

THE WRITERS' PROJECT

Had it not been for the Project, the suicide rate would have been much higher. It gave new life to people who had thought their lives were over.

—NELSON ALGREN



IN 1999, IN THE BASEMENT OF A UNIVERSITY building in Madison, Wisconsin, a professor discovered boxes containing 167 steno notebooks, a time capsule from the 1930s. Many were written in an unfamiliar language; others included sketches of ox yokes and lacrosse sticks. The authors were members of the Oneida, a branch of the Iroquois, who had worked for the WPA. The notebooks included interviews with Oneida elders and life stories of people now long dead.

Yet these stories from the past have importance for the Oneida community today. Copies of the WPA notebooks are now available in the small reading room of the Oneida cultural center. "Readers get so excited," said Carol Cornelius, an Oneida historian. "You're pulled right into the time period. It's engrossing."

"It's a vital connection to our early days," she added, noting that without the notebooks, there would be major gaps in the tribe's history. The notebooks also helped revitalize interest in the Oneida language, which was on the verge of dying out.

The 1930s writers who worked on the Oneida program and other parts of the Writers' Project had a sense of mission. Oscar Archiquette, the youngest of the Oneida writers, had floundered in his youth, as he himself admitted, but on the Project he had purpose. Others agreed. "For two years I have been working on Oneida Language Project," Guy Elm wrote. "I am very much interested in my work. . . . I hope to see it published in books so that the people can read it and find out for themselves, what Oneida people are really, bad or good."

Gordon McLester, an Oneida historian who now films oral histories, echoes that view. McLester learned his approach to education and history from Archiquette, and his efforts to record Oneida lives today grew from the WPA project. "The cycle comes around," he said. "They did it in the 1930s; we're doing it again in the twenty-first century. The main point is to get images of *real* Oneida life out there."

How controversial could that be? Today oral history is the province of preservationists and stewards of the past. But during the Depression, the effort spurred huge protests. "There still continues to be . . . a lot of useless, worthless WPA projects," one Wisconsin farmer complained to his congressman. He singled out the Oneida language project as full of "fat, lazy Indians" and marveled at their useless make-work at taxpayer expense. "Can you tell me who wants to learn the Indian language?"

The core of his complaint was economics: as long as members of the WPA staff could get \$70 a month "writing the Indian language," they would never take farm jobs that paid less. "That is one project that should be halted immediately," he urged.

Welfare-to-work stirred debate in the 1990s, but it provoked much more intense feelings in the 1930s. A 1939 Gallup poll found that as the country headed toward a presidential election, more voters ranked WPA relief as the worst part of FDR's government—nearly one in four, more than for any other issue, well ahead of spending, farm programs, foreign policy, or even "packing" the Supreme Court. Yet the same poll found

that more respondents ranked WPA relief as the administration's *greatest* accomplishment (28 percent). Clearly, WPA work relief was a lightning-rod issue.

The WPA guides to the states, U.S. territories, and selected cities remain the most visible legacy of the Writers' Project. The books—part travel guide, part local encyclopedia—together made up America's first self-portrait: a multifaceted look at America by Americans, assembled during one of the greatest crises in the country's history. The Project, as it was known, churned out more than three hundred publications in five years, including a hundred full-size books on topics ranging from zoology to ethnic history. The Project also left an archive of oral histories and interviews with people in many walks of life, including the most comprehensive firsthand accounts of slavery ever collected, from thousands of former slaves across the South. Plans to publish interviews went into limbo when the Project closed down in 1939. In recent years, the Library of Congress has posted thousands of these life-history interviews on its *American Memory* Web site.

At the time, the guides received the most public attention. "This is not the well selected, carefully sculptured mosaic of formal history or geographical description" of a typical guidebook, wrote Frederick Gutheim in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. "It is the profuse disorder of nature and life, the dadaist jumble of the daily newspaper. It gets in your blood and sends you crowing from oddity to anecdote, from curiosity to dazzling illumination of single fact." The guides formed an often irreverent portrait that revealed the eccentricity, humor, brutality, and ingenuity of the American people. Anything was fair game, as Jerre Mangione noted in *The Dream and the Deal*, from a colorful sketch of millionaire John D. Rockefeller with dimes in his pocket and doggerel he typed and gave his visitors to the exploits of a jovial but homicidal Delaware innkeeper. Illustrated with thousands of black-and-white images, the WPA guides provide a glimpse into America's window.

Now you can connect a WPA guide with relevant interviews in a few mouse clicks at the Library of Congress Web site (see the appendix for a full list of Web sites). Pull up a map of the country and browse interviews collected in each state, or search for a town name or an individual.

In Nebraska, you can read the recollections of a farm wife in Dakota City, the songs of a hobo in Lincoln, and a cattleman's memory of driving stock to Omaha. You can view photos of life back then taken by field photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Jack Delano, and Gordon Parks, who worked with the Farm Security Administration. It may be that nothing gets you closer to the life story of a place than this combination of guides, interviews, and photos.

The Writers' Project, like the rest of the WPA, had its roots in poverty relief, not in a patriotic desire to celebrate America. The Depression's bleakest days had passed, but families still slept on park benches and in stairwells. Across the countryside, thousands of families lost their farms in a foreclosure epidemic that sparked desperate protests. The economic hurricane didn't spare writers: by 1935, a quarter of the U.S. publishing industry was out of work. Women and minorities were especially hard hit. ("There is something about poverty that smells like death," wrote Zora Neale Hurston in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. "Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season.") Roosevelt's efforts to jump-start the economy included the 1935 Emergency Relief Act, which authorized the Works Progress Administration, the most ambitious of all relief efforts during the Great Depression.

The whole WPA faced heavy skepticism from both ends of the political spectrum. Many saw it a haven for people who were too lazy to work. The gag was that WPA stood for "We Poke Along" (local variations included "Whistle, Piss and Argue"), suggesting that those involved had no work ethic and would accept any handout. One editorial warned that with the Writers' Project, pencil leaners would be added to the ranks of WPA "shovel leaners." In Chicago, the *Tribune's* front-page cartoons lampooned the WPA workers as goggle-eyed professors. "The word was 'boondoggling,'" said Studs Terkel in a 2004 interview. "They were loafing on the job at taxpayers' expense." (The word's origins are murky. It seems to have sprung to life in 1935 as part of a movement to fight government waste, but some sources trace it back to the cowboy era, when it referred to braiding together odds and ends of leather to make saddle trappings. Boondoggling was done when there was no other work on the ranch, so it was the equivalent of twiddling your thumbs.) On the left, radicals decried the Project as hush money designed to preempt

the publications of pamphlets about the broken capitalist system. People questioned why any kind of writing deserved public support. In many places, introducing oneself as a “WPA writer” could raise hackles and end an interview on the spot. In the Southwest, the WPA writer became known as *el Diablo a pie*: “the devil on foot.”

Initially, WPA relief was mainly intended to create jobs for blue-collar workers, for the building of bridges, roads, and other public works. But unemployed white-collar families demanded help, too. Unlike bridges, however, writing was not something the public thought it needed, so the program took some pushing. The Writers Union and the Unemployed Writers Association called on the government to create a policy for the broad category of writers “in the present economic emergency,” or else “the writer must organize and conduct a fight to better his condition.” In February 1935, the two groups picketed the New York Port Authority with placards that read “Children Need Books. Writers Need Bread. We Demand Projects.”



In 1935, strikes in New York pressured the WPA to create relief jobs for white-collar workers.

Six months later, the WPA announced that it would sponsor projects to employ people on relief who were qualified in the fields of writing, art, music, and drama (a fifth was devoted to historical surveys). The Writers' Project established offices in every state.



A WPA poster on the meaning of work relief: Work Promotes Confidence.

It was intended to last six months. Not surprisingly for an emergency effort, things were thrown together. Henry Alsberg, the Project's director, had worked with WPA director Harry Hopkins on a larger relief program and was drawn to the new effort for writers. A fifty-seven-year-old bachelor, Alsberg had been a foreign correspondent, a playwright, and a director of the Provincetown Theatre and had organized humanitarian relief to Russia in the 1920s.

Few questioned Alsberg's qualifications, but, privately, friends marveled at the idea of him as a national manager. He looked the part of the

distracted intellectual: poorly dressed, constantly fumbling for cigarettes, his clothes streaked with ashes and stains. One staffer described him as having "a cumbersome body and a voice that sounded like something from the Old Testament." Colleagues said that he was a completely impractical planner. How could someone who was barely able to administer himself lead a nationwide effort?

Alsberg had big ideas for the project. He wanted the WPA writers to document aspects of America that were already fading. His plan highlighted regionalism, the concept that America's unique cultures grew out of its varied landscapes and its natural and man-made vistas. In 1935, as historian Bernard Weisberger has noted, most Americans cared little about the rest of the world. In the South, Civil War memories still dominated politics and race relations, and there were still many Civil War veterans alive to parade on Memorial Day. In the West, pioneer days tinted the public's views about



Franklin D. Roosevelt (left) and Harry Hopkins, WPA director.

Native Americans. But by that year, signs pointed to factors that were changing the character of every region of the country. The influence of radio spread further every day, and the pace of news was quickening.

Alsberg imagined that the task would also provide a sort of training for young writers. "These writers will get an education in the American scene," he told the *New York Times* that fall. "A great deal of *real* American writing comes out of seeing what is really happening to the American people."

A time of national disaster may not seem like the best moment to raise such issues. With America's economic system flat on its back, people—especially young people—were searching for new solutions, for change.

It took time for officials to settle on an objective that resembled an economic engine that involved a pen: travel guides. But Alsberg was less interested in economics than in sociology and the arts. He wanted



Henry Alsberg, director of the Writers' Project, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

guidebooks that were also history books and that captured the gamut of America and its experience. He didn't seem fazed about making guidebooks too big for people to carry on a walking tour. Can you sightsee with a thousand-page book in your hand? It's not surprising that few people believed anyone would actually read these books.

Working with Alsberg, however, was someone who had a more practical view of guidebooks. Katharine Kellock, like Alsberg, had helped with humanitarian relief in Russia in the 1920s. That was when she saw how useful tour guides like the Baedeker series could be. Originally from Pittsburgh, Kellock had recently worked as a writer and a researcher for the Scripps Howard news service. When she joined the Writers' Project,



Katharine Kellock, national tours editor for the Writers' Project, meets with George Cronyn, assistant director (right).

she proposed that part of each state guide consist of driving tours that showed a traveler on the ground what to expect at each stop on the road.

In supervising the progress of the guides, the editors at headquarters traveled tirelessly and were sometimes overwhelmed and appalled at what they discovered. In late 1935, George Cronyn, an assistant director, found a nest of corruption in the California office. "Incompetence, grave irregularities, political maneuvering, and sabotage of the American Guide," he warned Alsberg in a memo. "This business is so messy I am in despair," Kellock wrote to Alsberg, as she traveled through South Carolina in January 1936. "Weird how much this state reminds me of Russia—down here the rotten plumbing and scaly walls and curious meal hours are reminiscent of Odessa."

After creating the guidebooks, a second goal of the Project was to gather American folklore. The Project's first director of folklore was John Lomax, the legendary ballad collector who had amassed cowboy songs since his boyhood. Even before 1910, he had received Harvard fellowships to haul around a massive recording machine, making disks

of “Home on the Range” and “Git Along Little Dogies.” Lomax found himself widowed and out of work in 1932 when the bond market—his day job—collapsed. By 1935, he was making recordings for the Library of Congress, mostly in the South. Lomax spoke of field recording as capturing songs in their “native habitat.” An unreconstructed Texan, he and his son Alan had met Huddie Ledbetter (aka Lead Belly) in a Louisiana prison in 1933, secured his release, and helped him settle in Manhattan. They published *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* in 1936.

Lomax was nearly seventy when he took the WPA job. As the Project’s folklore adviser, he brought to it his interests in folk songs, regional character, and black culture. He left after a year and a half, feeling that the spread of better roads and the rise of radio already spelled doom to folk music and regional cultures. But his influence on the Project remained, especially in the interviews with former slaves.

In May 1938, the folklore job passed to Benjamin Botkin, who was in some ways Lomax’s opposite in personality—where Lomax was brash and full of Texas bluster, Botkin was shy and bookish. An intellectual who combined a knowledge of writing with a deep love for American culture, Botkin was the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants who had



Benjamin Botkin, national director for the folklore division.

settled in Boston. He was a cousin of George and Ira Gershwin's and loved low and high culture equally: jazz as well as opera, pulp fiction as well as classic literature, movies and Mark Twain. He had traveled widely and was fascinated by the entire country. Botkin had a Harvard degree and a PhD from the University of Nebraska and had been a professor in Oklahoma for nearly twenty years. He was deeply interested in how regular Americans talked about their lives and work, and he believed that writers had the job of "helping us respect one another." Even if writers weren't journalists who should show what was happening to America's traditions and point out spots of hope.

"As a nation, we have a genius for overstatement and understatement," Botkin told the *New York Post* in May 1944. "Both extremes are typically American." In time, he became the Project's spokesman for creating what he described in "WPA and Folklore Research: Bread and Song" as "a comprehensive picture of how America lives and works and plays."

This effort would show perhaps most clearly where many of America's various cultures came up against one another, sometimes deflecting, often cross-pollinating. From Chicago, where white musicians learned the vocabulary of jazz expression from black musicians (defying a 1920s racial ban on blacks and whites playing together), to Florida recordings of Spanish songs and Bahamian versions of old English folk tunes, these dynamics came through. Hurston described what was happening as a "revolution in national expression in music" equal to Chaucer's shift from Latin to vernacular English. In Harlem, Ralph Ellison found in the black community men who argued passionately the merits of their favorite sopranos, having themselves been extras at the Metropolitan Opera for years whenever there was a need for Egyptians or "natives." Ellison laughed at this unexpected crossing of race and culture. He called it an "outrageous American joke" and felt that his "appreciation of American cultural possibility was vastly extended."

To show America through people's lives, Botkin urged every WPA interviewer "to discover the real feeling of the person consulted and . . . record this feeling regardless of his own attitude toward it." For him, the Project's importance lay in showing "a living culture and understanding its meaning . . . in democratic society as a whole."

As a result, Peggy Bulger notes in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, folklore became a way to improve people's lives, as well as to create understanding. It was a way to look at culture, and Botkin's method was to interview lots of people to find out what they valued. In other words, folklore was more than old folktales—it was a tool for national recovery.

The Project's designers believed that celebrating American diversity could prevent a wave of fascism like the one Europe was experiencing. The hard times had fueled a rise of anti-immigrant and fascist groups in the United States, like the group that Humphrey Bogart's embittered autoworker joins in the 1937 film *Black Legion*. ("No matter what it is or who commenced it, I'm against it," Bogart growled. "Especially if they're after my job and have an unpronounceable last name.") Eleanor Roosevelt crystallized this idea when she said that America's diversity was its strong point. This was in response to Hitler, who championed a monolithic, homogeneous population and viewed America as a great country weakened by fissures and subcultures. The Roosevelts essentially said, "No, that variety is our greatest strength." The WPA guides and interviews attempted to show that variety.

People realized that a program on such a vast scale would probably have an effect beyond whatever books were published, but nobody knew what that would be. At the time, the Writers' Project was called a charity for mediocre talents, and there is overwhelming evidence for this. There are many instances of plodding and awkward writing, and quite a few of the guides are rife with stereotypes of their time that can make today's readers cringe. Yet many of the guides show lively writing, and in the decades that followed, people who had never considered themselves writers would publish biographies and histories. In the case of Juanita Brooks, her 1950 book *Mountain Meadows Massacre* offers a nuanced investigation into the hidden story of a slaughter in Utah that would transform a community's view of itself.

A handful from the Project's roster would become some of the century's most important literary artists. Four of the first ten winners of the National Book Award in fiction and one in poetry came from this emergency relief project. Its effects have been cited in works as varied as John Cheever's *Falconer*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Saul Bellow's

Chicago novels, Zora Neale Hurston's later novels and plays, and Studs Terkel's interviews and books. The Project also influenced the poetry of Margaret Walker, May Swenson, and Kenneth Rexroth and the eyeballs-at-the-curb viewpoint of Jim Thompson's noir classics *The Grifters* and *The Killer inside Me*.

When Nelson Algren said that the Project gave hope to people who had lost it, he was not being melodramatic. The Writers' Project set a trampoline under many thousands, writers and nonwriters, who would otherwise have hit the pavement. The poet W. H. Auden called the Project "one of the noblest and most absurd undertakings ever attempted by any state." It put people in contact with one another, restored voices to many who had fallen silent, and gave us the closest thing to Twain's vision that America has ever seen.

