its own right. The experimental volumes and research efforts strengthened

⁸⁷Edna Walton, "American Stuff," New York Times Book Review, August 29, 1937, p. 2.

the projects' contribution to cultural history in the 1930s and recorded the contemporary life of the Depression for the readers in later decades.

CHAPTER 5

The Passage of Roosevelt's Relief Act

The passage of Roosevelt's Relief Act on June 30, 1939 spelled the end for the Federal One projects of the WPA. The act specifically forbade relief appropriations to aid the theater project and allowed the other three programs to continue only if some local group "sponsored" them by contributing 25 percent of their cost. The provision read that "none of the funds made available for the operation of any project sponsored solely by the WPA".¹

Under the previous arrangement the national office of the cultural projects had influence because of the subsidiaries in the states were almost totally dependent on the federal government for funds. But now state cultural units were no different from other WPA relief projects, and the national offices. The project now seemed to have little function. The Federal Writers' Project as it had existed was ended.

Generally, the work of the state programs after 1939 was of more local than national interest. The

¹Leuchtenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

states did not, as a rule, suggest innovative or imaginative research projects. All the books and pamphlets completed in the states were related because they followed general plans either tried or suggested by the old Federal Writers' Project or its successor, the Writers' Program.

The Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941, and mobilization of the country for war canceled any future for the Federal Writers' Project. The number of workers declined steadily. In mid-1940 the total number of workers on state programs was 4,000; by November, 1941, it dropped to 2,200. In January, 1942, the newly appointed director, John D. Newsom, informed the state offices that all activities were suspended for the duration. A month later he left to take a commission in the Army, and many other staffers entered the armed forces or found positions in the wartime government agencies.

Merle Colby, presiding over the shadow of the organization, unsuccessfully tried to revive the project. However, the gears of the project could not proceed with the steady transfer of workers. Most WPA officials felt that the Writers' Project should be allowed to die, its usefulness for the nation completed. To most critics

in the 1940s, the remaining Federal Writers' project was merely a grim reminder of relief, unemployment, bread lines, and high labor costs.

Never intended as a subsidized cultural enterprise, the Federal Writers' Project was established to provide work relief for writers and white-collar personnel caught in the toils of the Depression. Under the circumstances, the project could not be divorced from relief regulations. The clear majority of its personnel, as a result, were not writers, but simply willing workers in need. Yet, without the contribution of the lawyers, ministers, newspapermen, librarians, and teachers who made up the bulk of its rolls, the project would never have been able to arrive at its outstanding record of success.

The writers' project admirably achieved its primary objective, to serve as an agency of conservation and the rehabilitation of the unemployed. Many took pride in their work, and this fact reflected itself in the relative absence of boondoggling. White-collar workers underwent significant transformation almost overnight. With their awakened enthusiasm, they diligently ferreted out information for the American Guide Series and other volumes. Many claimed to have regained their faith in

human nature and American democracy. This conservation of skills and professional pride, rather than the production of books, marks the true significance and revolutionary nature of the federal program for writers.

The Federal Writers' Project also justified itself artistically. Despite the dearth of qualified writers, the absence of worthy guidebook examples, and the persistent attempts to reduce the project to a political football and an auxiliary of local chambers of commerce, the project succeeded in fulfilling its reason for being, the American Guide Series. Marked by neither drumbeating nor ponderous criticism, these books were relieved of the dullness of most of their predecessors by good writing, intelligent editing, and a wealth of interesting information. Unlike the traditional "intimate" guidebooks, "usually so damnable intimate as to drive tourists into bars for information if not for drink," the project's state and local offerings substantially filled the gap between armchair knowledge and practical application.²

To emphasize that the guides lacked sufficient interpretive depth or historical perspective is to

²New York Times, July 5, 1939, p. 3, Col. 3.

minimize the difficulties constantly encountered by the project and to misconceive the fundamental purpose of a guidebook. It is also to disagree with the judgment, for example, of Bernard De Voto, who noted the "astonishingly high" average level of literacy and historical competence of these volumes.³

Escaping both the internal danger of purple prose and the external one of censorship, the American Guide Series gained the warm praise of such additional observers as Harry Hansen, Lewis Gannett, Louis Bromfield, and Van Wyck Brooks for containing some of the best reading of the day and for providing the country with "its first candid self-portrait."⁴

At a time when the WPA sought to bring about a national recovery, the guides' contemporary import and that of the project's numerous other publications lay in their bringing about a new national self-awareness. With considerable scholarship, the federal writers uncovered a land which lay hidden behind billboards and boosterism. Their painstaking research reached far

³Bernard De Voto, "The Writers' Project," The Pathfinder, December 17, 1938, p. 18.

⁴Fox, op. cit., p. 19.

beyond the countless movie houses, highway restaurants, and chain stores to discover the nation's rich diversity.

Cities and towns were found to have an individuality of their own. State pride was raised. The North Carolina Guide convinced one reviewer that the state would no longer be called "the Rip Van Winkle of the Union." A local resident hoped his New York friends would read the Arkansas volume so that it might "drive from their nostrils the stench of the subway" and "make them even forget the cockroaches of Greenwich Village." "Florida" and "florid" would no longer be considered synonymous, nor would Iowa be confused with Ohio or Idaho.⁵

In increasing understanding the state and local guidebooks also strengthened national unity by placing the particular within the framework of the whole. As the Depression tested the foundation of the country, and as it turned to a "new nationalism," the critical guides did their part in making this inspection fruitful. While conserving skills and human dignity, the project also conserved history and folklore which otherwise

⁵New York Herald Tribune, January 18, 1940, Pt. III, p. 9, Col. 1.

might have remained unexplored or fallen victim to oblivion. As a result, the project writers put out publications which continue to stand as a monument to the stability of American, long after the 1930s have been forgotten.

Even aside from the guidebooks, the Federal Writers' Project made significant contributions in a number of areas. Its Black studies were pioneering ones. Its social-ethnic and folklore research represented novel approaches, as did the "life-history" technique of These Are Our Lives. These auxiliary projects resulted in a total achievement which forty-five years later seems almost incredible.

One aspect of the project's publications is, in some respects, reminiscent of the note sounded by literary America at the close of the 1930s. An insular "literature of nationhood" swept the land, as writers, seeking new certainties, deeply reexamined America's life and landscape for a "usable past." The debunkers of the 1920s were often criticized for abandoning the country's needs to focus on art and Europe.

A popular interest in history, aroused by a group of scholarly biographers in quest of heroes, especially Lincoln, and the two most successful novels of the

decade, Gone With the Wind and Anthony Adverse, came into full bloom. Constance Rourke and John Lomax revived frontier legends and ballads, and James Truslow Adams's widely read Epic of America called its readers to recapture the "American dream."⁶

The way the project's discoveries came to light and finally reached expression also reflected trends of the 1930s. Its very collective effort which "helped explode the romantic notion of the genius as someone solitary, irresponsible and unique," suggested the shift from the individualistic ethic of the 1920s to a community spirit. The Federal Writers' Projects' stress on the pooling of various contributions typified the greater contemporary dependence on such approaches as cooperatives and county planning boards, as well as emphasis in the field of education which played down the child's individual role in favor of social concerns.⁷

⁶Kazin, op. cit., Chapter 1. The dramatic shift from the 1920s is well seen in a comparison of Harold Sterns' anthology Civilization in the United States (1922) and America Now (1938). For the use of history in various civilizations for sanctification, rather than as a quest for truth, see the essay in S. H. Plumb, The Death of the Past (Boston, 1971), Chapter 1.

⁷Charles I. Glicksberg, "The Federal Writers' Project," South Atlantic Quarterly, 37 (April, 1938), p. 158.

On a broader scale, the project's development along regional lines mirrored certain other tendencies by a quickening interest in TVA and the National Resources Board. Howard Odum, examining such developments, praised the project's exploratory ventures in this regard. The findings of the project also had an affinity with the resurgence of regional social consciousness expressed in the novels of Faulkner, Steinbeck, Farrell, and Wright and in the paintings of Grant Wood, Charles Burchfield, and Thomas Hart Benton.⁸

The various publications of the Federal Writers' Project, analogous to contemporary trends in another respect, viewed the nation in human terms. These Are Our Lives, The Negro in Virginia, American Stuff, and the state guides, with their focus on the commonman hero, the forgotten American, were in the same vein as Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, You Have Seen Their Faces, An American Exodus, and the "proletarian literature" of the decade. This search for the "acknowledged life in all its forms" helps explain the interchangeability of word and camera in these troubled times, as revealed

⁸Howard Odum, American Regionalism (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), pp. 428-429.

in the previously mentioned books or in the lean, documentary "newsreels" of Dos Passos's U.S.A.⁹

In this fashion, the Federal Writers' Project made a unique contribution to the New Deal quest for a "cultural democracy." Because the project's program was not specifically geared to professional talent, it never could hope to bring the art of writing to the nation's millions through creative workshops, readings, lectures on literature, or the encouragement of gifted unknowns through contests and other means.

In contrast to the other WPA arts projects, the Federal Writers' Project was thus of necessity not so concerned with the integration of the artist and public and the creation of a new, public intelligentsia.¹⁰ However, its final works, as some project administrators had hoped, also pointed to the promise of a new national art. More than any other project on Federal One, the project brought its audience face-to-face with the

⁹Stott, op. cit., p. 111.

¹⁰For the best analysis of the hopes of New Deal cultural enthusiasts, see Jane De Hart Mathews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy," Journal of American History, 62 (September, 1975):316-339.

factual, rich diversity of America and her people. The guides, in particular, were distinctly an American product, transcending Baedeker to become the "road map" for the cultural discovery of the United States. All Americans could, therefore, relate in some fashion to the project's multifaceted portrait. This extensive documentation was also especially, albeit unintentionally, helpful in forming what Holger Cahill of the Federal Art Project called a "great reservoir" from which a genuine art movement might yet flow.¹¹

Is there a future for the works produced by the project? The historical information and interviews are used by scholars who wish to view either American history or life during the Great Depression. The guides should continually be revised and updated, perhaps in paperback.

An enterprise which made publishing and cultural history, the project did prove that subsidized art could be generally free of censorship. It also indicated that worthwhile productions could be produced at very little

¹¹Some of Cahill's opinions are succinctly given in his address, "American Resources in the Arts," in Frances V. O'Connor, ed., Arts for the Millions, Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 33-44.

cost. Still, the Federal Writers' Project was hampered by relief regulations, as well as by state and congressional politics.

While it is true that the Federal Writers' Project is far removed from present day society, the United States still needs a program such as this, but with a different format. The Project's experiences are a convincing argument that such a program should be kept under both federal control and the supervision of competent editorial personnel and that the prevailing wage should be paid for each skill employed.

Employees would have to know they were writing for actual publication, and diversified creative outlets would have to be provided for gifted professionals. In the event that white collar persons such as those who made up most of the project's rolls might need employment, they would be put to large-scale research tasks of a cooperative nature. Such works could be invaluable and far-reaching.

Until the time when federal support is again granted cultural enterprises on a broad scale, the potentials of the project for a fully realized "salvation" of the arts remain unfulfilled. That the creative arts were

supported by the American government in time of depression represents a paradox which deserves the attention of students of politics and culture. Meanwhile, the national government can look back with satisfaction upon the project's diverse accomplishments.

APPENDIX 1
Selected Publications of the Federal
Writers' Project

Note: At least three hundred publications are substantial contributions to the recorded history of the United States. Some of them are contributions to our national literature as well.

I. State Publications.

A. Alabama.

1. Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South. New York: R. R. Smith, 1941.

B. Alaska.

1. Merle Colby, A Guide to Alaska, Last American Frontier. New York: MacMillan, 1939.

C. Arizona.

1. Arizona: A State Guide. New York: Hastings House, 1940.
2. The Havasupai and the Hualapai. Flagstaff: State Teachers College, 1940.
3. Mission San Xavier del Bac, Arizona: A Descriptive and Historical Guide. New York: Hastings House, 1940.

D. Arkansas.

1. Arkansas: A Guide to the State. New York: Hastings House, 1941.
2. Survey of Negroes in Little Rock and North Little Rock. Little Rock: Urban League of Greater Little Rock, 1941.

E. California.

1. Almanac for Thirty-niners. Palo Alto: J. L. Dekin, 1938.
2. California: A Guide to the Golden State. New York: Hastings House, 1939.
3. Death Valley: A Guide. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939.
4. A History of the Ranchos: The Spanish, Mexican, and American Occupation of San Diego. San Diego: Union Title Insurance and Trust Co.
5. Los Angeles: A Guide to the City and Its Environs. New York: Hastings House, 1941.
6. The Old West: Pioneer Tales of San Bernardino County. San Bernardino: Sun Printing and Publishing House, 1940.
7. San Diego: A California City. San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1937.

8. San Francisco: The Bay and Its Cities. New York: Hastings House, 1940.

F. Colorado.

1. Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State. New York: Hastings House, 1941.

2. Ghost Towns of Colorado. New York: Hastings House, 1947.

G. Connecticut.

1. Connecticut: A Guide to Its Roads, Lore, and People. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938.

H. Delaware.

1. Delaware: A Guide to the First State. New York: Viking, 1938.

2. New Castle on the Delaware. New Castle: New Castle Historical Society, 1936.

I. Florida.

1. Florida: A Guide to the Southern-most State. New York: Oxford University Press, 1939.

2. A Guide to Key West. New York: Hastings House, 1941.

3. The Spanish Missions of Florida. St. Augustine, 1940.

J. Georgia.

1. Atlanta: A City of the Modern South. New York: Smith and Durrell, 1942.

2. Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940.

3. Georgia: A Guide to Its Towns and Countryside. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940.

4. Mary Granger, ed. Savannah River Plantations. Savannah: Georgia Historical Society, 1947.

K. Idaho.

1. Idaho: A Guide in Word and Picture. Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1937.

2. Idaho Lore. Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1939.

L. Illinois.

1. Cavalcade of the American Negro. Chicago: Diamond Jubilee Exposition, 1940.

2. Illinois: A Description and Historical Guide. Chicago: McClurg, 1939.

3. Nauvoo Guide. Chicago: McClurg, 1939.

4. Pioneer Days in Illinois. Chicago: 1940.

5. Who's Who in Aviation: A Directory of Living Men and Women Who Have Contributed to the Growth of Aviation in the United States. Chicago: Ziff-Davis, 1942.

M. Iowa.

1. Iowa: A Guide to the Hawkeye State. New York: Viking, 1938.

N. Kansas.

1. Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State. New York: Viking, 1939.

O. Kentucky.

1. Kentucky: A Guide to the Bluegrass State. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939.

2. Lexington and the Bluegrass Country. Lexington: Commercial Printing Co., 1938.

3. Louisville: A Guide to the Falls City. New York: Barrows, 1940.

4. Military History of Kentucky. Frankfort: State Journal, 1939.

P. Louisiana.

1. Gumbo Ya-ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folktakes. Compiled by Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, and Robert Tallant. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945.

2. Louisiana: A Guide to the State. New York: Hastings House, 1941.

3. New Orleans City Guide. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938.

Q. Maine.

1. Maine: A Guide 'Down East'. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937.

R. Maryland.

1. Maryland: A Guide to the Old Line State. New York: Oxford University Press, 1940.

S. Massachusetts.

1. The Albanian Struggle in the Old World and New. Boston: Writer, Inc., 1939.

2. The Armenians in Massachusetts. Boston: Armenian Historical Society, 1937.

3. Cape Cod Pilot, by Jeremiah Digges (pseud. of Josef Berger). Provincetown: Modern Pilgrim Press, 1937.

4. Massachusetts: A Guide to Its Places and People. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937.

5. Selective and Critical Bibliography of Horace Mann. Roxbury, 1937.

6. Whaling Masters. New Bedford: Old Dartmouth Historical Society, 1938.

T. Michigan.

1. Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State.

New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.

U. Minnesota.

1. Minnesota: A State Guide. New York: Viking,

1938.

V. Mississippi.

1. Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State.

New York: Viking, 1938.

2. Mississippi Gulf Coast: Yesterday and Today,

1699-1939. Gulfport: Gulfport Printing Co., 1939.

W. Missouri.

1. Missouri: A Guide to the "Show Me" State.

New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941.

X. Montana.

1. Land of Nakoda: The Story of the Assiniboiné

Indians. Helena: State Publishing Co., 1942.

2. Montana: A State Guide Book. New York:

Viking, 1939.

Y. Nebraska.

1. A Military History of Nebraska. Lincoln:

National Guard of Nebraska, 1939.

2. Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State.

New York: Viking, 1939.

Z. Nevada.

1. Nevada: A Guide to the Silver State.

Portland, Oregon: Binfords and Mort, 1940.

AA. New Hampshire.

1. Hands That Built New Hampshire: The Story of Granite State Craftsmen Past and Present.

Brattleboro, Vermont: Stephen Daye Press, 1940.

2. New Hampshire: A Guide to the Granite State.

Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938.

BB. New Jersey.

1. New Jersey: A Guide to Its Present and Past.

New York: Viking, 1939.

2. Stories of New Jersey: Its Significant Places, People and Activities. New York: Barrows, 1938.

3. The Swedes and Finns in New Jersey. Bayone: Jersey Printing Co., 1938.

CC. New Mexico.

1. New Mexico: A Guide to the Colorful State.

New York: Hastings House, 1940.

DD. New York.

1. New York: A Guide to the Empire State. New

York: Oxford University Press, 1940.

EE. North Carolina.

1. W. C. Hendricks, ed. Bundle of Troubles and Other Tarheel Tales. Durham: Duke University Press, 1943.

2. North Carolina: A Guide to the Old North State. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939.

FF. North Dakota.

1. North Dakota: A Guide to the Northern Prairie State. Fargo: Knight Printing Co., 1938.

GG. Ohio.

1. The Ohio Guide. New York: Oxford University Press, 1940.

HH. Oklahoma.

1. Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942.

II. Oregon.

1. Oregon, End of the Trail. Portland: Binfords and Mort, 1940.

JJ. Pennsylvania.

1. The Floods of Johnstown. Johnstown: Mayor's Committee, 1939.

2. The Harmony Society of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia: William Penn Association, 1937.

2. The Making of America: Land of the Free.

New York: Smith and Durell, 1942.

3. Pennsylvania: A Guide to the Keystone State.

New York: Oxford University Press, 1940.

4. Philadelphia: A Guide to the Nation's Birthplace. Philadelphia: William Penn Association, 1937.

KK. Puerto Rico.

1. Puerto Rico: A Guide to the Island of Boriquen. New York: University Society, 1940.

LL. Rhode Island.

1. Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937.

MM. South Carolina.

1. Palmetto Pioneers: Six Stories of Early South Carolinians. Columbia: R. L. Bryan, 1938.

2. Our South Carolina: Today from Yesterday. Clinton: P. C. Press, 1942.

3. South Carolina: A Guide to the Palmetto State. New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.

4. South Carolina Folktales: Stories of Animals and Supernatural Beings. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1941.

NN. South Dakota.

1. Legends of the Mighty Sioux. Chicago:
A. Whitman, 1941.
2. Sodbusters: Tales of Southeastern South
Dakota. Alexandria: South Dakota Writers League, 1938.
3. A South Dakota Guide. Pierre: State
Publishing Co., 1938.

OO. Tennessee.

1. God Bless the Devil! Liars' Bench Tales.
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940.
2. Tennessee: A Guide to the State. New York:
Viking, 1939.

PP. Texas.

1. Texas: A Guide to the Lone Star State. New
York: Hastings House, 1940.

QQ. Utah.

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APPENDIX 2

Birth Years of Informants in
The Negro in Virginia

<u>Birth Years</u>	<u>Number of Informants</u>
1865	1
1864	1
1863	3
1862	0
1861	1
1860	5
1859	10
1858	5
1857	5
1856	4
1855	5
1854	5
1853	4
1852	8
1851	3
1850	12
1849	7

Birth YearsNumber of Informants

1848	11
1847	7
1846	4
1845	8
1844	1
1843	5
1842	9
1841	3
1840	3
1839	3
1838	2
1837	4
1836	3
1835	2
1834	1
1827	1
Unknown	11

APPENDIX 3

Places Where Informants Were Slaves or (If Not Slaves) Where They Grew Up

<u>Place</u>	<u>Number of Informants</u>
Unknown	54
Petersburg	6
Norfolk-Portsmouth	5
Hampton-Newport News	3
Richmond	2
Albemarle County	5
Pittsylvania County	5
Spotsylvania County	5
Hanover County	4
Nansemond County	4
Appomattox County	3
Bedford County	3
Chesterfield County	3
Franklin County	3
Gloycester County	3
Southampton County	3
Sussex County	3
Brunswick County	2

<u>place</u>	<u>Number of Informants</u>
Charles City County	2
Culpeper County	2
King William County	2
Lunenburg County	2
Middlesex County	2
Nottoway County	2
York County	2
Amelia County	1
Buckingham County	1
Charlotte County	1
Chesapeake County	1
Fairfax County	1
Fluvanna County	1
Greenville County	1
James City County	1
King George County	1
Louisa County	1
Mecklenburg County	1
Northampton County	1
Orange County	1
Powhatan County	1
Prince Edward County	1

<u>Place</u>	<u>Number of Informants</u>
Prince William County	1
Richmond County	1
North Carolina	5
Florida	1
South Carolina	1
West Virginia	1

APPENDIX 4

Questionnaire for Ex-Slaves

Note: Some ex-slaves would have information on certain questions, others on certain other questions. Of the greatest importance are facts concerning: (1) full names--their parents', brothers', their owners' and his family; (2) places--location of their owner's plantation by county, state, census tract, or deed number; and, (3) their exact location in the census years 1850 and 1860.

1. Name.
2. Age. (How does he know his age?)
3. Weight.
4. Height.
5. Color or complexion.
6. Evidence of age.
7. Dress.
8. Teeth.
9. Voice.
10. Eyes.
11. Hearing.

12. Sex.
13. Hair.
14. Health.
15. Birthplace of parents.
16. Nationality of parents.
17. Birthplace--county, state, name of plantation.
18. Brothers and sisters--names, ages, living and dead.
19. Length of time in present resident.
20. Master and mistress--names, number of children, their names and ages.
21. Relationship to owners.
22. Treatment by owners.
23. Discipline as a slave.
24. How administered?
25. Why disciplined?
26. Difference between treatment for men and women.
27. Discipline of children.
28. Who administered punishment?
29. Manumission?
30. Maiming slaves?
31. Resisting owners or overseers?
32. Sex relation of slaves.
33. Sex relations between slaves and whites?
34. Runaways?

35. Why slaves ran away.
36. Where runaways went.
37. How slaves escaped.
38. Did whites help them escape?
39. Treatment when captured.
40. Did slaves help runaways?
41. Examples of free Negroes sold as slaves.
42. Examples of free Negroes.
43. Free Negroes owning slaves.
44. Any member of family run away?
45. Ever run away or help others run away?
46. Size of plantation.
47. Number of slaves.
48. Attitude of master toward slaves.
49. To whom were slaves directly responsible?
50. Attitude of overseer.
51. Work done by father.
52. Work done by mother.
53. Work done by other slaves.
54. Jealousy between house servants and field hands?
55. Jealousy between dark and light slaves?
56. Where were the slaves sold?
57. Descriptions of slave sales.
58. Attitude of slaves toward being sold.

59. How often were slaves furnished clothing?
60. What did slaves do when it rained?
61. Treatment of lazy or rebellious slaves.
62. Were slave families ever broken up?
63. How close were slave family ties?
64. What kind of quarters?
65. Floors?
66. Rooms?
67. Cold or warm?
68. Beds?
69. Pictures.
70. Curtains?
71. Windows?
72. Fireplaces, fuel?
73. Eating?
74. Were slaves ever divorced?
75. Describe a slave funeral.
76. Where was the slave graveyard?
77. Did slaves mourn for dead master or mistress?
78. Were slaves allowed to own a Bible?
79. Who preached to slaves?
80. Could slaves sing or preach in church?
81. What did slaves do on Sunday?
82. What did slaves do during Christmas holidays?

83. Special rations and gifts at Christmas?
84. Were there ever slave dances?
85. What songs do you recall that were sung during slavery?
86. Did whites and Negroes sing the same songs in Church?
87. Did slaves believe in "hants"?
88. Did you ever see any ghosts or spirits?
89. Did you ever hear of Nat Turner?
90. Did you ever hear of John Brown?
91. Where were you when the War came?
92. Did any slaves rebel during the war?
93. How did Confederate soldiers treat the slaves?
94. How did you first learn you were free?
95. How did whites and Negroes get along after freedom?
96. Did you know any slaves from Africa?
97. Did you ever hear of any white slaves?
98. Did you know any Indians?
99. Did slaves ever marry Indians?
100. Did Negroes want to go North after freedom?
101. Was the Ku Klux Klan in your neighborhood?
102. Was your master in the Klan?
103. Did you or any Negroes you know vote after freedom?

104. Did you go to school after freedom?
105. How did Negroes address whites after freedom?
106. Did you join a church after freedom?

Taken from The Negro In Virginia, pp. 366-376.

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