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LITERATURE, CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN DEPRESSION ERA AMERICA: ARCHIVES OF THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT



The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was the most controversial and contentious program of the Work Projects Administration (WPA), an integral part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal." This bold, imaginative and wide-ranging enterprise is the key to understanding literature, culture and society in America during the Depression era.

Date Range: 1933-1943

Content: 37,407 images

Source Library: Library of Congress

Detailed Description:

This collection presents the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) publications of all 47 states involved in the project, which ran from 1933 to 1943. Forming the most complete collection of publications from all participating states, this archive contains more than 450 individual items, many of which are typed or mimeographed and received only limited circulation. The FWP was a part of "Federal One," the arts project established by the WPA to cover music, theater, art and writers. The WPA recognized that steelworkers, bricklayers, share-croppers, and factory workers were not the only section of the economy hit by the Depression. Academics, post-graduate students, journalists, playwrights and novelists were also unemployed. In five years the WPA spent millions, provided literary training and, more significantly, the opportunity for participants to observe, eat and write.

Reaction to the FWP was intense. Viewed as a courageous humanitarian answer to the issue of the homeless and hungry on the one hand, it was considered a counter to the threat of Fascism on the other and branded "Communist" and "Un-American" by the Dies Committee of 1938 and the Woodrum Committee of 1939. The Communist Party, however, thought it was counter-revolutionary.

This unique collection of the publications of the FWP provides scholars with an extremely lively and detailed picture of life in America during the Great Depression. Almost every aspect

of life is covered from Industry and Labor Relations, through Welfare and Government, to Sports and Hobbies.

The American State Guide series has been omitted as this is readily available in reprint and was the one series that most major libraries acquired when they were first published. Conversely, the publications in this microform project are extremely rare — but they are essential for any study of the whole range of materials produced by the FWP.

This collection includes a number of important City Guides, that should be read alongside the major State Guides. A few examples are *Aberdeen: A middle border city*, *Cincinnati* (described through 3 guides produced for the sesquicentennial celebration), *Louisville: A guide to the falls city*, and *San Diego: A California city*. Similarly there are county guides for regions of Kentucky, Minnesota, Ohio, and other states, and numerous historical booklets (eg *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, and *Great Spanish American Liberators*) reflecting the historical drive of the FWP.

There are publications that sprang out of the important social-ethnic studies carried out by the FWP. For instance, *The Armenians in Massachusetts*, *Immigrant America*, *The Italians of New York*, *the Cavalcade of the American Negro*, *Immigrant settlements in Connecticut*, and *Survey of Negroes in Little Rock and North Little Rock*.

Industrial and labor issues are addressed in publications such as *Annals of labor and industry in Illinois*, *Flax in Oregon*, *The growth of RCA*, *Intra-Urban mobility in Omaha*, *A technical review of early Comstock mining methods*, and *the Work and Employment Readers for Adults*.

Social and Community issues are covered by items including *The Adult Education Outlook*, *Advancing Public Health 1939-1940*, *Guides to Cultural Organizations*, *Diphtheria and its prevention*, *Family Welfare*, *Mental hygiene clinic*, *Models for the Blind*, and *Radio in Education*.

Then there are the most ephemeral or even frivolous items: *Autumn hikes*, *Baseball in Old Chicago*, *Fish are Fighters in Alabama*, *Fleas — their habits and control*, *Softball*, *Little animals* (lithographs by Alyn), and *Songs* by Stephen Foster. But even these are important to the historian. They are part of the time-capsule that captures the 1930's in print. In the way that they are written or in the facts they include, they justify some of the accusations leveled against the FWP

Original poems and plays were also published by the FWP. This program included *The Indians' protest: A play in one act* and *Poems*, by Elma Scheel, Flora Rivola, Jill Spargur, and others. Radio scripts include *Play Room*, by Riley Hughes. And there are short stories such as *Blizzard*, by George W. Hall, and *Des hitch-hiking besness*, by Virgil Aiken.

Also reflected are the endeavors of the folk-lore units of the FWP. Pioneering work on the American Indian was partly released in publications such as *The Crow Legend of Creation*, *The Havasupai and the Hualapai*, *Santee-Sioux Indian legends*, *The Naming of the Blackfeet*, *The Navaho*, *Seminole Indian Legends*. Whilst other aspect of Folk culture are

revealed by *Alabama, Facts, Events, Places, Tours, Ballads, John Brown, Pioneer Tales, and Pioneer Religion*.

The importance of these publications for the social historian cannot be overestimated. The style of writing, the designs and typography and the written contents, all add up to a remarkable picture of this depressed and yet creative period of American history.

The contents of this collection constitutes the Harvester Microfilm product entitled *Archives of the Federal Writers Project, Series One: Printed and Mimeograph Publications in the Surviving FWP Files, 1933-1943, excluding State Guides*.

Publisher's Note: This collection comprises, in its entirety, the Primary Source Media microfilm collection *Archives of the Federal Writers' Project: Printed and Mimeographed Publications in the Surviving Federal Writers' Project Files, 1933-1943*.