

CULTURAL DEMOCRACY™

Number 18

P.O. Box 11440, Baltimore, MD 21239

January 1982

FROM NEW DEAL TO RAW DEAL: LEARNING FROM the WPA

Note: The New Deal cultural programs discussed in this article are described in "Alphabet Soup," which begins at right.

The New Deal was born at a time when the failure of the private sector in the U.S. was viewed as a key public problem. During the Depression of the 1930's, almost everybody thought big business was to blame for the American people's suffering, and government was the tool to put it right.

In the arts, great changes in cultural forms and practices accompanying the Depression made the situation even worse. The skyrocketing popularity of radio and sound films had put many artists out of work: some 30,000 musicians were displaced by new mechanical modes of musical reproduction; government estimated that well over 30,000 theater professionals were out of work by the mid-'30s. As 70 million Americans were buying movie tickets each week, live theaters closed all over the U.S. The Loew's theater chain had 36 houses offering 40-50 weeks of live entertainment yearly until 1930; by 1934, Loew's had only three such theaters operating.

Setting The Stage

In the U.S., the Great Depression was the long and difficult period that followed the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange in November of 1929 and ended in the late '30s as armaments production was stepped up in preparation for World War II. It was part of a worldwide depression that some say marked the end of Empire as it had previously existed; it took a massive war -- with unprecedented destruction promising a future prosperity based on rebuilding -- to turn the tide temporarily.

Despite the popular legend of ruined stockbrokers throwing themselves from Wall Street windows like lemmings, the early days of the Depression were a dragged-out tug-of-war. On one side were the economic optimists -- including President Herbert Hoover -- who felt the country's economy was "fundamentally sound" and that a rapid recovery could be achieved by cutting workers' wages, encouraging state and local of-

(continued on page 2---

ALPHABET SOUP: '30s Federal Arts Programs

January 30th marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, so every political commentator in the U.S. is taking a look back on FDR's accomplishments as 32nd president. One year into Ronald Reagan's presidency, this is a look fraught with irony.

FDR's New Deal -- begun nearly 50 years ago with his inaugural in March, 1933 -- meant a sweeping change in American government, introducing a great many programs and services that most U.S. citizens took for granted until a year ago, when many were axed to clear the way for military spending and benefits for the rich. It's irony with a twist, as Reagan repeatedly

(continued on page 7 ---)

INSIDE:

New Deal Resources

Feedback: Aesthetics and People's Theater

Cultured Pearls: Hodson Works Overtime

SPECIAL NEW DEAL ISSUE

Cultural Democracy (formerly NAPNOC notes) is published by the Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee (NAPNOC). Copyrighted articles may not be reprinted without permission of the author(s); other material may be reprinted so long as proper credit is given to the author(s) and to Cultural Democracy. Signed articles represent the views of their author(s) and not necessarily those of NAPNOC.

NAPNOC welcomes letters, comments and suggestions for articles. Please put NAPNOC on your organization's mailing list.

Cultural Democracy is distributed free-of-charge to NAPNOC members. Subscriptions are available for \$25 per year. For information on subscriptions or membership, please write to NAPNOC, P.O. Box 11440, Baltimore, MD 21239 or call 301/323-5006.

Cultural Democracy is co-edited by Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard

NEW DEAL TO RAW DEAL

(continued from page 1---)

officials to step up their public works, and increasing federal spending by \$500 million. On the other side were those whose ability to see the situation clearly was not compromised by their own economic interests, and who felt that some fundamental changes were required.

Chronic unemployment was the central and most persistent feature of the Depression: by 1932, estimates ranged from 8½ to 17 million unemployed when the total U.S. population was around 125 million. The "technical unemployment" among artists (their displacement due to the adoption of new technology) was paralleled in other spheres of work. In their frantic efforts to recapture their own financial stability after the stock market crash, big corporations adopted and deployed as many labor-saving devices as possible; so even when business began to pick up, unemployment didn't drop.

It was against this backdrop that the radical shifts in government that made up the New Deal became possible. The '30s brought a whirlwind of events that could not be comprehended through the received ideas of the time. People cast about for radically new ways of making sense of the world and their places within it. Meanwhile, with each new business failure came new exposés of corruption and criminality. People lost respect for business and doubted that its interests were theirs. The feeling was that the old way could not be rescued; it was time to go forward to something new.

Time For A New Deal

In the summer of 1932, the Democrats met in Chicago to nominate Franklin D. Roosevelt as their candidate for president. His acceptance speech called for a "new deal" for Americans -- though few specific proposals were made, and few of those made bore any relation to FDR's eventual program. FDR won a sweeping victory in November, and speculation began on the action he would take as president after his March, 1933 inauguration.

Ironically, we hear most about the sweep of Roosevelt's programs today from political pundits searching for a parallel-- in scope and magnitude, if not in substance -- for the grand changes in government's role proposed through Ronald Reagan's "Economic Recovery Program." The cultural aspects of the New Deal we've outlined in "Alphabet Soup" (which appears in this issue) will give you a sense of the program's scope. Suffice it to say here that the New Deal was the starting point for "big government" in the U.S. It represented a break with the idea of a minimalist government that only steps in where the states or the private sector are unable to settle differences. The New Deal was based on the idea that neither business nor local government was equipped to deal with the country's problems; that direct federal intervention was needed in almost every aspect of public life; and that it is the public sector's responsibility to look to the needs of all members of society, not just the privileged.

From Dreaming To Dealing

That was the idea, and some people in the administration were committed to it in principle and in practice. But the New Deal as a whole was a hodge-podge, a jury-rigged program run by idealists and opportunists, demagogues and ideologues, obstructionists and adventurers.

The ferment of ideas that characterized the '30s found its expression within the government: radical schemes were proposed, and often as not, disposed of by entrenched elements in the bureaucracy. FDR had captured the public's imagination with his stirring exhortations to national recovery; but he also feared alienating the business interests whose votes and influence he needed.

In the end, the New Deal shied away from addressing the fundamental structural changes that were needed to end the Depression and alter the direction of the economy; the economic emergency was ended by the build-up to arm first Europe, then the U.S., for World War II; and with the red-baiting and witch-hunting that accompanied the war mobilization, the superficial social reforms of the New Deal were all that was left, until Reagan's election called even their future into question.

The New Deal invites comparison with the present period. Aside from all the obvious reasons to take a look again at the '30s -- it's the centennial of FDR's birth, and coming up on the 50th anniversary of the New Deal cultural programs -- we think neighborhood arts people have special reason to examine this legacy, with an eye toward our own future: the New Deal marked the U.S. government's first big investment in cultural development. And with the demise of CETA (the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, which supported many neighborhood artists) and cuts and shifts in federal cultural priorities, we seem to be approaching the end of the second. With an economic crisis at hand, and an administration that sees rearmament as *the way out*, the parallels proliferate.

The New Deal is a topic for endless speculation. We'll suggest some resources for further study and reading at the end of this article. For now, we want to touch on three issues especially germane to cultural development today: Public and Private Roles; Centralization and Decentralization; and Freedom and Censorship.

I. Public and Private Roles

To the extent that our current cultural policy has been articulated, the primacy of the private sector is unquestioned. Since the establishment of the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities in 1965, the role of most public arts agencies has been to support with public patronage the objects of private patronage; public money goes to existing groups to "match" private contributions; and a piece of the orthodoxy of public policy-makers is that government should not attempt to direct the course of cultural policy.

A clearer parallel to the New Deal cultural programs (like the Works Progress Ad-

(continued on page 3--)

NEW DEAL TO RAW DEAL

(continued from page 2 --)

ministration's -- WPA -- Federal One) were based on the need to put people to work: they aimed to get people off the relief rolls and into public service; and to thereby preserve the skills of the U.S. workforce, skills that were not being privately employed at the time.

But within the broader framework of the New Deal cultural programs, something happened that's taboo now: national cultural goals were defined and articulated. For example, the designers of the New Deal cultural projects rejected the idea of setting up a program of subsidy for existing arts organizations, partly because of restraints placed on them by Congress, and partly because it would have been ineffective in pursuing their goals. In the words of Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), "*We all believed that the theater was more than a private enterprise, that it was also a public interest which, properly fostered, might come to be a social and educative force.*"

Government As Producer

In essence, the New Deal cultural projects acted as *producers* of arts events instead of *supporters*. In some cases, this distinction was striking: for example, the FTP set up 10 Black theaters in cities where economic and social conditions had made it impossible for Black theater to exist outside the vaudeville stage. The Federal Writers Project (FWP) compiled regional histories and a collection of oral histories that preserve for us a past that the private sector has had no interest in preserving -- neither in the '30s, nor in the present. The Federal Music Project (FMP) compiled an Index of American Composers -- all 5,500 works it includes were performed by WPA groups.

In other words, the New Deal cultural projects took responsibility for our cultural commonwealth. The programs took on the task of recording and preserving our cultural history -- including many parts previously deemed too painful or embarrassing to mention -- and more than that, the task of promoting cultural life where private action had failed or where it had done positive harm. "*Irony*" is hardly adequate as a term to describe the feeling with which composers and playwrights of today, unable to find publishers or producers for their work in a marketplace bent on blockbuster box-office, would respond to the prospect of a national program of publication and distribution.

Public officials today view this kind of government participation in cultural development as bureaucratic control on the marketplace, or unfair competition between the public and private sectors -- and of course, these objections were also raised during the New Deal. The standard snappy comeback was to ask whether the establishment of public libraries had amounted to unfair competition with commercial publishing. But beyond snappy comebacks, it must be noted that the New Deal cultural pro-

grams were designed with the consultation of the artists' unions, commercial producers and others who were seen as arts community leaders. In many cases it amounted to the federal government taking the risk for private entrepreneurs who were no longer willing or able to gamble on new material.

Taking The Risk

Take, for example, the "try-out" theater the FTP set up in New York City. It was used to produce new works in order to assess their potential for commercial production; the first production, "Woman of Destiny," was sold to the movies for \$25,000.

Richard Wright wrote Big Boy Leaves Home and Native Son on FWP time -- and like virtually every FWP-subsidized work that saw publication, Wright's books were published and distributed commercially.

Wright was no anomaly -- Nelson Algren, Ralph Ellison, Meridel LeSueur, Studs Terkel and practically every other writer of the period were sustained, during these crucial years, by the federal government. The same was true in the visual arts: Alice Neel, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and Morris Graves might never have survived as artists without the WPA. Who knows what sorts of artists might have emerged through the 1950's and '60s if this kind of opportunity for public service had been available?

Of course the WPA was never established as a permanent program of cultural public service, which is perhaps one reason why the careers of most WPA veterans have since followed the traditional pattern of individual struggle, achievement and reward or rejection. Like CETA, the New Deal programs maintained the official fiction that their goal was to provide temporary jobs and to keep skills alive until participants could be employed in the private sector. Also like CETA, the WPA never did much about developing those private sector jobs -- though in both cases it would be difficult to imagine how private business could be induced to take on the unprofitable, publicly-oriented work that federal support made possible.

Early in 1939, Colonel Harrington, the army engineer who replaced Harry Hopkins as WPA administrator, offered a skeptical view of Federal One employees' prospects for private sector work, advising the House Appropriations Committee that "*the government should go slowly in providing employment in a certain profession for people who can never get a job in that profession.*"

From painter Stuart Davis, secretary of the American Artists Congress, came the opposing view: Federal patronage meant "*a new and immensely valuable cultural growth, far greater and more valuable than the cultural state which it was initiated to defend and uphold...In other words, the original intention of an emergency stop gap has been changed by a social dialectic into its opposite.*"

In 1937 and '38, 3 bills were introduced to establish a permanent "Department of Science, Art and Literature" or a "Bureau of Fine Arts." The proposed Bureau would "assume all functions, powers and duties ex-

(continued on page 4 --)

(continued from page 3 --)

exercised by the WPA" in the arts. Early versions of these bills were slowed by art world bickering over how representatives to the new agency would be picked, and whom it would employ. Ultimately, the pressures of an increasingly anti-New Deal Congress and growing military expenditure killed the idea.

II. Centralization and Decentralization

Viewed as a whole, cultural production in the New Deal programs was far more centralized than it is today: national direction and a set of national tasks characterized the programs. But paradoxically, one important principle within this national direction was to protect and promote diversity and regional cultural identity. So while the WPA cultural apparatus permitted far more centralized control than the current apparatus, the programs' emphasis on differentiation of publics, audiences and contexts resulted in far more diversity than we see under the current system.

Federal Art Project (FAP) director Holger Cahill summed up this emphasis in a 1939 speech: "...the Project has discovered that such a simple matter as finding employment for the artist in his hometown has been of the greatest importance. It has, for one thing, helped to stem the cultural erosion which in the past generation has drawn most of America's art talent to a few large cities. It has brought the artist closer to the interests of a public which needs him, and which is now learning to understand him. And it has made the artist more responsive to the inspiration of the country, and through this the artist is bringing every aspect of American life into the currency of art."

As a rule, the aspects of New Deal cultural programs which were centralized were those which could be most efficiently accomplished with one locus of authority and production. For example, the FTP maintained the National Service Bureau as a clearinghouse for information, scripts, personnel and other resources; it also published Federal Theatre Magazine and its national and regional staff acted as trouble-shooters with state and local units. Large projects like the Indexes of American Design and American Music were planned and administered centrally, and carried out in many parts of the country simultaneously.

By contrast, our current public cultural apparatus centralizes grants-making and leaves training, research and information-gathering up to whoever is interested in taking on these tasks.

Within these centralized frameworks, considerable allowance was made for regional differences. The Oklahoma Federal Theatre carried out extensive historical research, using radio to contact people who might provide historical information. Oklahoma had few theater professionals, so it used them wisely -- and fully -- setting up a service which, according to Hallie Flanagan, "ultimately furnished plays, radio

scripts, or dramatic source material to over two hundred dramatic clubs in educational institutions. The playwright's group expanded to include sixty-six young writers..." Oklahoma also ran a theater for the blind, ten recreation centers, serving both black and white communities, and the Vagabond Puppeteers, which toured CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camps.

Sometimes this commitment to regionalism was more for show than for substance. The Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts commissioned murals to decorate a post office in each state; nearly 1,500 designs were submitted by almost a thousand artists. In many cases, the Section's commitment to regionalism amounted in practice to compelling an artist to substitute cacti for sycamores or lumberjacks for cowboys in a design created by someone who had never seen either outside of a book.

The WPA's success stories were matched by stories of failures and false starts. In states like Washington and Missouri, where patronage politics superseded cultural concerns, state directors were qualified only by their alliances with politicians and project work failed to advance.

The WPA's bureaucratic administrative structures hindered the growth of a good number of projects, and caused a great deal of turnover among frustrated Federal One personnel. In the early years, all personnel and supplies had to be procured through the Department of the Treasury in Washington, DC -- until special procedures were ironed out, it was necessary either to requisition separately for, say, each evening's perishable-fruit props for a play, or for financially-strapped theater staff to swallow the costs themselves.

Once the WPA began to receive and administer its own appropriation, state WPA officials began to play a greater part in Federal One administration. In some states, these bureaucrats were understanding and helpful. But in others, arts project staffers faced continual problems.

State WPA officials' rulings sometimes blocked the establishment of state arts units altogether. When the state administrator in Iowa forbade the employment of out-of-staters, the entire Iowa FTP died on the vine for lack of "qualified" local theater professionals. The same reasoning was used to explain the lack of an FTP in the District of Columbia.

Charismatic leadership could transcend the constraints of bureaucracy and central control; successful projects operated under the same conditions that kept the state of Iowa out, just as successful projects operate today within the inadequate and unresponsive public cultural support apparatus. In retrospect, the WPA could never have attained the success of its early years without Harry Hopkins at its helm, dedicated national project directors, and the participation of others like them in state and local units -- committed, risk-taking, creative and democratic in their impulses. When these people were gone -- in some cases replaced by the sort of manager-technicians we see (continued on page 5--)

(continued from page 4 --)

too often in public agencies today -- the heart went out of their institutions.

III. Freedom and Censorship

It's difficult to discuss censorship and public cultural policy in the U.S. For one thing, it's a terrifically hot issue: references to the specter of "state control" pepper the massive transcripts of the Congressional hearings on the establishment of the National Arts and Humanities Endowments, and they arise with equal frequency in the discussion of national policy today. Yet we have no consensus on what constitutes censorship. When the marketplace subsidizes certain kinds of art and makes others all-but-impossible, it is censorship? Some people call it "taste," others "appropriateness," still others "natural selection."

No matter how you slice it, censorship was a key issue throughout the WPA arts projects. The projects, by their very existence, sought to redress the marketplace censorship that came before; government control or no, the New Deal saw the widest distribution of images and ideas that encouraged people to think -- *even to criticize!* -- that the U.S. has ever experienced.

"I am asked whether a theater subsidized by the government can be kept free from censorship, and I say, yes, it is going to be kept free from censorship. What we want is a free, adult, uncensored theater." With these words Harry Hopkins announced the creation of the FTP at the National Theater Conference at Iowa City in 1935. Six months later, the White House forbade the portrayal of any foreign ruler in FTP productions, effectively cancelling the first Living Newspaper, Ethiopia (which portrayed Haile Selassie and Mussolini following the Italian invasion), and causing the resignation of the New York City FTP director, Elmer Rice.

Pluralistic Censorship

This did not, however, inaugurate a program of censorship by executive edict. The most obvious characteristic of censorship in the New Deal cultural programs was that its causes and sources were plural.

State and local WPA officials were the most frequent transgressors of Harry Hopkins' wish. Three sections of a 4-panel mural at Brooklyn's Floyd Bennett Airport were removed from the wall and burned when the director of the New York City WPA, looking to purge radical artists, saw a figure who looked like Lenin and a plane with a red star that looked Soviet. The artist was fired though he brought photos to prove the Lenin lookalike was really an early parachutist and the plane a U.S. model.

In Chicago, the WPA state administrator closed Paul Green's Hymn to The Rising Sun while the opening night audience was milling around in the lobby. The play, the second production of the Chicago Negro Company, dealt with the penal system, focusing on the brutality of the chain gang. The state administrator said the play was "of such a moral character that I can't even discuss it with a member of the press." The play

later opened in New York to rave reviews.

Despite occurrences such as these, WPA projects were highly popular with audiences and critics and reviewers were generally favorable, and often interested in the development of permanent local projects on the foundation laid with WPA support.

Federal One As A Symbol

But the WPA as a whole stood as a symbol of the entire New Deal. As the '30s drew on, the WPA became the most frequent target of New Deal critics in Congress and in the press. Federal One, as a highly visible and controversial part of the WPA, was an especially good target for FDR's foes. Their attacks led to the ultimate act of censorship: the discontinuation of the projects.

By 1938, a coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats began to press against the administration's policies. Late in July, 1938, Rep. J. Parnell Thomas of the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities (known as the Dies Committee, for its chair Martin Dies) claimed that he had "startling evidence" that the Theatre and Writers' projects were "a hotbed of Communists" and "one more link in the vast and unparalleled New Deal propaganda network" that should be investigated.

In its first 6 weeks of investigations, centering on San Francisco, Boston, and New York City, the Dies Committee commanded some 500 column-inches in the New York Times (and even more in other media), and no chance for rebuttal from either project. A small parade of disaffected former WPA workers produced a litany of unsubstantiated "evidence" that the projects were tools of the Communist Party designed to breed class hatred in the U.S. The hearings followed a campaign to withdraw the FWP-produced Massachusetts state guide book, which included in its 675 pages 31 lines on the Sacco-Vanzetti case (in which two Italian immigrants and activists were executed, over nationwide protest, for killing two men in a holdup; in 1977 they were officially vindicated by the Governor of Massachusetts).

Similarly, the New Jersey state guidebook was criticized for its depiction of its 1935 shipbuilders' strike; said Rep. Thomas, the guide was "written as if there had been trouble between capital and labor." The Dies Committee reported that "Communist phraseology had been inserted in guides from the states and here in Washington."

At the same time as the Dies Committee report was issued and a further investigation funded, Rep. Clifton Woodrum declared his intention "to get the government out of the theater business." In June, 1939, the House Appropriations Committee chaired by Woodrum successfully barred any future use of WPA funds for theater activities of any kind, abruptly ending the FTP.

The chilling effect of the continuing Dies Committee hearings, the headlines about "red artists," and the increasing nearness of World War II were accompanied by a

(continued on page 6 --)

reorganization of the remaining components of Federal One, which led to its final decline. Greater authority was handed over to the states, where many projects suffered delays or derailments as local censorship took its toll.

The New Deal Legacy

Our legacy from the New Deal cultural programs is twofold. First, the programs have shown us that we *do* have a cultural commonwealth, and it's more than the patriotism stored in the establishment cultural institutions. The New Deal cultural programs demonstrated how a great many artists could be put to useful work, for their own good and the good of their neighbors, and to the lasting benefit of our country.

Second, the programs have left our government with a seemingly permanent aversion -- echoed in the establishment press and cultural institutions -- to art which serves a democratic purpose. Censorship now happens before the fact; we have been deeply educated to suppress controversy before it occurs. When the government supports artwork now, it takes no real risk with democratic disorder. Our public policy shows no trace of commitment to cultural democracy in practice; where once it was understood that the American spirit is critical and contentious, it is now written that art and politics don't mix.

Don Adams & Arlene Goldbard

New Deal Resources

There are many, many sources of information on the public cultural programs of the '30s. Aside from the records of the Projects, WPA employed many people to carry out cultural research and many of their findings have been preserved. You'll be surprised!

Institute on the Federal Theatre Project and New Deal Culture, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030; 703/323-2546.

The Institute is a treasure trove for Federal Theatre buffs, and it's now expanding to encompass other New Deal cultural agencies. The nucleus of the Institute's holdings is a collection placed on permanent loan with George Mason by the Library of Congress in 1974.

Here are: the complete production books of all Federal Theatre productions (with text, director's analysis; program; designs and production plots; photographs; and press reaction -- all bound by the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project!); 25,000 scripts reviewed by the National Service Bureau, along with script indexes (e.g., "anti-war" or "labor" plays) and readers' reports; part of the national Living Newspaper morgue; production photographs, designs and posters; research files (e.g., "Chinese Theater in America"); audio and videotaped oral history interviews with WPA vets as well as transcripts; and much, much more.

Directed by Lorraine Brown, the Institute serves as a clearinghouse for academics and others interested in New Deal cultural programs. Its Federal One newsletter includes articles on FTP revivals, New Deal cultural research, updates on oral history work and the like. The Institute itself carries out and helps coordinate oral history work with arts project veterans, and is eager to learn of New Deal vets who have not as yet been interviewed.

We got the idea for preparing this issue of Cultural Democracy from a conference the Institute sponsored back in October. Most conference participants were academics who seemed to see the New Deal as a new, potential area of specialization. It was discouraging to see the current fashion for debunking the New Deal -- at this political moment -- because it wasn't radical enough. But it was very encouraging to meet the Institute staff and sense their deep commitment to the New Deal as a living legacy and not just a topic for papers.

The Institute is interested in helping neighborhood arts groups who want to use Federal Theatre materials, or who need information on New Deal culture generally. (They helped Bob Martin to mount an exhibit of FTP materials at the last People's Theatre Festival in San Francisco in September.) Call or write with your questions and they will provide help or referrals.

Several other Washington, DC, institutions act as repositories of the work and records of the New Deal cultural agencies; Institute staff could advise you on working with them:

The Library of Congress (Washington, DC 20540) aside from the obvious books and publications, holds considerable material from the Federal Music Project, photographs from the Farm Security Administration, oral history collections (e.g., ex-slave narratives) and similar collections of recorded, visual and print materials.

The National Archives and Records Service (Washington, DC 20408) holds the administrative records of the WPA (and many other New Deal agencies); correspondence files of such notables as Harry Hopkins; recordings, programs and exhibition catalogues; and a variety of similar materials.

The National Gallery of Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560) houses the Index of American Design.

The National Museum of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560) holds some 1,500 pieces of WPA and Treasury Section artwork (500 paintings, 230 sculptures, 200 mural studies, 800-1,000 prints). Its Archive of American Art comprises interviews with artists, administrators and others, including some from the '30s, as well as collections of documents and personal papers of Holger Cahill and other art administrators. The museum has a slide and photo collection available for loan; it also carries out a loan program of original artwork.

Karel Yasko (Counselor for Fine Arts and Historic Preservation, General Services (continued on page 7 ---)

NEW DEAL RESOURCES

(continued from page 6 ---)

Administration, Washington, DC 20405) has spent the last decade as a virtual one-man campaign to save federally-subsidized artwork from the New Deal era and locate lost work -- often just before the wrecking ball flies.

There are many interesting, moving and valuable books produced by and about the New Deal cultural programs. The following are offered as basic texts, starting points, and sources of additional leads in tracking down what you want:

Hallie Flanagan's Arena (New York, Duell, Sloan and Pierce, 1940) 475 pp. The Theatre Project director's comprehensive, detailed and fascinating account of FTP work. Appendices contain a complete production record and a bibliography of contemporary coverage.

Jerre Mangione's The Dream and The Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943 (New York, Little, Brown, 1972) 418 pp. The National Coordinating Editor during the Alsberg regime conducted extensive interviews, correspondence and research in preparing an extremely detailed account of the rise and fall -- with general WPA history as well.

Richard D. McKinzie's The New Deal for Artists (Princeton University Press, 1973) 201 pp. A complete and detailed history of all the New Deal visual art programs and the people behind them, with complete footnotes and a discussion of other sources.

Francis V. O'Connor's WPA: Art for the Millions (Boston, New York Graphic Society, 1973) 317 pp. O'Connor edited this collection of essays by artists and administrators of the WPA Art Project, prepared in 1936 to portray the complete program to the public but never published. O'Connor completed the work, with biographies of all the contributors.

Milton Meltzer's Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects (New York, Delacorte, 1976) 160 pp. An easily-read summary of all the WPA projects by this 3-year FTP veteran. A good introduction, with suggestions for additional reading.

John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown's Free, Adult and Uncensored (Washington, New Republic Books, 1978) 228 pp. Not a lot of copy, but many photos, designs, posters, and the like from 17 Federal Theatre productions and the dance units -- all from the Institute on New Deal Culture, described above. The authors outline the FTP story, then present play synopses and oral history cuttings for each show.

ALPHABET SOUP

(continued from page 1 ---)

compares himself with FDR. (So far as we can tell, the extent of the similarity is that in 1932, FDR's platform including balancing the federal budget; he was no more successful at it than Reagan has been.)

The New Deal was an exciting time for

cultural development work. Under FDR's administration, the federal government undertook an array of locally-based, democratic cultural programs that were revolutionary at the time and never repeated since. Highly controversial, they waned by the end of the '30s as the build-up for World War II began to divert enthusiasm for New Deal programs and the House Un-American Activities Committee led a witchhunt that only hinted at what was to follow during and after the War.

A Modest Beginning

George Biddle is credited with first suggesting a federal arts program to FDR. A classmate of Roosevelt's at Groton and Harvard, Biddle studied painting with Diego Rivera and found inspiration in the Mexican murals of the 1920's for a socially-conscious public art in the U.S. In 1933 he wrote to FDR with the suggestion that he and a team of muralists embellish the new Justice Dept. building in Washington.

The notion of public artwork wasn't new to Roosevelt: During FDR's governorship, New York state relief director Harry Hopkins had allocated funds to New York City's College Art Association to employ around 100 artists in settlement houses. FDR turned Biddle's idea over to the Treasury, responsible for overseeing construction. There, a lawyer-turned-painter on the staff -- Edward Bruce -- was asked for advice.

With approval for Biddle's Justice project out of the way, organizational work was left to Bruce, who developed the much larger program he would oversee: the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP).

PWAP was part of the Civil Works Administration (CWA), an experimental program in work relief to provide the unemployed with public jobs during the bitter winter of 1933-34. The PWAP employed artists to create work which would embellish public buildings -- including one painting for each member of Congress, as well as public schools "which had never owned a picture," orphanages, public libraries, museums and practically every type of publicly-owned building. PWAP exhibits in many cities were well-attended; 33,000 people turned out for an opening in Los Angeles alone.

PWAP ended in April, 1934, along with the CWA. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) had been established in 1933 to bolster the efforts of state and local governments through federal grants to support relief. Units of artists who had received support from state or local governments also received support through FERA grants. Many former PWAP artists continued their work with FERA support. Some 450 theater workers formed small performing units that played spot bookings in some major cities from 1933-35.

In the fall of 1934, building on the success of PWAP, Edward Bruce was named to head the new Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture -- later known as the Section of Fine Arts. The Section was responsible for fitting out federal buildings with artwork. Except for a brief period in 1939, when the U.S. had a short-lived 1% for art provision, allocations (if any) were made
(continued on page 8 ---)

ALPHABET SOUP

(continued from page 7 ---)

building-by-building.

Many Treasury Section artists were picked by competition: 190 were held in which 15,000 artists submitted over 40,000 sketches. Eventually, 1,371 commissions came from the Treasury.

In the spring of 1935, the Treasury Section introduced its Treasury Relief Art Program (TRAP) with a \$530,000 relief fund grant from the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Bruce felt he could overlook the WPA's requirement that 90% of TRAP artists be drawn from the relief rolls, insisting "There are not enough artists on relief to do our job and maintain the quality for which we stand." When he was made to adhere to this condition, he slowed hiring, holding the TRAP payroll to 289. American Artists Congress secretary Stuart Davis protested: "By what authority does the administration of TRAP arbitrarily refuse employment to artists of professional ability?" Artists' protests throughout 1936 forced TRAP's payroll up to 356 -- its highest level -- but never to the authorized level of 450.

FEDERAL ONE

The WPA's Federal Project Number One was the largest and most important of the New Deal cultural programs.

WPA's philosophy was to put the unemployed back to work which would serve the public good at the same time that it helped to conserve the skills and self-esteem of American workers.

Though many had reservations about developing effective arts projects that could employ thousands of artists in so little time, 5 national directors were selected and met in Washington for the first time in the spring of 1935. Under Ellen Woodward of the WPA's Division of Women's and Professional Projects, they set to work right away establishing the 5 major divisions of Federal One, as the arts programs were known. At their peak one year later, some 40,000 WPA artists were working across the U.S.

Federal Art Project

At its height in the spring of 1936, the FAP comprised 5,300 visual artists and related professionals. Directed by Holger Cahill, the FAP included: a murals project that designed and executed more than 2,500 murals in hospitals, schools and other public buildings; an easel painting division which produced nearly 108,000 paintings; a sculpture division which produced some 18,000 pieces; a graphic art workshop; a photography project that mostly served to document the WPA; a poster division; and a stained glass division centered in New York.

In addition to these divisions, the FAP compiled a 22,000-plate Index of American Design, dispatching artists to record a wide variety of American design from colonization on. Its Scenic Design Division provided models of historic stage sets and architectural models for planning and educational use. And its Art Service Unit provided illustrations and the like to the WPA's writers, mu-

sicians and theaters. The Exhibitions Division organized public exhibitions of the work of all WPA artists and students of WPA-employed art teachers.

The FAP employed hundreds of teachers in its Art Teaching Division in settlement houses, community centers and other institutions. In the New York City area, an estimated 50,000 children and adults participated in classes each week. The FAP also set up and began to staff 100 arts centers in 22 states; they included galleries, classrooms and community workshops; an estimated 8 million people participated in these centers' programs. The centers received around \$825,000 in local support in addition to federal funds, and some have survived 'til today.

Federal Writers Project

The FWP employed 6,686 writers at its peak in April, 1936, with active projects in all 48 states and the District of Columbia. The FWP produced some 3.5 million copies of 800 titles by October, 1941.

FWP was directed by Henry Alsberg from its inception in 1935 through 1939 and is best known for its American Guide Series. Guides were to be prepared for every state plus Alaska, Guam, Puerto Rico and Washington, DC, utilizing FWP employees' skills in research, writing and editing. Each guide included detailed descriptions of towns and villages, waterways, historic sites and the like and often extensive collections of local history and folklore. Many similar guides were published for localities.

With the exception of the ponderous 2-volume guide to Washington, DC (the 1st FWP showpiece publication), all the guides were published at the expense of local cosponsors. They are the most comprehensive encyclopedias of Americana ever published; some have been updated and are available today.

The FWP also produced studies of architecture, science for children, the American Indian and other topics. Among the most important were collections of oral histories. FWP writers also served research, writing and editorial functions for government agencies.

Federal Music Project

The Music Project employed nearly 16,000 musicians at its peak. Public performances were given by orchestras, chamber groups, choral and opera units, concert, military and dance bands and theater orchestras. It was estimated that 5,000 performances were presented each month before some 3 million people. The music projects had local cosponsors -- schools or colleges, government or civic groups -- and small charges helped meet costs. The FMP was directed by Nikolai Sokoloff, former conductor of the Cleveland Symphony.

WPA musicians also led classes in rural areas and inner city neighborhoods; in 1939, it was estimated that 132,000 children and adults received instruction in 26 states as well as Washington, DC. A Composers Forum Laboratory program in several cities afforded composers the opportunity to hear their work performed with complete instrumentation. The Index of American Composers paralleled the cataloguing work of the Design Index; it contained 5,500 works by 1,500 composers.

(continued on page 9 ---)

Extensive work was done in recording folk music, especially in the Southeastern and South Central states. WPA workers provided help in music therapy experimentation; they also served as copyists, arrangers and librarians, expanding music availability.

Federal Theatre Project

FTP was the most controversial of all the Federal One units. Under the direction of Hallie Flanagan (an old friend of Harry Hopkins' from Grinnell College in Iowa), the FTP's units presented more than 1,000 performances each month before nearly a million people -- 78% free-of-charge and many for their first time. It produced over 1,200 plays in its 4 years, introducing 100 new playwrights. In the spring of 1936, FTP employed 12,700 theater workers.

FTP was also the shortest-lived of the units; it was banned by Congress in the WPA appropriation bill pass in June, 1939.

The FTP units were formed wherever sufficient numbers of unemployed theater people could be found. A commitment to developing truly regional theaters was fundamental to FTP's leadership. State units were established in 31 states and New York City; several states, in turn, established more than one company or unit in their jurisdictions.

In addition to producing theater units, the FTP undertook a regular radio series -- "Federal Theatre of the Air" -- which, Flanagan estimated, reached 10 million each week on all the major networks. FTP's National Service Bureau provided research, consultation and play-reading services to all units. The Federal Theatre Magazine united the disparate components, detailing and critiquing the work of units nationwide.

Striving to serve as a true people's theater and to attract audiences not previously interested in theater, the FTP encouraged experimentation in form and content. The "Living Newspaper" emerged as a hallmark of the FTP. WPA journalists researched pressing social concerns of the day; in turn, the productions themselves made headlines. Living Newspapers involved large casts, innovative staging and use of media, and were produced (often with local variations) in theaters all over the U.S. The most famous "edition" was "One-Third of a Nation," which gave form to FDR's statement "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad and ill-nourished." It was produced in 11 cities.

Special efforts were made to develop new theaters nationally. Negro Theatre Units were established in Seattle, Hartford, Philadelphia, Newark, Los Angeles, New York City, Raleigh, Birmingham, Boston, San Francisco and Chicago -- performing both in their home theaters and on tour. Other units produced foreign language theater -- Yiddish, German, French, Spanish and Italian. A few cities had dance units.

The success of state and local units varied, as did their mode of work. In many rural areas, where there were few unemployed "professional" theater workers, attempts were made to place professional directors,

technicians and actors in communities to act as resources for local amateur work or to train other professionals. Several state units and regional offices did both, providing community-based theater groups with help as well as producing work through their units.

In addition to the four main arts projects, Federal One also included an Historical Records Survey -- a national effort to collect and conserve records for historic purposes.

DECLINE AND FALL

Harry Hopkins left the WPA to become Secretary of Commerce and was succeeded by Col. Francis Harrington, from WPA's Administrative Manual Division. Until his death late in 1940, Harrington oversaw the disassembly of the arts projects he despised, whereupon he was replaced by Howard Hunter.

A reorganization plan for WPA was passed in June, 1939, renaming it the "Work Projects Administration" and giving each project 2 months to find a local sponsor to pick up 25% of the costs. It was thought the projects would automatically die, but even the controversial FWP found sponsors for 46 of 48 projects.

By 1941, employment in the FWP had dropped, but others showed increases.

The reorganization of WPA and the storm of Federal One controversies had danged the projects' work radically. The national offices were reduced to "technical advisor" status, and state units turned most employees to non-cultural work. Recreation guides became the meat of the FWP, and the wartime economy finally ended all artwork but that related to the war effort. The WPA was formally ended by FDR in a proclamation in 1942.

FEEDBACK

Aesthetics and People's Theater

In NAPNOC notes #16 we covered the People's Theater Festival, and in a section headed "Politics and Experimentation" (page 3) talked about a panel discussion among political and experimental theater people. Misha Berson, who moderated that panel, has written to say that we missed the point. Here are some excerpts from Misha's letter:

"What I had in mind...was an exchange of aesthetic philosophies and ideas, a discussion about both content and form. One thing that is clear to me as a critic is that a lot of theatre that is socially conscious is not very interesting or compelling artistically, and loses a great deal of impact because of that. There is some wonderful experimental theatre that is extremely short on content, or that is more concerned with being 'unmediated'; that is, non-directive so that the audience can make their own meanings. What I hoped to do was create a situation where these different kinds of artists could share their approaches and influence one another... Joan Holden was interested in being on the panel because she's interested in experimenting with form -- this is what makes the S.F. Mime Troupe continually exciting, what keeps them from being didactic and predictable...

(continued on page 10 ---)

FEEDBACK

(continued from page 9 ---)

"Some performance artists/experimentors are fascinated by work like the Mime Troupe's, interested in the political level too, but their artistic allegiance is to another kind of experience. Yet they often have some very potent techniques for making exciting theatre, techniques that would enliven and energize a lot of political theatre work that is earnest and well-meaning but just not captivating in the way that theatre must be, or else why are you saying it on stage? Why not write a pamphlet, give a lecture, if the medium of theatre isn't being utilized to the fullest to reach your audience?

"I think that aesthetics must be a consideration of a festival like the (PTF). For theatre workers to become more imaginative, add to their vocabulary of stage images, explore beyond the confines of their own work and the work of their immediate peers, is a great challenge, and an opportunity a festival like that can provide. It was no surprise that this panel attracted more people -- and more participating artists -- than any other at the Festival.

"...It is not antithetical to the idea of people's theatre or cultural democracy to be concerned with having questions of aesthetics raised...The discussion of political responsibility is part of this, but to deny that aesthetic considerations are a vital part of theatre, or to relegate them to some entirely separate arena is a missed opportunity for synthesis and growth."

CULTURED..... PEARLS.....

Working Overtime

By all accounts, Frank Hodsoll, the new NEA Chairman, is putting in long hours. He's studying the grant applications that panelists have already recommended for the National Council on the Arts' (NCA) approval. If he doesn't like what he sees, he's sending them back to the programs for staff justification.

Rumor has it that Hodsoll is being completely literal about program guidelines, including the infamous and indefinable requirement that projects be "professional." Neighborhood artists know that this loaded

term and its partner-in-crime "quality" have long been used to dismiss community cultural work that cares more for cultural participation and vitality than for shoring up such relics of the establishment arts world as its top-heavy star system.

So far, these grants--as many as one out of ten in some programs--have been *deferred* or tabled, not formally rejected. It's not clear how they will be presented at the NCA's February meeting. Technically, the NEA's granting authority rests with the Chair, who is only *advised* by Council and panels.

It's ironic that Hodsoll is reviewing applications post-panel, since he and the Reagan administration have declared their commitment to the panel system. In his Senate confirmation hearing Hodsoll said, "*It is certainly my intention to continue the panel system, which, as you know better than I, involves selecting peers from various disciplines without regard to party affiliation and with regard only to merit. We will continue that.*" The report of the Presidential Task Force on the Arts and Humanities contains a similar recommendation: "*The professional panel review process is an effective and fair method of recommending Endowment grants, and should be continued.*"

We have heard that Hodsoll believes the present Endowment panels are "stacked" with people who might be critical of the administration, though panels are charged with making judgements as to "professionalism" and "quality," not politics. Hodsoll himself told the Senate that "*I view this program (the NEA) as not partisan,*" but we bet that until the panels change to include more right-wingers the Chairman will be reviewing their recommendations himself, and making up his own mind.

We'll be covering the February 5-7 NCA meeting and trying to find out whether panel recommendations have been permanently "deferred." In the meantime, if you're an NEA panelist and find that your recommendations have been overturned -- or if you're a grantee and find that the panel's recommendation to fund your project has been ignored -- you might consider contacting your elected representative to suggest that the Endowment's commitment to democratic procedure is not at all as it's made to seem.

Don Adams and Arlene Goldberg

NAPNOC

neighborhood arts programs
national organizing committee

P.O. Box 11440, Baltimore, MD 21239



Lincoln Cushing
5703 Oak Grove
Oakland, CA 94618