

1990

The Uneasiest State: Art, Culture, and Society in New Deal Louisiana, 1933-1943. (Volumes I and II).

Richard B. Megraw

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Megraw, Richard B., Ph.D.

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The Uneasiest State:
Art, Culture, and Society in New Deal Louisiana, 1933-1943

Volume I

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of History

by
Rich Megraw
B.S., Missouri Valley College, 1979
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1984
December 1990

To the Memory of my Mother
and
the Future of my Sons

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Of the many debts incurred during the completion of this project, a few require special mention.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vii
INTRODUCTION	viii
VOLUME I	
CHAPTER ONE: THE HOLINESS OF BEAUTY: ELLSWORTH WOODWARD AND THE PUBLIC WORKS OF ART PROJECT, 1933-1934	1
1. A Brass Bound Idealist	1
2. "The Most Perfect Expressions of Locality"	15
3. "A Native Product"	25
4. "One Hell of a Job"	39
5. "The Dying Scenes of the South"	50
6. Voyage of the <u>Torrent</u>	61
CHAPTER TWO: WALL-TO-WALL LOUISIANA: TREASURY SECTION MURALS AND THE SOUTHERN FUTURE, 1934-1943	77
1. "Cotton Time"	77
2. "Painting Section"	81
3. "Are There No Chickens?"	93
4. "A Southern Pattern"	104
5. Evangeline's Return	116
CHAPTER THREE: THE NEW HORIZON IN AMERICAN ART: THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT, 1935-1943	167
1. "The Shooting of Huey Long"	167
2. Holger Cahill and the New Art	177
3. Every Man an Artist	187
4. Mr. Stanton's Attitude	207
5. Mrs. Durieux's Enthusiasm	238
6. "American Art For EVERY American Home"	250
VOLUME II	
CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROMANTIC ORLEANIAN: LYLE SAXON AND THE FEDERAL WRITERS PROJECT, 1935-1943	268
1. "To Chart America and Possess It"	268
2. The Width of a Mardi Gras Mask	283
3. The Second Most Popular Man in Louisiana	296
4. Papa Saxon's Literary Plantation	323

CHAPTER FIVE: LAST EFFORTS AND LOST STRUGGLES	352
1. A View From the Quarter	352
2. "Gay Times in Old New Orleans"	354
3. "God What a Nuisance!"	370
4. "The Real Under-the-Crust Louisiana"	381
5. The Dillard History	393
6. Farewell to the Irish Channel	407
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 426
VITA	444

ABSTRACT

During the Great Depression artists working in programs funded by the federal government roamed the nation wielding brushes, jotting notes, and pointing cameras in an attempt to define and characterize American society. Never before and not since has this country conducted so intensive a survey of itself, or one so controversial. Federal patronage of the arts occurred during an anxious period of political and cultural turmoil, a turmoil inherent in the story of the Arts Projects themselves. The very structure, organization, composition, execution, and objectives of the arts agencies mirror the tensions of the age. The artists' selection or avoidance of subjects, even the manner by which the fruits of their labors were disseminated among the American people, reflects the turbulence of the 1930s. Nowhere is this more evident than in Huey Long's Louisiana, where the government art program recorded some of its greatest achievements and most bitter disappointments. This dissertation is an interdisciplinary analysis of four federal programs in Louisiana, a state then undergoing rapid political and social transformation. Each of the projects, individually and collectively, not only provides a valuable glimpse into the character of American society in crisis, but also addresses many of the enduring questions of this Republic.

INTRODUCTION

During the nineteen thirties, to combat the dislocation and hardship of the Great Depression, the Roosevelt administration operated a massive and unprecedented work relief program. It paid people to sweep streets, clean parks, and clear forests, build hospitals, dam rivers, pave roads, renovate schools, dig ditches, drain swamps, and bridge canals. But the activities were not confined to the pickaxe or the shovel or the steam crane. As early as December, 1933, New Dealers began to sponsor so-called "white collar" projects, among them one that paid artists to paint and etch and carve and print. This was only the beginning. By 1935 the federal government had become the largest and most controversial patron of the arts in America. Critics howled from every point on the ideological compass. Conservative art academicians feared for the future of American painting and sculpture. Other observers, hostile to the President and his administration, suspected that the nation's artists had been bought off. Government patronage, they charged, could only result in so much propaganda glorifying the New Deal. Yet, when it was all over, there was agreement on at least one point. What took place during the ten years between 1933 and 1943 represented the largest experiment in the arts in American history.

This dissertation is about that experiment, or at least the part of it undertaken in Huey Long's Louisiana. From limited objectives and modest appropriations, the government art programs grew into something few suspected at the start. Originally, they represented stop-gap measures designed to conserve artists' skills. Ultimately, they became

part of a massive survey of American life, creating a portrait of the nation whose forms, themes, and subjects mirrored the industrial society they depicted. But this would not occur easily. The arts projects operated at a pivotal moment in history, reflecting in their separate aims, ambitions, and forms, the uneasy transition of American society from an individualized society of small producers to an organized nation of industrial consumers. Such tensions were easily visible in New Deal Louisiana, where Huey Long opposed the expansion of federal political power. At the same time and for similar reasons, a series of local writers and artists would defend the old methods of art and literature. They could only delay what they could defeat in a compelling struggle that chronicled the emergence of a national culture rendered through industrial methods of artistic creation, one that broke fundamentally with traditional American assumptions of political and cultural localism.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOLINESS OF BEAUTY: ELLSWORTH WOODWARD AND THE PUBLIC WORKS OF ART PROJECT, 1933-1934

1. A Brass Bound Idealist

It began with a jolt. Two sharp whistle blasts and the engine lurched forward. For a moment the train hovered between rest and motion, then, each in turn, the cars snapped forward with a clang of tautened couplers. "The Southern Crescent" creaked slowly out of Union Station in New Orleans. Billows of black smoke gusted from the locomotive, spewing bits of undigested coal and sprays of warm water. Well wishers and passersby slid backward along the coach windows. Black men in white coats muscled bags into overhead racks. Conductors called for tickets. The train clicked faster, chugging north along the sloping convex arc between New Orleans and New York. In a Pullman berth sat Ellsworth Woodward, a seventy-two year old artist with a high balding forehead, hands folded in his lap. He had been called to Washington, as so many others, by the industrial calamity of the Great Depression. This was in December, 1933.

Hard by the Rhode Island line, Ellsworth Woodward was born in Seeconk, Massachusetts, seven days before First Bull Run. With his brother, William, two years senior, the boy developed an interest in sketching. Childhood fancies became professional aspirations after the family visited the art gallery at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. William enrolled in the Rhode Island School of Design the

year it opened. Ellsworth followed in the class behind. Graduated in 1880, he remained at the school as an instructor for the next four years, married his childhood sweetheart, Mary Bell Johnson, and in 1885 took his bride to New Orleans, joining William on the faculty of Tulane University. Together the brothers developed one of the first collegiate art curricula of its kind. Ellsworth remained at the University as an assistant professor of drawing and painting until 1889, the year he accepted a position as instructor of art at Sophie Newcomb College, a newly created womens' academy affiliated with Tulane. Two years later Woodward became Director of the Newcomb School of Art, a position he held until his retirement in 1931.¹

The younger Woodward was a study in New England rectitude. Of the two brothers he was by far the more reticent. Cool and erect and of patrician features, his carriage bore the stamp of what men in his day

¹ As yet Woodward has no scholarly biographer, though he is the subject of numerous articles and theses. See Estelle Barkmeyer, "Ellsworth Woodward and His Work," (M.A. Thesis, Tulane University, 1942); Lillian Francis Boyer, "The Etchings of Ellsworth Woodward: A Catalogue Raisonné," (M.A. Thesis, Louisiana State University, 1982). See also "Ellsworth Woodward," Artists' Files, Department of Curatorials, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana, [hereinafter cited by artists name-Artists' Files, THNOC]. This is a thick file full of assorted bits of biographical materials such as chronologies, capsule biographies, exhibition catalogues, and photocopied newspaper articles. See also, Isaac Monroe Cline, "Contemporary Arts and Artists of New Orleans and Their Work," (Reprinted From Biennial Report of the Louisiana State Museum, 1924); Mary W. Mount, Some Notables of New Orleans: Biographical and Descriptive Sketches of the Artists and Their Work, (New Orleans, 1896), pp.159-60; Lillian Norvell, "Ellsworth Woodward," New Orleanian 1 (August 1931), pp.21-2; Frank Eugene Ford, "Artist in Stone," ibid., 3 (March 1934), pp. 14-6; Ben Earl Looney, "Historical Sketch of Art in Louisiana," Louisiana Historical Quarterly, 18(April 1924), p. 390; Anthony Radcliffe, "Some Artists of Louisiana," The Southern Magazine, 4(June 1937), pp.11-2, 35; Ethel Hutson to S.A. Trufaut, May 15, 1934, Ellsworth Woodward Papers, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, Box 1, [hereinafter cited as Woodward Papers, Box #, TU; Untitled biographical sketch, Woodward Papers, Box 4, TU].

called character. His portraits, most of them taken in profile, revealed an intensity of the eye and a strong jawline ending in a goateed chin. He had fastidious habits. His tastes were elegant. An even temper ruled him, broken only rarely by the utterance of oaths no stronger than "Jumpin' Je-hosaphat!" He rose early and retired late. Even late in life he left his home on Pine Street in uptown New Orleans no later than 6:30 every morning. He walked a few blocks to the Zimple Grocery, "made" the daily groceries, then returned for breakfast and the morning paper. At 7:30 he headed for the Newcomb campus, and remained in his classroom until four in the afternoon, spelled only by a thirty minute lunch. Often following the dinner hour he returned to Newcomb where he taught night classes on a host of subjects.²

His outward dignity and reticence masked an energetic soul. Woodward drove himself relentlessly, sometimes to the point of breaking. "If the pace at which I force myself through the routine of the endless weeks does not slacken," he confided to a friend, "I shall wake up some fine day in a padded cell." Enormous hands punctuated his animated lecture style. They clutched huge fistfuls of air before him as he wrestled for words. Corded muscles on each hand knotted around the knuckles. His brow furrowed into an inverted "V" above the nose. His activities were legion. He was at once teacher, practitioner, and promoter of art. He had no hobbies to speak of, no favored diversions. He joined the Round Table Club, but attended infrequently. Instead his

² "Ellsworth Woodward," Artists Files, (THNOC); Woodward Papers, Box 1, (TU); Untitled biographical sketch in *ibid.*, Box 4, (TU); "The Man Who Molded Newcomb Pottery," Times-Picayune, (New Orleans), March 27, 1987; Item, (New Orleans), February 28, March 1, March 2, 1939; Tribune, (New Orleans), March 1, 1939; States, (New Orleans), February 28, March 1, March 2, 1939; Times-Picayune, March 1, 1939.

one pastime seemed to be the sound of his wife's voice. She often read to him for stretches lasting well into the evening. They covered a wealth of subjects in various forms: biographies, romances, novels, histories. "She is my theater," he once commented, "my opera and everything else rolled into one."³

Woodward held dominion over his Newcomb classroom in a benevolent suzerainty spanning four decades. He awed his students. One called him "God on roller skates." Another insisted that he had opened the whole word before her. His work absorbed him. He attacked it with a zealot's singleness of purpose. Eyes flashing, he flitted birdlike among his students. "Look here," he often told them, "and I will show you something worth seven dollars someday." Most remembered his unflinching devotion to the highest standards, others his unflagging classroom patience. A paternal bond developed. The Woodwards had no children. Instead they drew the Newcomb students around them in familial embrace, often calling them to tea or to dinner. Students were always welcomed on sketching trips into the hinterland.⁴

Woodward painted all his life in the impressionist style. He studied briefly abroad, in Munich, under the tutelage of Carl Marr and Richard Fehr. He did most of his work in water color. Some said the crush of his teaching duties and other art-related activities prevented

³ Ellsworth Woodward to Edwin L. Stephens, April 1, 1912, Edwin L. Stephens Papers, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, Box 1 [hereinafter cited as Stephens Papers, TU]. "Ellsworth Woodward," Artists Files, (THNOC); Item, February 28, 1939; Item-Tribune, (New Orleans), June 5, 1913; Times-Picayune, June 29, 1913.

⁴ "The Man Who Molded Newcomb Pottery," Times-Picayune, March 27, 1987; Item-Tribune, June 7, 1931; Suzanne Ormond and Mary E. Levine, Louisiana's Art Nouveau: The Crafts of the Newcomb Style, (Gretna, 1976), p.120.

studies in more painstaking media, though he did produce a substantial number of etchings. His work sold well and received critical applause; but Woodward never achieved distinction as a great artistic innovator.⁵ Instead he left his greatest mark as a teacher of art and a missionary on its behalf. He prophesied the dawn of a new epoch in American art and a new role in society for the American artist. He venerated beauty and revered locale. He was an unyielding environmental determinist and a committed educator. But above all he was a passionate idealist whose character traits and social thought comprised an aesthetic Bible he thumped for fifty years. His sermons began invariably with beauty. "Art as I understand," he wrote, "is truth made visible, and this at once becomes order, harmony, fitness—that is to say beauty." Woodward believed that every living soul craved beauty. Its civilizing influence, he insisted, raised men above the animals: "The love of beauty is essentially a part of our nature, and art is the means of its expression. Poetry, painting, sculpture, and music are each a language which speak to our inner life. All have the strongest possible claim upon us, for it is through their instrumentality that we escape a debasing materialism."⁶

Woodward found in nature the purest expression of beauty. He filled his sketchbooks with landscapes and punctuated his lectures with

⁵ William R. Cullison, Two Southern Impressionists: An Exhibition of the Work of the Woodward Brothers, William and Ellsworth, (New Orleans, 1984), ix-xi; Boyer, "The Etchings of Ellsworth Woodward."

⁶ This discussion of Woodward's aesthetics is based on various speeches collected in the Woodward Papers at Tulane University, Box 2. Subsequent reference will be to "title," Woodward Speeches, (TU), thus, "Everyday Art," "What Has Art to do with Practical Things," Woodward Speeches, (TU); Ellsworth Woodward to E.L. Stephens, April 1, 1912, Stephens Papers, Box 1, (TU).

allusions to the beauty of nature. Nature was his Eden, his ideal Paradise soiled only by Adam's muddy touch. "The world's beauty is increased by the abatement of humanity's ugliness," he insisted, "for nature is always beautiful. Ugliness is only kept alive by human agency. It is therefore no light matter, this gospel of the holiness of beauty."⁷

He uttered these words urgently, for even as he spoke them, Woodward warned of a great corruption stealing across the land. With John Ruskin and William Morris, he shared an anxiety deepened by the quickening pace of industrialization. Industrialization, he believed, threatened nature and subverted beauty by spreading cheaply made objects offensive to the eye and damaging to the spirit. It lowered art tastes and retarded the progress of civilization. To Woodward the advent of the machine age represented the nadir in American art history, a thirty year darkness stunting national artistic growth from 1850 to 1880. The industrial movement, he lamented, had caused a schism within the Church of Beauty. The machine had co-opted the place once reserved to artisans and skilled craftsmen. It drove them from the cathedral and opened an unnatural breach between the lesser and higher arts.⁸ Yet Woodward did not damn industrialization as an unregenerate evil. Rather he regarded industrialization as a mis-directed force of great potential value.

⁷ Untitled biographical sketch, Woodward Papers, Box 4, (TU); "What Has Art to do with Practical Things," Woodward Speeches, (TU).

⁸ E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, (New York, 1977), especially, 32-40, 88-107; Peter Stansky, William Morris, (Oxford, 1983), 60-73. Indeed, Woodward followed Ruskin and Morris so closely that he often indulged a rare if mild vanity by addressing his close friend and long correspondent, E. L. Stephens, as "Ruskin" while signing his letters, "E.W. Turner." "Everyday Art," Woodward Speeches, (TU).

Industry, he asserted, represented the necessary foundation of any great art center in the modern era. "Art is the child of busy industrial cities," he reasoned, since enlightened arts thrived upon the rivalry between patrons competing to obtain objects of the highest artistic value. With a nod to William Graham Sumner, unfettered competition governed Woodward's art world. Wealth obtained through industrial progress would naturally draw the best artists in America to the industrialized cities where each, of necessity, would produce his very best art. Schools would then develop to train lesser talents and to instruct the general public in the lessons of art appreciation. Museums and galleries would be established for public viewing. Higher standards of art would evolve within the community, and beauty would flourish within the heart of the industrial beast. The lion could be made to lie down with the lamb.⁹

The issue turned on the promise of industrial design. To refine the crudities of earlier years, Woodward planned to reconcile art and industry through the application of elegant design to the manufacturing process. "The struggle for industrial survival, not to mention national expression, is pitched not in the world of easel pictures," he observed, "but in the immeasurable field of art lending beauty to industry." These were lessons learned at the Rhode Island School of Design whose opening the year before Woodward matriculated, together with other signal developments such as the Centennial Exhibition, represented the first gray streaks of light across the thirty-year artistic darkness. Beyond these a world of hope lit up before him. Working in tandem, the craftsman and the industrialist could forge an alliance of untold

⁹ "The Lesser Arts," "Art in Education," Woodward Speeches, (TU).

benefits, one capable of placing quality art within the grasp of every American citizen. Industrial designers would staunch the long hemorrhage of ugly objects pumped into the national marketplace, salve wounds inflicted by ugliness upon the public spirit, and demolish those artificial barriers erected between practitioners of the lesser and higher arts. The craftsman would reclaim his pew in Woodward's Cathedral of Beauty and resume a vital role in society as practitioner and promoter art. Even more important, Woodward asserted, industrial design promised to create a national environment conducive to an appreciation of beauty, the essential basis for any elevation of American art standards.¹⁰

Nothing in all of Woodward's teachings ever surpassed the importance he placed on environment, keystone of his entire aesthetic edifice. "Art begins at home," he repeatedly insisted, "We are learning that the museum and the picture gallery are not the natural and exclusive home of art, but that civilized life demands it in its daily routine." Nothing would do for him but decoration with finely woven drapes hung properly, silverware of the finest craftsmanship, or harmony between the architectural structure of the house and the interior furnishings of the home. Here, he reasoned, were taken the first rudimentary steps along the path to a higher appreciation of art. "It seems reasonable... to conclude that when the interests of the community are largely embarked in artistic manufactures, that appreciation and sympathy with the art idea should be greatly expanded and prepared to understand that higher form of art which finds expression in painting,

¹⁰ "What Has Art to do With Practical Things," "Art in Education," "The Lesser Arts," Woodward Speeches, (TU).

sculpture, and noble architecture," he concluded. This was a vital lesson. Woodward considered an appreciation for the lesser arts exhibited in the home to be far more than a modest axiom for better living. Nor did it simply represent a means toward understanding higher forms of art. It was instead a tenet of public virtue. "You as citizens may be indirectly responsible for the low standards of public taste if you patronize the ill-conditioned products of tasteless manufactures," he charged. Such neglect depressed the public spirit. It also depressed Ellsworth Woodward. Few experiences saddened him more than "a contemplative walk through a neighborhood where well-to-do people live in total forgetfulness of the happiness that may be added to living through harmonious form, order, and a thrift regard for cleanly streets... somehow moral health is more possible with fitting environment." Once Americans began to appreciate art in the home, Woodward prophesied, there would blossom nationwide an all-encompassing public aesthetic of magisterial elegance, something on the order of the Chicago Public Library:

simplicity, permanency, dignity, beauty, national honor and power typified in couchant lions guarding the giant staircase, whose glowing marble is inscribed with the names and deeds of heroes. The walls pictured with mystic allegory where poets, sages, and artists, each through the agency of his genius wait upon inspiration. Religion manifested in majesty more eloquent than words, upon walls which speak of the imagination as did those of the mother church. Vast rooms for the student every furnishing of which leads the mind away from the sordid and common. Rooms for children where entire freedom and association with the beautiful exert their benign influence...this treasure house which has sculptured upon its frontal: 'Built By the People and Dedicated to Learning'¹¹

¹¹ "What Has Art to do with Practical Things," Woodward Speeches, (TU).

Environment also determined the nature of an artist's work. "The beginnings of all great and viril (sic) epochs of artistic expression have been at home and have dealt with life and environment as it lay at hand," Woodward asserted. He raised the subject often in gallery talks and organizational speeches. He made it the bedrock principle of his classroom lectures and studio discussions. He called this environmental determinism the "genius loci." Woodward borrowed the phrase from the title of a book written by Violet Piaget under the pseudonym of Vernon Lee. He treasured the volume and re-read it often, Woodward explained, because "it paralleled so nicely my own romantic soul." Piaget defined the term as "a substance of the heart and mind, a spiritual reality," describing the attachment of a sensitive soul to a specific locale. "I have compared the feelings we can have for places with the feelings awakened in us by certain of our friends--feelings of love and gratitude--and have the effect of turning locality from a geographical expression into something of one's very own," she wrote. These were emotions stirred in Woodward whenever he viewed the southern landscape, especially in and around his adopted city. He had no sooner arrived in New Orleans, he often reminisced, before he fell under its charm: "I tramped the City from Carrollton to the Barracks, a sketch book in one hand and the romances of Cable in the other."¹²

¹² "Everyday Art," "The Genius Loci," Woodward Speeches, (TU); Vernon Lee, Genius Loci; Notes On Places, (London, 1899), p.6. Woodward once joked about his intense devotion to the southern countryside by recalling the bitter cold of his boyhood winters. "No one forced by the rigors of the New England climate to pour a kettle of boiling water over the kitchen pump as the first move toward the family breakfast can look upon a palm tree unmoved," he explained. Quoted in "The Man Who Molded Newcomb Pottery," Times-Picayune, March, 27, 1987.

Characteristically, Woodward elevated the emotionalism of the genius loci into an unyielding aesthetic principle. Since artists were products of their own locale, he reasoned, they were best suited to interpret their immediate environment. Outsiders could appreciate the beauty of a given place, but they could not render it artistically without exhibiting the severe limitations of alien sensibilities:

In a country as immense as ours in which climatic conditions and geographical place differences exert their influences, it is, or should be, manifest that art expression will assume wide variety of application. Out of these conditions which background our lives, grows love and loyalty to locality--the genius loci which is the essence of art as well as patriotism. The land of the palm and orange, of arid plains and towering mountains must find their true expression through the hearts of their indwellers.¹³

During an era dominated by a persistent awe of European culture, this made Woodward something of an artistic nationalist, albeit a hesitant one. He insisted that American artists, products of the American environment, were superior interpreters of American subjects. "The art of other lands cannot express for us our sentiments or ideals beyond the intellectual recognition of principles of universal application," he wrote. Still, Woodward accepted an inferior status for American art in the world. "The American is an idealist," he insisted, "but he is not art-minded. Generations must pass before he will be." Nevertheless, Woodward did declare independence from the Continent and announce the birth of an indigenous form of national expression:

So important and unmistakable have been the changes in the status of American art in recent times that when its history comes to be written, these present years will be noted as

¹³ "Art in Colleges, " Woodward Speeches, (TU).

the beginning of our National School. That School which has become detached from foreign influence and stands for expression of our National character.¹⁴

Back of this theorem loomed a strong sectional corollary. Speaking to a meeting of the Southern States Art League, he warned of the folly of southerners who painted in the north: "When you southerners go to Cape Cod, Providence, Cape Gloucester, you can paint your heads off, but New England artists can paint these scenes better than you ever will." Then he provided equal time. "No Yankee artist, however skillful can paint the South," insisted, "He has never known the sights and sounds and scents in his childhood as you have." Woodward held the belief so firmly he applied it to himself:

I have spent fifty years in the South--I'm more southern than Jeff Davis in some respects--and when I make annual pilgrimages to various parts of the South...and wake up in a Pullman in the morning and see the lovely Southern scene with its incomparable trees and flowers...I think what masterpieces I could paint--if only I were a Southerner-born!¹⁵

The beauty of nature, the value of design, the importance of environment, these all played key roles in Woodward's plan to raise the nation's artistic standards. He insisted that tastes could only be raised from the bottom up through homes adhering to standards handed

¹⁴ "What Has Art to do with Practical Things," "The Lesser Arts," Woodward Speeches, (TU). Woodward repeatedly emphasized what a long evolutionary process lay ahead of the country in the struggle to raise art standards. See for example an untitled manuscript Woodward drafted in response to a letter requesting a summary of his aesthetic beliefs in the Woodward Papers, Box 2, (TU). Archie Palmer to Ellsworth Woodward, November 21, 1933, *ibid.*, Box 1, (TU). For a broader discussion of artistic nationalism during the period see Charles C. Alexander, Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth Century America, (Bloomington, 1980), pp.7-27.

¹⁵ "Art in the South," Woodward Speeches, (TU).

from the top down. A rigid class structure characterized the society uplifted through art, one organized on training and talent and dedicated to standards of enduring value. "Art my friends," he once said, "is a means by which a gifted few present to us glimpses of divine beauty which help explain life and make it more tolerable." He did not claim divinity for the artist nor expect him to record beauty through some innate sense of its existence; rather, he proposed to lead the artist to beauty through the discipline of training. "The adjustment of individual taste to correct standards does not come about by accident," he maintained, "It is the product of training," the essential means of shaping taste and steering it away from sloth. "Taste may be educated downwards as well as upwards," he warned, "The one whose taste in reading is low is a sorry case, but not more deplorable than is the condition of him whose choice in art is low."¹⁶

Such an awareness made Woodward sensitive to the importance of education. "Our duty is therefore to intelligently cultivate a knowledge of art through qualified teachers and in the dissemination of art appreciation in public schools." This has been a traditional American avenue to the moon and stars, but it made Woodward no less ardent. He conceived of his classroom as a clearing house where undergraduates, and, ideally, the general populace learned through his lectures the rudiments of art appreciation. These he planned to supplement through practical application. In his studios he sought out students whose superior talent merited additional training in professional schools of design. Or, as Woodward described his program: "The academic study of

¹⁶ "The Lesser Arts," "What Has Art to do with Practical Things," Woodward Speeches, (TU).

art I would have supplemented by practices for the recognition of beauty in the homely setting of daily business is brought about by training the eye to appreciate form, color, and [training] the mind to understand laws."¹⁷

¹⁷ "What Has Art to do with Practical Things," "Art in the South," "Art in Education," Woodward Speeches, (TU).

2. "The Most Perfect Expressions of Locality"

Woodward's aesthetic assumptions placed him in the vanguard of a burgeoning Arts and Crafts movement whose period of greatest influence coincided with political Progressivism. Like Woodward, the Arts and Crafts Movement championed the reconciliation of art and industry through tastefully designed objects of everyday use. It was an Atlantic phenomenon, begun in England, but one whose zeal quickly swept westward. Soon local crafts clubs appeared in most American cities. Usually, they evangelized on behalf of the movement, either through gallery talks or display rooms exhibiting the fruits of local labors. Woodward revelled in such places. In his estimation they were essential dispensing centers "for hand-wrought articles," places "where people of taste may find something of rare individual beauty," places "where the artist may find the opportunity to escape the narrow convention-ridden demands of commercial manufacture," places that Woodward himself sought to establish in Louisiana. His efforts bore fruit in 1909. That year his friend and frequent correspondent Dr. E.L. Stephens, founder and president of the Southwestern Training Institute in nearby Lafayette, dedicated an arts and crafts building on the campus. Woodward could scarcely contain his enthusiasm. "Ho-o-o-rah for your arts and crafts building!," he rejoiced to Stephens, "Ho-o-o-rah for your noble idea!... The world is full of a number of things but none of them is more certain than that art and handicraft are siamese twins."¹⁸

¹⁸ Wendy Kaplan, The Art That Is Life: The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920, (Boston, 1987), pp. 77-100, 207-22; Isabella Anscombe, Arts and Crafts in Britain and America, (New York, 1978),

By then, Woodward had already made great strides for the movement in New Orleans. He had joined the Newcomb Committee on Public Grounds and, in order to create the proper atmosphere for artistic study, had directed beautification of the campus. He made his classrooms forums for the theory and practice of art appreciation. He converted his studio space into a center for the handicrafts. Looms were installed for weaving and presses and tools for book-binding. Anvils were added and punches acquired for metalworking and leathercrafts. A silversmith was engaged with all the necessary accouterments. The Newcomb ladies went to work on a host of the applied arts. They made vases and bowls, plates, inkwells, watch fobs, mugs, and lamp shades and stands of brass and glass, fire-screens, candlesticks, three-handled loving cups, rose jars, chocolate and tea services, and calendars of fine calligraphy, these and more, anything of domestic use. Before long Newcomb gained international renown for the quality and variety of its arts and crafts activities; but nothing drew more attention or wider acclaim than Woodward's first foray into the practical arts made in 1894 when he set out to revive earlier attempts to found a pottery.¹⁹

pp.63-83, 168-88. For a bibliographic treatment of the Movement see Mary A. Vance, The Arts and Crafts Movement: Monographs, (Monticello, 1984). The Craftsmen, 1-39(October 1901-December 1916); "Everyday Art," Woodward Speeches, (TU), Box 1; Woodward to Stephens, April 2, 1909, Stephens Papers, Box 1, (TU).

¹⁹ "Ellsworth Woodward," Artists Files, (THNOC); Item, June 7, 1931; Ormond and Levine, Louisiana's Art Nouveau, pp.3-14; Jessie Poesch, Newcomb Pottery: An Enterprise For Southern Women, 1895-1940, (Easton, 1984), pp.9-16; Jerry Jack Mitchell, "An Analysis of the Decorative Styles of Newcomb Pottery," (M.A. Thesis, Louisiana State University, 1972); "The Newcomb Art School," American Magazine of Art, 10(October 1919), p.480; Anthea Gallen, Women Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement, 1870-1914, (New York, 1979), pp.88-9; Kaplan, The Art That is Life, pp.324-5; Anscombe, Arts and Crafts in Britain and America, p.153.

He began by devoting an entire year to finding the proper clay. Once satisfied, he engaged a supervisor of design, Mary Sheerer, and put a half dozen of his best students to work decorating pots thrown by his ceramist, Joseph Meyer. The results were first exhibited in 1896 and drew squeals of local delight. Soon the pottery gained a wider audience. Several exhibitions were made in northern cities. Critical approval followed. Awards and accolades began to accumulate. Eventually the Newcomb wares were exhibited in Europe. In 1901 the pottery won the Bronze Medal at the Paris Exhibition, marking a pivotal moment in its development. Since its inception Woodward's venture had supported itself through limited sales of its wares. Receipt of the Paris award trebled orders. Quickly the pottery was altered to meet the demand. Previously, the designers had labored in piece-work fashion, paying for the costs of each pot before having it thrown and not realizing any of the investment until a sale was made. This was risky speculation. Pots often crumbled during the firing process, and even finished products were subject to the buyer's fancy.²⁰

The new arrangement sought to change all that by establishing a corporation within the College to underwrite the costs of production. "In other words," announced Woodward in the next annual catalogue, "an effort has been made whereby the designs of the kiln will be placed on the market, the industry regulated, and the losses maintained in the future." Production then moved forward in assembly-line fashion. Meyer threw pots according to one of several standard shapes chosen by the designer, who then executed her decoration and submitted the piece to

²⁰ Poesch, Newcomb Pottery, pp.17-32.

the kiln master for firing. Woodward and Sheerer upheld the quality of production by enforcing exacting standards of technical skill. By 1908 the profit margin permitted the hiring of a salaried employee to run the campus display and sales room. Soon technical innovation and a larger working space permitted an additional increase in production. Even then orders continued to swamp the project. Between 1918 and 1930 the Newcomb Pottery produced nearly fifty thousand pieces, requiring an expanded sales staff. By 1931, the year Woodward retired, fifty-four agents working out of twenty states directed the national and international distribution of Newcomb products.²¹

The pottery was the fullest institutional expression of Ellsworth Woodward's artistic idealism. Ethel Hutson, a Newcomb alumna and later a professional colleague of Woodward, spoke for them both when she called the Pottery "a new movement for greater beauty, simplicity, and freedom of design--a reaction against that slavery to the machine which was characteristic of the last century."²² The experiment reflected Woodward's guiding faith in environment. When it expanded in 1901, the pottery moved to a new location chosen by Woodward because it typified the local surroundings of New Orleans. The structure itself reflected Woodward's own close study of French Quarter architecture and repeated many of its forms. Inside his artistic spirit abided. The workshop, spacious and neatly appointed, fostered a solemn atmosphere, almost a hushed reverence for beauty in the making. Local surroundings also governed the designs used to decorate the pottery. Woodward believed

²¹ Ibid., pp.45-9.

²² Quoted in Ibid., p.52.

that artistic freedom governed his experiment. His designers, he insisted, were free to work out their own decorations so long as they were drawn from nature. "No special haste is felt to be needed in fixing upon the character that the wares shall assume," he explained, since "the belief is entertained that if no formative pressure is employed, its development will proceed along lines of the least resistance, and arrive finally at the most natural expression of locality." Here was the logic of the *genius loci*, a matching of design to material. Newcomb pots were thrown from mud fetched up from nearby Bayou Tchulacoubouta and Bogue Falaya. It followed naturally to Woodward that the only suitable designs for local clays were studies of local nature whose richness and fecundity Woodward revelled in:

fleur-de-lis, crepe myrtle, White Cherokee Rose, China Berries, wild iris, moss-draped cypress and live oak, dogwood,²³ water lily, cotton plants, jonquils, and wild jasmine.

Ideally the designer too was born and bred locally. When one young student approached Woodward and expressed her concern that her skills would not match the master's exacting standards, he asked her where she was from. "Louisiana," she replied. Woodward smiled softly and told her that she was more qualified to decorate the pottery than he was. "There's a good deal of bosh in that of course," she wrote her mother, "but I'm glad I was born in Baton Rouge."²⁴

²³ Andy Peter Antippas, "The Newcomb Pot Revolution of 1887," New Orleans Magazine, 10(July 1975), p.96,98; Poesch, Newcomb Pottery, pp.47-56.

²⁴ Antippas, "The Newcomb Pot Revolution," p.102.

Here was art for the American Century, the aesthetic counterpart to political Progressivism. Arts and Crafts experiments such as Woodward's were urban and middle-class in character and composition, reformist in spirit. An aura of gentility pervaded them and a fragility born of conflicting impulses. The experimenters were zealous idealists devoted to Truth and practitioners of handicrafts they considered imperilled by machines. Yet they retained a firm faith in the blessings of an industrialized future. They prophesied the elevation of the national spirit. They trumpeted the creation of indigenous forms of national expression, but they never overcame their attachment to locale. Arts and Crafts movements flourished in cities across America throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. They exchanged annual exhibitions and fraternal good wishes. Each applauded the others' efforts. None suggested national coalition. Instead they arrayed themselves as constellations in the night sky with the Southern Cross flickering over uptown New Orleans.

By no accident did the Newcomb Pottery burst upon the international art scene from the heart of the New Orleans Garden District. This was the geographical center of the Louisiana reform impulse in politics as in art. Several prominent members of the Good Government League made their homes near the Newcomb campus, among them John M. Parker, chief southern political advisor to Theodore Roosevelt. Cream of the New Orleans gentry, Woodward's students flocked to his classrooms where he led them out beneath the moss-draped elegance of the campus grounds to contemplate nature. Most, he reasoned, would benefit from the experience by going out into the world to establish homes and families guided by the aesthetic principles he taught in his classroom.

The very best he hoped to employ in his pottery, earning for a small coterie of talented designers some means of income suited to a woman of taste and gaining for them, too, a vital role in society, one bearing all the respect and responsibility freighted in the word "professional."²⁵

Guided by these faiths, Woodward's "perfect expressions of locality" earned wide praise. In 1907 Newcomb Pottery won the Gold Prize at an arts and crafts exhibition held in Jamestown, New York. "You know this puts us in the front rank," he wrote jubilantly to his friend, Stephens, "It is a real distinction taking us out of the provincial and amateur class and ranking us as a world power." Greater honors awaited. At the Panama-Pacific Exposition held at San Francisco in 1915 the Pottery won five separate awards, including two Grand Prizes. Though Woodward and his designers drew deep satisfaction from the distinction, the emergence as a 'world power' brought additional burdens and unforeseen developments. The year of the San Francisco show Newcomb ranked second only to the Rookwood Pottery of Cincinnati as the largest American producer of individually decorated pottery. Financial growth had been phenomenal. Critical acclaim always stimulated sales and renewed demands for increased production. Under the pressure a fissure,

²⁵ For discussions of political reform in turn-of-the-century New Orleans, see, S.W. Taylor, The Citizen's League: A History of the Great Reform Movement, (Baton Rouge, 1965); Joy Jackson, New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress, 1880-1896, (Baton Rouge, 1969). Woodward should not be considered as any staunch defender of women's rights. He held traditional views of sex roles and relationships, ones he explained to Stephens: "I would be the last man to put a profession in the way of what I think to be a woman's mission-to make the right man happy." Nevertheless, he continued, if a woman "had to fight for herself," and she measured up to his grueling standards, then he considered her fully entitled to the honors of a craftsman. Ellsworth Woodward to Edwin L. Stephens, May 18, 1902, Stephens Papers, (TU).

first opened in 1901, widened into a major fault line running between the artistic purpose of the project and its continuing commercial appeal.²⁶

Woodward insisted that business decisions should never overshadow the aesthetic concerns of the project. "It is never a question of 'salability'," [sic] he insisted, "death lies that way for the artist." Instead he clung to the faith that art and commerce were complimentary forces held in delicate equipoise by the pursuit of knowledge and the quest of beauty, a utilitarian creed he called "industrial commercialism":

Art has been transformed before the eyes of an indifferent public from a subject of ornamental trifling to one of serious economic meaning. And let me say to those who think that the college is no place for industrial commercialism that the test of all education lies in its application to the needs of life. Pure philosophy and pure theory are pure moonshine unless they square with the lives we have to live enabling us the better to perform the duties that we cannot and do not wish to escape. If we wish our subject to be repeated we must show that it is capable of doing the world's work.²⁷

Nevertheless, there were already clear indications that considerations of the marketplace were directing matters of artistic scruple. In 1910 Woodward hired the ceramic chemist, Paul Cox, who developed a matte glaze to finish the pottery. It prompted a noticeable boost in sales, as Cox himself had intended. For the first time in the pottery's history, he boasted, the designers enjoyed more than a modest salary. Changing public tastes hastened the transformation. Cox's

²⁶ Poesch, Newcomb Pottery, 61-69; Ellsworth Woodward to E.L. Stephens, December 29, 1907, Stephens Papers, (TU).

²⁷ Quoted in Poesch, Newcomb Pottery, p.69.

tenure coincided with the emergence of a more conservative, highly romanticized representational style of design. The decorations evoked images of the South similar in theme and spirit to popular film and fiction. Muted tones, softened by Cox's glazes, depicted moonlight through magnolias and live oaks dripping with Spanish moss. They became the most popular designs ever created at Newcomb and ones repeated to the point of tedium by designers fully aware that the decorations were artistically unsuited to the angular shape of the pots.²⁸

The altered style allowed the pottery to outlive the Arts and Crafts movement, but only by adopting practices that contradicted Woodward's idealism. Nineteen-fifteen marked high tide for both the movement and the pottery. Unable to match the productivity of the manufacturing process, the movement failed to overcome the momentum of the machine. Its leaders were dying, practitioners were turning elsewhere; fittingly it slipped from the scene amidst the industrial carnage of the Great War. The San Francisco exhibit, scene of Newcomb's greatest triumph, was the last major showing of its kind. Still, the pottery's wares sold well, but Woodward's designers no longer shaped popular tastes. Instead, they were prisoners to it. Designers no longer handed down "glimpses of divine beauty" for the enlightenment and uplift of the general public. They received orders to satisfy taste as it already existed. Nor were the wares used for their intended purpose.

²⁸ Ibid., pp.61-85; Paul Cox, "Newcomb Pottery Active in New Orleans," Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society, 13(May 1934), pp.13-5; "The Newcomb Potteries, Where an Industrial Need Has Been Adjusted to Commercial Purposes," Glass and Pottery, 4(January 1911), pp.11-12. For a more general discussion of the commercialization of the Arts and Crafts Movement, see, Anscombe, Arts and Crafts in Britain and America, 189-207.

They did not become articles for household use, the stuff of everyday art. As awards accumulated so did value and price. Private collectors hoarded the pieces, making them objects of private display and not popular use.²⁹

The pottery never became exclusively a business enterprise. Woodward was too much an idealist to permit it. Instead it occupied a position somewhere between the lecture hall and the sales office whose awkwardness even Woodward recognized. "What shall a teacher do with a manufacturing business," he asked a group of executives in 1930, "It doesn't seem right, I was going to say almost indecent." By then Newcomb wares were fully standardized products despite two late attempts to recapture the experimentalism of earlier days. The pottery had lost its envied reputation for innovative design. It had even left the Garden District when the college moved further uptown to its present location adjacent to Tulane. Worse, with the onset of the Depression the pottery suffered the fate of all industrial America. Production outstripped consumption; sales began to slip and never recovered. A year after his address to the businessmen Woodward retired in a tearful farewell heightened by the appreciation that more than the man was passing.³⁰

²⁹ Poesch, Newcomb Pottery, pp.75ff.

³⁰ Quoted in Ibid., p.82; Item, June 7, 1931.

3. "A Native Product"

A half century of efforts failed to bring off the revolution in art prophesied by Woodward in younger days. For all its critical acclaim, the institutional application of his aesthetic beliefs, the Newcomb Pottery, failed. Woodward did not arrest the hum of the machine, or the effusion of cheaply made goods into the marketplace. He failed to harness the manufacturing process and apply its might to the uplift of society through art. Nor had he won for the artist a place of esteem in the national community. No national standards of artistic taste were established. Still, Woodward never lost his faith in the uplifting promise of art. Even in retirement he continued with the same relentless energy to preach his message of beauty.

Then in 1933 a movement coalesced within the national art community and gathered momentum. Crystallized by the economic collapse, it espoused ideals similar to Woodward's own, ones based on the value of art in a democratic society. During the waning autumn months the movement earned the attention and support of the new national administration in Washington. Under its auspices, a meeting was called to organize an emergency work program for needy artists. Woodward received an invitation as the staunchest friend of art in his region. Now he steamed north toward the capital at his own expense aboard a swaying Pullman coach. No record exists of how he passed his trip or what he thought about watching the southern landscape roll by. Still there remains the impression of daylight streaking through the window and Woodward's reflection on the glass as though the two faces told the story, one clear and sharply defined, eyes bright with anticipation, the

other a soft reflection of efforts gone before.³¹

The meeting was held in the home of Edward Bruce, chief architect and guiding spirit of the proposed program. He left nothing to chance. Arrayed around his home the afternoon of December 8, 1933 sat representatives drawn from the highest circles of American art, society, and politics. These included such prominent art museum directors as Mrs. Juliana Force of the Whitney Museum; Alfred Barr from the Museum of Modern Art, New York; C. Powell Minnegrode of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington; and Fiske Kimball, Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. New Dealers such as Brains Truster Rexford Tugwell, head of the Resettlement Administration and Harry Hopkins, then director of the Civil Works Administration (CWA) attended. Even the first family was represented in the person of the President's uncle, Frederic A. Delano, who chaired the meeting. He accompanied the First Lady, who would soon emerge as the preeminent symbolic leader in the cause for government support of the arts.³² Driven there by the crush of the economic disaster, this circle gathered in Washington and, in the space of a single afternoon, fitted itself into a makeshift wheel of mutual support and interdependence. With the promise of funds and the prestige of its official blessing, the Administration supplied the protective rim.

³¹ Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, Record Group 121, Records of the Public Buildings Commission, National Archives, (Washington, D.C.), Entry 124, Correspondence of Edward Bruce, 1934-43, Box 7. [hereinafter cited as RG 121/Entry 124, Box #, NA].

³² Civil Works Administration Bulletin, no. 464, Entry 105, "Central File of the Advisory Committee and the Project, 1933-34," Box 2, NA, [hereinafter cited as "CWA Bulletin, 464, RG 121/105, NA"]; Erica Beckh Rubenstein, "Government Art in the Roosevelt Era: An Appraisal of Federal Art Patronage in the Light of Present Needs," Art Journal, 20(Fall 1960), p.2; Richard D. McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, (Princeton, 1973), p.10; Olin Dows, "The New Deal's Treasury Art Program: A Memoir," Arts in Society, 2(no. 4 1964), p.55.

Ellsworth Woodward and his colleagues from the art community formed the individual spokes. In a symbolic sense here was the nation gathered, an ill-fitting, oddly shaped coalition of disparate regions and different tastes and conflicting points of view. The hub was Edward Bruce.

Bruce was a stocky figure, fifty-six years old, a jowly ebullient man. His robust sense of humor had no match but for his capacity for long hours of intense work. He was graduated from Columbia Law School in 1904. Business interest drew him across the Pacific and into the China trade. He bought a controlling interest in the Manila Times. In 1915 he established the Pacific Development Company. Profits accumulated. Bruce seemed destined for a career of unlimited success. Yet there were always internal doubts, a nagging spiritual uneasiness. His father, a Baptist minister and "the most Christ-like man" Bruce ever knew, preached a social gospel the son could not reconcile with the acquisitiveness of the marketplace. Once, in a shipboard poker game he threw in a royal flush rather than finish the hand.³³

The promising career ended in 1922 when the Morgan Company ruined Bruce. He spurned a series of offers to recoup his business losses and quit China with his wife. They travelled to Europe where, under the tutelage of his friend, Maurice Sterne, Bruce learned to paint. He destroyed his earliest efforts, but within two years his paintings were displayed successfully and sold. Bruce spent six years painting in Italy where his work acquired international acclaim. Then a second disaster struck. Disillusioned by the rise of the Fascists under Mussolini, Bruce returned to the United States in 1929. He continued to

³³ Belisario Contreras, Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art, (Lewisburg, 1983), pp.31-7; Dows, "A Memoir," p.54; Rubenstein, "Government Art in the Roosevelt Era," p.2.

paint, but like so many of his fellow artists, he no longer sold. Former patrons were reluctant to speculate on contemporary art. Few had the money, fewer still the inclination. Deprived of their principal source of revenue, Bruce and other artists languished. Work went unsold. Supplies could not be purchased. Odd jobs were taken on to make ends meet. Talent withered and with it hope.³⁴

The crisis forced Bruce's return to the business world. He moved to Washington and became a lobbyist, ostensibly to represent the Calamta Sugar Estate, but also to negotiate Philippine independence. In the capital he also switched political allegiances. He abandoned his former Republicanism and embraced the Rooseveltian idealism with the zeal of a new convert. The switch proved opportune. Accustomed to moving in the highest social circles, Bruce fell in with the New Dealers. As an aide to Nevada Senator Key Pittman he attended the London Economic Conference as Pittman's counsel on silver policy. Following his return Bruce learned of the proposal to hire needy white collar workers through the CWA. This crystallized an idea developing in his own mind, one designed to provide federal support for his fellow artists.³⁵

Others shared the desire. Early in May, 1933, George Biddle, artist and scion of Rittenhouse Square, wrote a letter to his former

³⁴ McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp.7-8; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.33-7; For a general discussion of the effects of the Depression on American artists, see, William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration, (Columbus, 1969), pp.341-76, especially, pp.345-8; see also, Robert C. Vitz, "Struggle and Response: American Artists and the Great Depression," New York History, 17(January 1976), pp.80-98.

³⁵ McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p.8; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, p.36; Rubenstein, "Government Art in the Roosevelt Era," p.2; McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, p.360.

Groton classmate, Franklin Roosevelt, beseeching the President to do something to relieve the plight of the American artist. Biddle was recently returned from Mexico, where his first-hand exposure to the on-going mural movement sponsored by the government made him an ardent convert. He proposed a federal subsidy for a team of painters assembled in Washington to decorate a single government building with murals depicting the social values of the New Deal. Measured against what followed, this was a humble proposal. Still, the tremendous implications it held concerning the future of American art made the plan immediately controversial. The decoration of any federal building was the responsibility of the Fine Arts Commission affiliated with the Treasury Department. For nearly twenty-five years the Commission represented the final arbiter of official government artistic taste. The same man, Charles Moore, had held the chair since 1915, and neither he nor the Commission had any use for the Biddle Plan. Works of modern art born not of aesthetic genius but economic necessity were, in Moore's opinion, pedestrian things, altogether repugnant to the classical structures of the federal capital.³⁶

The Commission's intransigence doomed the plan, but Biddle's efforts did not go entirely in vain. Edward Bruce also had dealings in the Treasury Building. He and Biddle circulated in the same social set. Their paths inevitably crossed. Biddle enlisted Bruce into the cause and, by virtue of a unique combination of bureaucratic skill, social eclat, and political savvy, Bruce soon became the energetic champion of

³⁶ George Biddle, An American Artist's Story, (Boston, 1939), pp.259-73; McKinzie, The Deal For Artists, pp.5-6; Milton W. Brown, "New Deal Arts Projects: Boondoggle or Bargain," Art News, 81(April 1982), p.84; McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.357-61.

an expanded version of Biddle's idea, a plan to hire artists nationwide. Through the heat of summertime Washington he huddled with New Deal lawyers, untying legal knots and sorting out lines of administrative responsibility. He button-holed key administration figures and won valuable supporters, among them Frances Perkins, Harry Hopkins, and Henry Morgenthau. A series of dinners held in the Bruce home that autumn wooed over Jerome Frank, Jacob Baker, and Harlan Fiske Stone.³⁷

Bruce finished his plan in mid-November, won Administration approval, and appointed a committee to oversee its operation. Now remained the task of persuading the leaders of American art, without whose cooperation success would be impossible. For Edward Bruce, working twelve and fourteen hours each day, the effort seemed to represent nothing short of a struggle to reconcile competing values, a chance to apply business skills and legal training to a lingering ideal of social service. His enthusiasm bore the stamp of an evangelical fervor inherited from his father's pulpit; his methods reflected a faith in the ability of the corporate framework to solve questions of public policy. Drawing on years of business experience he intended to lend aid and comfort to a disadvantaged segment of society and, concomitantly, to serve the higher values of art and democracy. It seemed the very heart of New Deal optimism.³⁸

Years later Olin Dows still remembered the intensity of the December organizational meeting. "It was an outstanding group," he

³⁷ Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, p.35; McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p.8; McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, p.361; Forbes Watson, "The Innocent Bystander," American Magazine of Art, 27(November 1934), pp.604-5.

³⁸ Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, p.35.

recalled, who despite the difficulty of the circumstances and the press for time, filled the room with a sense of hope. The host provided a good bit of it. After a luncheon served in the Bruce home, the First Lady opened the meeting with a brief comment stressing the urgent necessity of preserving the arts despite the current emergency. Discussion began in earnest. Bruce explained his plan and entertained questions. Talk grew animated and debate continued. Many future points of contention were ignored or glossed over in the desire simply to "do something."³⁹

In the late afternoon consensus emerged in support of the plan. The impressions of the participants ranged from guarded optimism to outright enthusiasm. "We should not be afraid to make a mistake," observed Tugwell, "[though]...we may have to whitewash a lot of walls and take down a lot of sculpture when we get through...." Homer St. Gaudens, Director of the Carnegie Institute, waxed far more sanguine. "For the first time in our land," he gushed, "the artist will be given heart by knowing that the government is back of him in a material way and feels that he is taken into the national soul." In the evening, following a celebratory dinner sponsored by Bruce at his club, his guests made their way home singly and in groups. Many returned to hotels and packed for the trip home. Finally, all retired but Edward Bruce, who drove home, locked himself in his study, and wrote the first press

³⁹ Dows met the Bruces, "a vital pair," at the apartment of Andrew Mellon where each had come to admire the former Treasury Secretary's extensive art collection. He found Mrs. Bruce "handsome, outspoken, strong, almost a pioneer type." Dows considered her husband "heavy, humorous, loving to tease amiably, enjoying ideas, throwing them out by the dozens and drawing them from others." A friendship grew and Dows gravitated into Bruce's circle where, ultimately, he directed the Treasury Relief Art Project, or TRAP. Dows, "A Memoir, " p.55; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.40-3.

release announcing the establishment and organization of the Public Works of Art Project(PWAP).⁴⁰

The Bruce plan mixed technical detail with grand design. PWAP was organized within the Treasury Department under the immediate supervision of Assistant Secretary L.W. Robert. Harry Hopkins funded the project with an appropriation of slightly more than one million dollars from his CWA budget. Office space was located in the Treasury Building where the national effort was supervised by Technical Director, Forbes Watson. Watson, a pre-eminent art critic of unimpeachable integrity, took the job not long after he was accosted on the streets of New York by Edward Bruce and challenged to do something patriotic for American art. It began a remarkable professional collaboration between the two. A "lucid" writer and persuasive speaker, Watson quickly became the unofficial project publicist. He was assisted by the Advisory Committee to the Treasury on Fine Arts, whose Secretary was Edward Bruce and a small staff. Edward Rowan served as Assistant Technical Director. Cecil Jones ran the business office.⁴¹

The organizational structure of PWAP reflected Edward Bruce's belief in the value of decentralized administration. Ultimately sixteen Regional Directors were appointed to hire needy artists and supervise their activities. Regional subcommittees were advised to expedite the search for artists, to judge the merit of completed works, and, it was

⁴⁰ Rubenstein, "Government Art in the Roosevelt Era," p.2; CWA Bulletin, 464, RG 121/105, (NA), pp.4,7.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp.1-8; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.40-51; McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p.10; Joel H. Bernstein, "The Artist and the Government: The P.W.A.P.," in Ray A. Browne, ed., Challenges in American Culture, (Bowling Green, 1970), p.73; Garnett McCoy, "Poverty, Politics, and Artists, 1930-1945" Art in America, 53(August 1965), pp.88-107; Dows, "A Memoir," p.56.

hoped, to stimulate local enthusiasm for art. In some of the more remote regions a third administrative tier was erected, regional sub-committees, fingertips of a federal hand stretched as far as possible into the furthest corners of the nation.⁴² Great hopes swung on the regional hinge. Like Ellsworth Woodward before him, Edward Bruce planned to carry off a revolution in American art. He intended to hire 2500 artists, and pay them a craftsman's weekly wage. Throughout the twenties, explained Forbes Watson, the artist, like the stockbroker, became entrapped in a spiraling vortex of overspeculation. "New oil fields or new artists," he observed, "the only real difference in the promotional methods was that in the case of oil the purpose of the manipulators was more frankly stated." In art circles the speculation created a privileged club of artists raised to prominence more by the whims of the marketplace than through natural talent or hard work. Bruce and Watson were convinced that conversion to the wage scale would redress the imbalance and correct the structural deficiencies of the system. Steady wages, they insisted, would arrest the speculative spiral and provide recovery for the artist. Older talents, lain fallow since the art market collapsed, would receive stimulation and rehabilitation. New talents were bound to be discovered and developed.⁴³

⁴² CWA Bulletin, 464, RG 121/105, (NA); Forbes Watson, "The Public Works of Art Project: Federal, Republican, or Democratic?," American Magazine of Art, 27(January 1934), p.7; Edward Bruce, "Implications of the Public Works of Art Project," RG 121, Entry 106, Central Office Correspondence and Related Records, 1933-34, Box 4, (NA), [hereinafter cited as RG 121/106, NA]. Bruce's article was later published in the March, 1934 issue of the American Magazine of Art. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.363-8; Dows, "A Memoir," p.55.

⁴³ CWA Bulletin, 464, RG 121/105, (NA); Forbes Watson, "The Artist Becomes a Citizen," RG 121/106, (NA); Watson, "The Public Works of Art Project," p.8; Watson, "A Steady Job," American Magazine of Art, 27(April 1934), p.168.

By stretching the bureaucratic apparatus deep into the national hinterland, the Project officials hoped to create a widespread popular appreciation for art. This, they reasoned, would inaugurate a simultaneous process of social uplift and economic rejuvenation with far-ranging results. Art disseminated throughout the land would strengthen the American spirit, providing it with a badly needed boost. It would also stimulate art sales. Working diligently in their government studios, PWAP artists could ensure a steady flow of works to this newly expanded market, matching supply to demand and keeping prices low. This new economic relationship would transform the role of the artist in society. His new-found patron, the American public, would force the artist to attune himself to national spiritual values. Artists would be swept out of seedy garrets and exclusive galleries into the American streets, there to mix with fellow citizens and assume civic responsibilities long ignored. Bruce promised hope, abundance, and uplift, even the very redemption of the American community, all for the price of a modest government subsidy. Here was an artistic pump-primer.⁴⁴

The PWAP intended to stimulate public art tastes through the decoration of public buildings. Federal and state administrative offices, schools, parks, public libraries, land grant colleges, hospitals, customs houses, and courthouses--any institution supported entirely or partially by taxes--all became subjects of the PWAP brush.

⁴⁴ Bruce, "Implications of the Public Works of Art Project," RG 121/106, (NA); Watson, "The Artist Becomes a Citizen," *ibid.*; Watson, "The Public Works of Art Project," p.8; Watson, "A Steady Job," pp.169-70; Edward Rowan, "Will Plumber's Wages Turn the Trick?," American Magazine of Art, 27(February 1934), pp.81, 83; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.42-3; Dows, "A Memoir," p.56; Rubenstein, "Government Art in the Roosevelt Era," p.5.

Yet, so vast an effort undertaken on behalf of so important a patron made the artistic style of Bruce's painters a matter of extreme delicacy. Unlike Ellsworth Woodward, Edward Bruce did not undertake to shape public taste; rather he hoped to match it through the representational style of American Scene painting. "More now than at any time during the past fifteen years the American artist is contemplating the American scene," Bruce wrote, announcing his choice, "More than ever he is looking at and into the life of his own land." The decision reflected Bruce's own artistic preferences. Through his PWAP artists Bruce sought to distribute nationwide the lessons of his own apprenticeship. In matters of artistic taste he was a confirmed realist. From his mentor, Sterne, he learned to appreciate nature and became committed to the value of artistic craftsmanship. Yet, most importantly, Bruce considered no other genre more palatable to the American public. He frankly admitted the importance of "selling" his program to the American people, an object requiring a means of mass appeal, an art form suitable to the widest number of people and offensive to the fewest, a way of conveying the message of hope in a fashion the average citizen could understand. The Scene became his marketing vehicle. Perhaps Bruce revealed more of himself than he intended when, in discussing his choice of genre for PWAP, he called American Scene "a native product."⁴⁵

The decision outraged conservative art academicians. To them the Scene was modern and therefore unfit for public display. To a strong

⁴⁵ CWA Bulletin, 464, RG 121/105, (NA); Bruce, "Implications of the Public Works of Art Project." For a discussion of the origins and ideals of American Scene painters, see, Matthew Baigell, The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930's, (New York, 1974), pp.13-41.

degree the Scene was also anti-European. The Continent still remained the beaux ideal of conservative tastes, something often aspired to but seldom achieved. The genre, in conservative estimations, was pedestrian; it spurned classical allegory for the vulgarity of the commonplace. It was cheap and tawdry and promised to ruin what slim chances the future held for art in America. In a word the Scene was an abomination, and among the conservatives, the announcement that Bruce had made it his aesthetic orthodoxy raised apoplectic fits. Paul Honore, a distraught member of the Society of Mural Painters, immediately wired for mercy: FOR THE LOVE AND RESPECT OF WHAT ART WE HAVE SO FAR DEVELOPED IN THE UNITED STATES DO NOT CARRY THROUGH THIS PROPOSED PLAN...WHICH CAN BE NOTHING BUT A REPROACH TO THE SANITY OF THIS GENERATION IN TIME TO COME STOP...."⁴⁶

Bruce anticipated the criticism. "They are boiling mad because they haven't been consulted and because the government leaned towards modern art," he confided to his diary, "and lastly because the government may cut into their swill by allowing starving artists to do murals at \$35 a week...." The public defense of his decision took a smoother, middle of the road course. "While of course it shows the signs of a definite art tradition and an art background, it is free of isms and fads and so-called modern art influences," he wrote, "The word 'modern' in connection with art has been badly misused. It conveys to the minds of most people merely invention which has been substituted for art in so many centers." Meanwhile, Bruce loosed Watson to the counterattack. Watson ridiculed the conservatives, lampooned their

⁴⁶ Paul Honore to Edward Bruce, December 15, 1933, RG 121/105, Box 2, (NA); Baigell, The American Scene, pp.13ff.

"morning-coated horror," and lambasted those organizations of conservatism whose narrowness of view, he intimated, bordered on the incestuous. Many, he charged, "looked so continuously from their pedestals up to the skies that they did not see what [was] going on in the world."⁴⁷

Yet neither Bruce's calm nor Watson's storm could mask the importance of Bruce's choice. Sprung to the limelight in the exhibition season of 1930-31 and vilified by its critics ever since, American Scene painting had been plucked up suddenly by the federal government, wealthiest patron in the land, and granted official state sanction. The genre had, in a very real sense, crossed the Milvian Bridge. Even more, the emergence of American Scene represents a crucial development not only in American art but American society as well. Not even the diplomacy of Edward Bruce could hide the fact that the Scene was modern, and that it did break with the past, a transition measured not only in the ambitions of the Scene's practitioners but in the manner of its emergence. American Scene painting strove to create a popular art form relevant to all Americans, one that would serve a public beyond the traditional and privileged inner circles of art appreciation. It sought, as Edward Bruce and Ellsworth Woodward did, to make the artist a full participant in the democratic community, an interpreter of national values. Yet it owed no allegiance to any specific locale. It emerged instead as a national phenomenon and a cogent reflection of the uneasiness of American society in the early 1930's. For this attempt to

⁴⁷ McCoy, "Poverty, Politics, and Artists," p.93; Bruce, "Implications of the Public Works of Art Project," RG 121/106, (NA); Watson, "The Affiliated Plum Pickers Attack the Public Works of Art Project, RG 121/108, (NA).

sound a national artistic voice coincided with the struggle to create a nationwide political administration capable of easing the burden of global depression. The two were bound up one with the other, each posing questions central to the democratic experience and the inherited traditions of the past. For the New Deal did not occur without cries that it usurped the power of the states, just as the American Scene did not emerge without a final celebration of American locale, an Indian Summer for the genius loci.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Baigell, The American Scene, pp.13-41; Barry Karl, The Uneasy State: The United States From 1915 to 1945, (Chicago, 1984).

4. "One Hell of a Job"

The patriarch of New Orleans art returned from Washington with barely enough time to unpack. Even before his trip Woodward agreed to become one of Edward Bruce's Regional Directors in case the project took form. Once PWAP became reality Woodward assumed responsibilities for Region Six, composed of three gulf states, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, plus a fourth, Arkansas. His career as artist and teacher and his location in New Orleans, a regional PWAP headquarters, made Woodward's selection the logical choice. His name was synonymous with art promotion across the South. In 1900 he co-founded the New Orleans Art Association and was currently its president. Twelve years later, when the Isaac Delgado Museum of Art was established in New Orleans, Woodward chaired the Art Committee. He became Director of the Museum in 1924, a position he still held. Finally, Woodward co-founded the Southern States Art League in 1920, became president of this organization in 1926 and was president still. His cooperation was vital for the Bruce plan to meet with any success in the region.⁴⁹

Both men understood the difficulties Woodward faced. Region Six included some of the more barren stretches of the Sahara of the Bozart, an opinion Woodward did not dispute. It was a problem, he explained, with deep historical roots. Woodward accepted the image of the Old South crafted by the plantation idealists. Antebellum homes, he asserted, were self-contained agrarian arcadies, the very antithesis of

⁴⁹ "Untitled biographical sketch," Woodward Papers, Box 4, (TU); Boyer, "The Etchings of Ellsworth Woodward," p.ix; "Ellsworth Woodward," Artists Files, (THNOC); C.C. Zatzinger to Edward Bruce, November 17, 1933, RG 121/106, Box 4, (NA).

the industrialized city. The isolated self-sufficiency of the plantation system forced aspiring southern artists out of the region for training and patronage. A modest art flourished, nonetheless, but it vanished during the War, whose widespread destruction forced upon the South a hardscrabble existence more concerned with the rudiments of survival, food and shelter, than the higher yearnings of the soul. Worse, the region staked its recovery on agriculture. Without the industrial catalyst, Woodward lamented, art would not flourish in the region, and the exodus of native-born talent would continue.⁵⁰

Prevailing conditions seemed to bear him out. In art as in economy the South remained a colonial appendage of the industrialized North. No prominent museums existed in the region, no centers of instruction. Only a handful of organizations cultivated art tastes. Southern artists were scattered along back country roads and rural villages. They worked in solitude, some with great talent, most with no training. Louisiana was a case in point. After fifty years of unceasing promotion Woodward could survey the art resources of his adopted state in a single paragraph. Three universities operated art departments, Newcomb, Tulane, and LSU, but the program in Baton Rouge still had the dew on it. Two museums operated in New Orleans, the Isaac Delgado in City Park and the Louisiana State Museum in the Cabildo. Only a sprinkling of organizations supplemented the work of Woodward's Art Association. These included the Fine Arts Club formed in 1902 as a circle of "cultivated women" devoted to study through lecture and reading; the New Orleans Art League formed by a band of professional artists to boost sales; and the Arts and Crafts Club, established in 1921. The Club

⁵⁰ "Art in the South," Woodward Speeches, (TU).

operated a showroom and a school downtown in the Quarter, the only center of art training in the state outside of the colleges. Beyond New Orleans there were pine hills to the north and swamps to the west and precious little in between. One or two clubs promoted art in Shreveport. Every summer a small colony of painters assembled in Natchitoches. In the diplomatic estimation of Edward Bruce, Region Six represented a "somewhat uncultivated...but not barren land." His Regional Director took no exception. Instead the lukewarm appraisal of each man received formal administrative expression when Bruce set his PWAP budget. From Hopkins Bruce had received slightly more than one million dollars to foment his revolution in American art. To advance the cause on its exposed southern flank he dispatched less than twelve thousand dollars.⁵¹

There was hope if little else. Woodward left Washington convinced that the Project foretold tremendous benefits, not only for the artist but for the nation at large. He blamed much of the Depression on a dangerous imbalance of values, or in his phrase, "materialism run amok." The people needed more than the immediate help of direct relief, he insisted, they required the sort of spiritual uplift PWAP offered. He

⁵¹ "Art in Louisiana," *ibid.*; Edward Bruce to Ellsworth Woodward, March 22, 1934; Bruce to Woodward, December 10, 1933, RG 121, Entry 108, Central Office Correspondence With the Regions, 1933-34, Box 3, (NA), [hereinafter cited as RG 121/108, (NA)]. Of the twelve PWAP Regions, Louisiana was among the smallest measured in terms of Bruce's appropriations. Region Five, centered in Atlanta, and Region Eleven, centered in Dallas, received the same figure as Region Six, \$11,250. Region Two, New York, received an appropriation of more than a quarter of a million dollars, prompting the criticism among many that PWAP represented one giant surrounded by eleven dwarfs. "PWAP Report of Art Project, Report of the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury to the Federal Relief Administrator, December 8, 1933-June 30, 1934, RG 121, Entry 115, PWAP Reports, Box 1, (NA), [hereinafter cited as "Final PWAP Report," RG 121/115, (NA)].

and Bruce envisioned the assimilation of the artist into society as an interpreter of national values and ideals. "There are dignity and hope and vast potentialities in this project," he insisted, "[and]...a breaking down of the barriers which have shut out too much genius from the community."⁵²

There was no smooth transition from hope to action. By night letter of December tenth, Bruce ordered his directors forward. There was time only for a hasty summary of the basic procedural details outlined at the Washington meeting. He encouraged directors to complete preliminary arrangements sometime Monday so that hirings could begin by Tuesday. Possible legal complications were highlighted and employment quotas assigned on the basis of an informal census of regional art population. The Bruce letter authorized Woodward to hire fifty artists divided into two groups according to skill and need, who were to receive \$42.00 and \$25.00 respectively per thirty hour work week. Torn between the desire for immediate action and the need for close adherence to administrative procedure, the letter reflected the urgency of the moment. Artists needed immediate help. The Hopkins fund was scheduled to expire in the middle of the coming February. Yet there was so little room for error. Success of the Project depended upon the economical production of a satisfying commodity. Overlooking the smallest detail might ruin six months of hard work and dash the hopes of thousands of artists. Such conflicting impulses wrung from Bruce conflicting instructions. He urged his Directors to refer even the smallest uncertainties to the central office. At the same time he promised each

⁵² Times-Picayune, December 17, 1933; Item, December 18, 1933; CWA Bulletin, 464, RG 121/105, (NA).

the widest latitudes of discretionary power.⁵³

Confusion was virtually assured. Similar pressures overwhelmed the Director of Region Six. Woodward lacked the temperament for a headlong rush. Rash action was not in him. He was a studious man by nature. His prose style reflected a contemplative soul and a Progressive faith in the power of the written word. It made him extremely solicitous of the press through whom he hoped to cultivate a favorable public opinion, something he considered a paramount task. When a local news item erroneously identified him as the architect of PWAP, he hurried off an immediate apology to Edward Bruce: "Incidentally, Mr. Woodward did not say that 'he had plans underway for putting needy artists to work.' I trust I have more tact." Such formality also made him a timid bureaucrat. Woodward inched his way through the procedural maze laid out in the Bruce letter. In what became the first round in a continuous ten-day cycle, he summarized his understanding of Bruce's instructions and forwarded a copy to Washington, requesting confirmation of the accuracy of his interpretation. In this fashion over the next fortnight the Director received instructions, interpreted them, and appealed for further clarification. Communications were agonizingly slow. Intermittent silences only deepened Woodward's anxiety. Often, additional instructions only compounded his confusion and renewed the cycle.⁵⁴

⁵³ Edward Bruce to Ellsworth Woodward, December 10, 1933; RG 121/108, (NA).

⁵⁴ Ellsworth Woodward to Forbes Watson, December 10, 1933, Woodward to Watson, December 13, 1933, RG 121/108, Box 3, (NA). Woodward issued frequent appeals for and several criticisms of publicity in his region. Failure to cultivate wide coverage by the local press was one of the bitterest disappointments of his PWAP service. Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, August 18, 1934, *ibid.*

Woodward began his search for needy artists on Monday, December eleventh. He hired a stenographer out of his own pocket and moved into a small office on the Newcomb campus donated by the college.⁵⁵ A "circular" based on his understanding of the Bruce letter was mailed to a hastily assembled list of seventy-five artists in his jurisdiction, most in Louisiana. Copies of the circular appeared in local presses to notify artists not on the list. The results were immediate. During the first week Woodward hired a total of eighteen artists: four muralists, nine painters, two sculptors, and a pictorial draftsman. For a substantial portion of this group the trip to Woodward's office began a long association with the government art experiment. These included Louis Reynaud, a painter and future post office muralist, the sculptor Albert Reicke, and painters Jane Ninas and Clarence Millet, all of whom would work in Louisiana on the Federal Art Project sponsored by the WPA. Two future directors of this organization were also among the group. One was the sculptress Angela Gregory, a former Newcomb student and the first person Woodward hired. The other, Gideon Stanton, was a painter and a close colleague of Woodward.⁵⁶

The Project was afoot but still very wobbly. Woodward continued to plead for direction with a renewed sense of urgency. Since the Depression began, there had been widespread discussion of need among the

⁵⁵ Ellsworth Woodward to Forbes Watson, December 19, 1933; Watson to Pierce Butler, December 22, 1933, RG 121/108, Box 3, (NA). Woodward later moved his office downtown into the French Quarter at the Natural History Building, 715 Chartres.

⁵⁶ Ellsworth Woodward, "Public Works of Art," unpublished mss., RG 121/106, (NA). [hereinafter cited as "Woodward Circular," RG 121/106, (NA)]; "Region no. 6, List of Names and Addresses," *ibid.*, "List of Artists Employed Between Tuesday December 12 and Monday December 18, 1933," *ibid.*, Box 5.

artists. Now Woodward had the objects of all the talk before him. There in his office he sounded the true depths of the emergency. What he saw appalled him. "I am already overwhelmed by the reality of need that is brought to my knowledge," he wrote to Edward Bruce, "Artists are desperate and driven beyond endurance. They chew the cud of hope deferred, sometimes without bread to chew with it." While he waited for instructions from Washington Woodward received a parade of daily visitors anxious for some word he felt himself unable to give. Many were friends and acquaintances. Some were former students. There was so much need, so many frustrated hopes, so many averted eyes. His mood blackened. "The situation uncovered here is acute," he confessed, "and in some cases heartbreaking."⁵⁷

An unswerving devotion to artistic standards compounded Woodward's anxiety. His aesthetic values forbade shoddy workmanship, the inevitable yield of the undisciplined artist. But need transcended skill; it ignored training and existed in abundance throughout the art community. How could Woodward, the artist, subsidize poor art? How could Woodward the human being turn his back on poor artists? Bruce foresaw the situation and issued strict instructions. "It is going to take a fine sense of discrimination [by us all] to select only those needy artists whose ability is worthy of their employment," he cautioned, "I think we all ought to remember that we are putting artists to work and not trying to make artists out of bums." Woodward grasped the point. "The problem is nicely poised between benevolence on the one hand and artistic ability on the other," he replied. Yet reconciling

⁵⁷ Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, December 16, 1933; Woodward to Bruce, December 21, 1933, RG 121/108, (NA).

this difference, as Woodward learned, required any number of painful decisions, especially for a man of his sensitivity.⁵⁸

Ellsworth Woodward never hardened himself to the desperate situation his artists faced, and because of it, he consistently refused compensation for his services. Late in January, 1934, a twenty per cent employment cut across the CWA forced Woodward to trim his payroll. He started by firing two artists of negligible talent, ones retained, he insisted, only through acts of "pure benevolence." Nevertheless, it prompted the unburdening of a troubled conscience.

If you were in my place you would at once realize the delicacy required. If a person claims to be a professional artist and asserts that he has been making his living...from his art, on the face of it his claim is valid. If his work, however, shows him to be the veriest amateur and shows him moreover to have no right...to be on the public payroll, you are at once put into a very unpleasant position of deciding whether or not he may be admitted in spite of his obvious inabilities.⁵⁹

This kind of uncertainty plagued Woodward to the end. "Nothing that I say to myself in support of my judgement is ever quite enough to give me a completely easy conscience," he lamented just six weeks before the Project closed, "If you do not mind my saying so in plain terms, this has been a hell of a job."⁶⁰

Bruce sympathized with the Director's plight, but never relaxed his demand for quality artwork. He insisted that the future of the

⁵⁸ Edward Bruce to Ellsworth Woodward, December 15, 1933; Woodward to Bruce, December 30, 1933, RG 121/108, (NA). For discussions of the tension between relief and skill see Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, p.43; McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp.13ff.

⁵⁹ Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, January 23, 1934, RG 121/108, (NA).

⁶⁰ Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, March 14, 1934, *ibid.*

government art experiment depended upon the value of the works produced by PWAP artists. The good of all, Bruce asserted, relied upon the skill of each. "I think [our] duty to the artists as a whole is higher than any duty we owe to the individual case," he explained, for "in the long run no kindness to any human being is shown by letting him think that he is an artist if you do not think he has the quality to succeed." It was a momentous issue, this question of standards, one debated in many quarters of the American nation. It cut fundamentally to a changing conception of society itself.⁶¹

Bruce and Woodward focused their vision of the good society on the promise of quality artwork. Art, they agreed, represented a civilizing force in life, a means of social uplift. Good art made better citizens, they assumed, and the best citizens were those with the highest appreciation of art, a circumstance mirrored by the structure of American society. The upper class, people of wealth, breeding, and education were not by accident the staunchest allies of art. For this reason Woodward's most anxious moments were those contemplative walks through well-to-do neighborhoods unguided by aesthetic principle. He never degraded the laboring districts whose ramshackle appearance, like the chronic poverty of their inhabitants, represented an immutable circumstance of American life. In art as in society, Woodward believed, the poor shall always be with us. Bruce echoed the assumption while advising his directors on the proper composition of the regional committees. "I think it is important for us to enlist in the movement as many people of culture and refinement and genuine interest in art as we can," he advised. This, he concluded, would ensure the participation

⁶¹ Edward Bruce to Ellsworth Woodward, January 27, 1934, *ibid.*

of what Bruce called "the right kind of people in each community."⁶²

These were curious methods for self-proclaimed revolutionaries. PWAP officials hoped to instigate a nationwide demand for art, a popular movement directed by the "best people in each community" dedicated to the highest artistic and social standards of the day. There were glaring contradictions. By eschewing relief for quality artwork, Bruce ran counter to prevailing political currents. His seeming indifference to relief administration drew exasperated protests from Harry Hopkins, who was convinced that PWAP violated the reform spirit of the New Deal. Bruce's elitism also undermined the image of the artist as citizen, loosed among the people to record their ideals on canvas. It attempted to make the artist a full participant in the democratic mass, yet somehow keep him aloof from it in accordance with the standards of his profession. It also assumed that the artist could touch the common without soiling his fingers, that he could come into contact with ideas in the streets and render these in a fashion agreeable to all. Experiences such as the Coit Tower episode in San Francisco,⁶³ proved otherwise. Most important, the repeated insistence upon art standards ignored a transformation begun by the conversion of art production to the wage scale. As an effort to revive slumping sales, PWAP yielded to the consumer the ultimate power to judge the quality of art. Artistic

⁶² Edward Bruce to Ellsworth Woodward, January 2, 1934, *ibid.* Woodward took the hint. Within two weeks he notified Bruce that he had contacted fifteen "citizens of the first rank and influence" in his region. Woodward to Bruce, January 17, 1934, *ibid.*

⁶³ Probably the most celebrated controversy of the PWAP, the Coit Tower incident centered over the use of direct references to the glories of the Communist regime in Russia. For discussion of the incident see Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.44-6; McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp.24-6.

methods, regardless of standard, would have to adjust accordingly. This had been Woodward's experience in the waning days of his academic career, as though the whole Newcomb experiment were a rehearsal for his PWAP service. But if his tenure as Director of Region Six stirred any ironic memories of his years at the pottery, Woodward kept these to himself. Instead he continued to seek out needy artists and put them to work on a series of projects he had devised, ones soon affected by this great transformation in American art.

5. "The Dying Scenes of the South"

Despite the Director's anxiety, his Regional Office took gradual shape. Woodward hired a Chief Clerk, John D. Britton, who, with an additional clerk, John Jacomest, Jr. rounded out the office staff. These two men deciphered the code of administrative procedure and put the office on a business footing. Britton contacted Warren Kearney, Collector of the Port of New Orleans and disbursing agent for Region Six, to arrange for the release of the first weekly checks. Their arrival, beamed Woodward, cheered his artists beyond description. Additional administrative bumps were smoothed when Woodward finally received the sort of close supervisory attention he had requested since returning from Washington. It came in the form of W.C. Cram, Chief Assistant to Treasury Undersecretary Robert, who arrived in New Orleans two days after Christmas. Cram made an extensive review of Project operations, met with Kearney, and gave the artists a pep talk. He entertained questions, offered criticisms, and finally, pronounced the effort sound. Woodward was delighted. He wrote Bruce a thankful expression of relief. "Mr. Cram brings back from New Orleans a glowing account of the splendid work you are doing for the artists, and the unique position as guide, philosopher, and friend you occupy there," responded Bruce, "My only fear is that in your affection for them and enthusiasm for the movement you are going to worry yourself sick."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ "Washington Office, Administrative Payroll," RG 121/105, (NA); Ellsworth Woodward to Forbes Watson, December 23, 1933, RG 121, Entry 108A, Central Office Correspondence with Regions, 1933-34, Box 3, (NA), [hereinafter cited as RG 121/108A, (NA)]; Edward Bruce to Ellsworth Woodward, December 21, 1933; Bruce to Woodward, December 22, 1933; Woodward to Bruce, December 30, 1933; Bruce to Woodward, January 2,

Such compliments had their purpose. Bruce hoped to convey faith in his Regional Director who was desperate for support. But the Bruce letter also hoped to reconcile a fundamental divergence of perspective between the two men. At the organizational meeting Woodward had asked Bruce if it were possible to use portions of the Hopkins fund to purchase works of art already created by a seventy-five year old "genius" working in his region. "No," Bruce said, "but you can set that genius to work next week to paint another..." "And can I use my artists to depict the dying scenes of the Old South, the Negro shanties, the wooden plows, the stills?" Woodward inquired. "Yes," Bruce replied, "but remember the eighteenth amendment is repealed. It's a new deal in art and liquor." So characteristic of each man, the exchange contained the seeds of future misunderstanding. Woodward did hire the seventy-five year old genius as Bruce directed. This accorded with policy laid down by the national office, guidelines Woodward felt honor-bound to uphold. But in matters of artistic interpretation Woodward lost all his bureaucratic timidity.⁶⁵

The circular Woodward drafted to announce the opening of his office contained a review of the subject matter his artists would be asked to treat. Five separate projects were proposed, beginning with the design and execution of mural studies. Next, Woodward proposed a

1934, *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Quoted in McCoy, "Poverty, Politics, and Artists," p.93; "Program of Public Works of Art Project in Region #6," RG 121/108A, (NA). Woodward's seventy-five year old "genius" was Alexander Drysdale, a prolific landscape water colorist, who had recently executed a large mural cycle for the newly-built Shushan Airport. Drysdale died two weeks after Woodward hired him. "Alexander Drysdale," Artists Files, (THNOC).

series of paintings recording local industries such as cotton, lumber, rice, and sugar. Through another project he recruited portraitists to work in oil or in the sculptor's plaster of Paris depicting "personages deserving of historic remembrance, who by public act or scholarship deserve a place in public galleries." Woodward also announced a series of architectural studies to be executed in various media, studying the historic streets and buildings of New Orleans. One final project suggested the creation of finely-crafted "eulogistic" memorials honoring signal events in the regional past.⁶⁶

Additional projects soon broadened the original series. Just after he opened his Project Woodward entertained a delegation of local museum directors and librarians, all representing institutions whose archival collections included valuable maps decaying rapidly. They convinced Woodward to hire an artist to copy the disintegrating originals. He forwarded this request with two others, each of personal concern. The first suggested a revival of the Newcomb Pottery work, the central episode of Woodward's academic career. The other concerned the Delgado Museum of Art. During his first week on the job Woodward read an article in the current issue of Museum News urging the use of PWAP funds for art museum preservation. It struck a responsive chord. The Delgado badly needed an internal facelift. Certainly, he wrote Forbes Watson, it must be possible to hire two women to clean oil paintings and to rearrange museum displays fallen into disrepair.⁶⁷

All these proposals, Woodward believed, satisfied both national

⁶⁶ "Woodward Circular," RG 121/108A, (NA).

⁶⁷ Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, December 14, 1933; Woodward to Bruce, December 16, 1933; Woodward to Bruce, December 26, 1933, RG 121/108A, (NA).

guideline and local circumstance. Down the line he stressed the American Scene despite certain reservations reflecting his academic conservatism. "I am all for the American Scene," he insisted, "but refuse to believe...that bad drawing and slatternly technique lend the Scene any charm." The projects were also mindful of the talents and limitations of Woodward's artists. Woodward hoped to employ the widest possible variety of artistic talents, everyone from craftsmen to painters. This not only accorded with his own aesthetic beliefs; the emergency demanded it. Yet there was no great overabundance of artistic talent at Woodward's disposal. Many of his artists came to him straight from the classrooms of the Arts and Crafts Club, whose variety of scholarships and awards drew aspiring artists from the hinterland. They brought with them "a great deal of erratic talent," Woodward observed, but little artistic discipline. Here the need for training and the emphasis on the American Scene fitted nicely, he thought, for the representational projects offered valuable lessons in design and composition in addition to the material benefits of a weekly paycheck. The portraiture project held similar advantages. Portrait painters constituted a disproportionate number of the local art population, one hit hard by the economic collapse. Employing the painters in their accustomed manner, Woodward reasoned, would not only obtain worthy objects of educational value, but prevent further deterioration of artistic skills.⁶⁸

Yet the Woodward plan contemplated more than relief and professional training. The projects were not unrelated ideas hastily

⁶⁸ Untitled speech in Woodward Papers, (TU); Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, December 19, 1933, RG 121/108A, (NA).

cut from whole cloth. The economic urgency bore them forward, but their existence reflected more than the single desire to aid needy artists. Something else arranged them as tiles in a mosaic, giving them the unity of design. Twin impulses, equally compelling, organized the projects: an urge to record and the wish to preserve. Woodward's intention to record the dying scenes of the South was not a remark made off the cuff. He could see the transition in the fading agricultural practices of the rural districts as well as in the Vieux Carre where the architectural heritage of three centuries lay crumbling. Thus he arrayed his artists in the most strategic positions to observe and record the moment.

What stirred Woodward's artistic soul also offended his patrician spirit. During the heyday of the Newcomb Pottery he had worked in vain to establish standards of public taste. Now, under the auspices of PWAP came a second chance, perhaps the final chance for a man already in his seventies. By stuffing the public buildings with "glimpses of divine beauty," by preserving the Great Deeds in silver and the Great Men in oil, by recording the fine architecture of the past, Woodward sought to shore up a social world he saw passing from the scene. The studies of regional industry destined to hang in public school classrooms would not only record the rising mechanization of southern life but preserve glimpses of its agrarian heritage. Art would instruct as it also uplifted. The subjects of the portrait program, men whose public acts earned honorable places in the public memory, would exemplify lessons in civic virtue: thrift, sobriety, and discipline, values Woodward saw threatened not only in the art community but in society at large. Practitioners of modern art conspired to overthrow the training and discipline Woodward championed even as the New Deal represented to its

critics an analogous toppling of standards. The situations were not entirely unrelated, a point made nowhere more clearly than in Woodward's own adopted state; for seventy miles north of his office lay the epicenter of the most profound social upheaval in Louisiana history.

The whirl of events made time crucial. Woodward rushed his artists to their assignments. The day Woodward hired Louis Reynaud, he handed the painter bus fare and sent him into the central parishes of the state to record scenes of the sugar industry. Woodward dispatched another artist to Honduras to observe banana production from the earliest stages to arrival of the fruit on the wharves of New Orleans. An etcher commenced work on historical markers. By special arrangement six students of the Arts and Crafts Club began a cooperative mural design under the direction of Club President, Charles Bien. In her studio Angela Gregory modelled a bust of John McDonough, the celebrated nineteenth century patron of New Orleans public education. A second sculptor, Albert Reicke, shaped the goateed features of Creole historian, Charles Gayerre. Woodward sent other artists into the streets. Jack Edwards recorded scenes along the riverfront. Alberta Kinsey set up her easel on Decatur Street and began a study of the Old French Market, already doomed to the wrecker's ball. At least five other artists depicted the Cabildo from various angles in different media.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ "Minutes of the Meeting of Regional Chairmen of the Public Works of Art Project on Monday, February 20, 1934 in Room 68 of the Treasury," RG 121/106, (NA), [hereinafter cited as "Regional Directors' Meeting, February 20, 1934," RG 121/106, (NA)]; Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, March 21, 1934, RG 121/108A, (NA); Woodward to Bruce, December 16, 1933; Woodward to Bruce, December 19, 1933, *ibid.*; *Times-Picayune*, January 6, 1934; "List of Pictures: PWAP, Region #6," RG 121/106, Box 5, (NA); Alberta Kinsey to Edward Bruce, July 22, 1934, RG 121, File 108, Central Office Correspondence with Artists, 1933-34, Box 2, (NA),

Almost immediately, pieces of Woodward's mosaic came unstuck. As early as December sixteenth, Edward Bruce wired to advise suspension of the portraiture project. Woodward could scarcely contain his dismay. He had already hired four portraitists, nearly a third of his present contingent. The loss, he insisted, would be grievous. "I implore you to give the regional directors liberal freedom in the choice of subjects and assignments," he protested to Bruce. Three days of silence deepened the anxiety and prompted renewed appeals for regional authority. "I cannot myself see anything but discrimination in accepting two or three lines of artistic endeavor and excluding half a dozen others," he complained, "I hope I may secure this liberty for all regional directors...If you think about it you will perceive that there is no one else upon whom you can depend with so much assurance in your whole organization relating to this project." Later, in a note to Forbes Watson, Woodward left no room for misinterpretation:

Certain categories of work had been discussed and generally agreed upon among them portraiture...I accordingly set to work some five or six artists working in this field. I then received word by wire that I had better not include portraiture. I am sorry for this, but will, of course, be guided by your decision. Nevertheless it leaves a very great hiatus which can be filled only by portrait painters who need employment and whose services could be used and legitimately be paid for. I am anxious, of course, that this ruling should not be made retroactive; indeed if it should be made retroactive, I should find myself in so embarrassing a position that I could not willingly go on.⁷⁰

The threat of resignation brought swift response. It also won

[hereinafter cited as RG 121/108, (NA)].

⁷⁰ "List of Artists Employed," RG 121/106, Box 5, (NA); Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, December 16, 1933, RG 121/108A, (NA); Forbes Watson to Ellsworth Woodward, December 20, 1933; Woodward to Watson, December 19, 1933; Woodward to Watson, December 23, 1933.

back the portraitists. The recommendation to suspend the project, explained Watson, rested on the suspicion that it might accumulate "a good many lemons." But if Woodward could assure the quality of the work, he continued, then the artists could stay. Ed Rowan advised Woodward to have his painters depict a broader range of social subjects, not just great and near great public officials, but all types of native characters. The advice ran counter to Woodward's purposes, who, having recovered his portrait painters ignored it. Additional suggestions met rebuff. Ultimately the Washington office rejected each of Woodward's proposals beyond his original five. Most were quashed by pleading fiscal stringency. Woodward let his etcher go after only a week on the job when the national authorities claimed themselves unable to provide the necessary supplies. They also questioned their ability to sponsor the pottery proposal. Rowan again drew a stony silence when he warned Woodward that the production of cheap "gift shop" wares would not be tolerated. The project was never started.⁷¹

Despite its brevity, Woodward's confrontation with Project officials revealed many far-ranging implications. The exchange coincided with Cram's visit, was resolved amicably, and thereafter but for occasional bumps the PWAP effort ran smoothly in Region Six. Yet in ten days Edward Bruce and Ellsworth Woodward opened questions never resolved by ten years of collaboration between art and government. These were issues germane not only to the art world. They cut to the essence of the New Deal and to the nation at large, and the first among them focused on the meaning of the word "region." For Ellsworth

⁷¹ Forbes Watson to Ellsworth Woodward, December 20, 1933; Edward Rowan to Ellsworth Woodward, December 27, 1933, *ibid.*

Woodward, the artist turned businessman, "region" represented the heart of the genius loci, a guiding inspiration of artistic expression. The regions, he insisted, were self-contained. They possessed unique characteristics and lived under differing circumstances. Each posed problems no national policy could address without recourse to an artificial standardization. It was an argument persistently advanced if steadily deflected by Edward Bruce, the businessman turned artist. Bruce considered regionalism not as a bedrock aesthetic faith but a management principle, a method of controlling the manufacture and distribution of a product, art, palatable to the broadest possible taste. He hoped to overcome the very regional barriers Woodward sought to reinforce, for in order to secure his revolution, Bruce needed a means of communication capable of making his message understood anywhere in the country.

During their association on the PWAP, Bruce and Woodward found themselves at consistent loggerheads over the regional issue. Each pulled for common goals, among them the elevation of American art tastes and the restoration of the artist to a position of public stewardship, but they never pulled from the same end. Woodward preferred the role of circuit rider and said so at a meeting of regional directors held in February, 1934. There he asked for the appointment of a regional vice-chairmen, someone to oversee the technical details of regional administration while Woodward visited the remote corners of his district. He could offer advice and criticism to artists working in the severest isolation, he explained, poor substitutes for formal training, but under the circumstances, the only open course. The request, of course, met with polite refusal. It flew in the face of Bruce's

management style. To him, Woodward's rightful place was in New Orleans, where he could reach any point in his region through the arm of the regional committee system. This was a polite disagreement between two gentle men without acrimony or additional threats of resignation and never a whisper of recrimination. Each had warm words for the other in an amicable correspondence continued long after PWAP ceased to function. Yet the impasse remained throughout the period, in art as in politics, a fundamental gulf created by the new federalism of the New Deal. This major theme of the era, one symbolized by the bitter struggle between Huey Long and Franklin Roosevelt, echoed in a minor key when Bruce and Woodward debated the best means of distributing the artistic fruits of the PWAP labors.⁷²

The topic hung fire all spring, and climaxed toward the close of the Project in April, 1934. "You know allocating these pictures is going to be a major problem," Woodward cautioned Bruce. Already, he reported, the regional office had received numerous inquiries from eligible recipients. One, from the Allen Parish School District, requested 113 paintings, more than the total produced to date by Woodward's artists. "I suppose you will want to send them at least one," quipped Bruce. Still no easy solution surfaced, though Woodward offered a characteristic suggestion. Since local artists were engaged rendering local scenes, he reasoned, it seemed only natural to allocate these works to regional institutions. Woodward proposed a lottery to divide the spoils, eligible recipients in each state to compete for the

⁷² "Regional Directors Meeting, February 20, 1934," RG 121/106, (NA); Ellsworth Edward to Edward Bruce, April 9, 1934; Bruce to Woodward, March 22, 1934, RG 121/108A, (NA). Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression, (New York, 1983), pp.8-81.

work of its native artists. Certainly the plan had merit. It conformed to earlier Project intentions by providing a means for a broad distribution of artwork. It also represented, as Woodward insisted, the most democratic method available. But Edward Bruce had other ideas. By then he had begun his long struggle to create a permanent institutional bond between art and government and could not resist the promotional value of the PWAP paintings. Rather than disperse these among the regions, Bruce now proposed to collect the very best in Washington for a major showing, then according to the time-honored stratagem, distribute the artwork among the members of Congress. Bruce announced his intentions while Woodward busied himself arranging a local exhibition. Bruce denied all appeals. Two weeks later Woodward shipped off more than forty of his best works. "I want to tell you it takes some loyalty not to withhold my best pictures with which I hoped to impress our home people," he lamented.⁷³

⁷³ Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, January 26, 1934, RG 121/108A, (NA); Bruce to Woodward, April 26, 1934, RG 121/105, (NA); Woodward to Bruce, March 16, 1934, *ibid.*; Woodward to Bruce, April 3, 1934, RG 121/108A, (NA); Bruce to Woodward, March 7, 1934; Woodward to Bruce, March 8, 1934; Woodward to Bruce, April 14, 1934; Woodward to Bruce, March 21, 1934, *ibid.*

6. Voyage of the Torrent

The Public Works of Art Project closed at the end of April, 1934, amidst the sort of hectic activity that marked its beginning. Arrangements made through the state Emergency Relief Administration offices provided temporary sponsorship for unfinished projects nearing completion. Another program, devised the previous January, provided for transfer of selected PWAP artists to CCC camps. These artists, all men, were chosen on the basis of outdoor experience and general hardiness, and dispatched to camps to record scenes of camp life. Jack Kelly finished his series of riverfront oils, packed his easel, and headed for a post at Camp S.P.2 in Creston, Louisiana, near Natchitoches. His colleague, Louis Reynaud, quit the sugar parishes for a CCC camp in Mississippi. Other efforts focused on closing down the administrative headquarters of each region, discharging the artists, compiling reports of completed works, and overseeing the allocation of artwork.⁷⁴

Bruce, Watson, and the Washington staff coordinated the effort while arranging a national exhibition of PWAP artwork, six hundred pieces in all, at the Corcoran Gallery in the capital. The President and Mrs. Roosevelt, accompanied by the Ickes and the Morgenthau,

⁷⁴ "Public Works of Art Project," RG 121, Entry 110, "Publicity File," Box 1, (NA), [hereinafter cited as "PWAP," RG 121/110, (NA)]; Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, May 17, 1934, RG 121/108A, (NA); "Uncompleted Projects Estimates by Regional Committees," RG 121/105, Box 5, (NA); "Work of Artists Employed in Emergency Conservation Work Camps," RG 121/106, Box 4, (NA); PWAP Bulletins, nos. 1 and 2, *ibid.*; William J. Johnstone to Ellsworth Woodward, January 26, 1934; Woodward to Johnstone, February 7, 1934, *ibid.*, Box 1; Jack Edwards to Edward Rowan, April 3, 1934; Edwards to Ellsworth Woodward, March 22, 1934; Robert Fuchs to Rowan, March 14, 1934, RG 121, Entry 107, "Correspondence and Other Personal Files of Ed Rowan," Box 1, (NA), [hereinafter cited as RG 121/107, (NA)]; Times-Picayune, March 23, 1934.

attended a special showing, applauded the effort, and selected thirty-two paintings for permanent exhibition at the White House. Reviewers of the show echoed the President's approval. Edward Alden Jewell, art critic of the New York Times, believed the exhibition surpassed any other in American history. Other critics followed Jewell's lead.⁷⁵

National officials were jubilant. Watson believed that the experiment had fundamentally transformed the role of the artist in society. He pointed with others to the critical and popular success of the Corcoran showing, to the number and variety of artists employed by the Project, and to the prolific output of those employed. Nearly 2500 artists, they boasted, created over fifteen thousand works of art in little better than four and one half months. These included virtually all the media: bas reliefs, carvings, drawings, etchings, lithographs, murals, portraits, pastels, prints, sculpture, sketches, water colors, and wood blocks, scores of each and all of it for less than a million and one half dollars. By sheer dint of volume, announced one PWAP bulletin, the American artist had made his voice heard in the democratic community as never before. "In other words," concluded L.W. Robert, "our figures show that the Government's agreement to employ artists at craftsmen's wages acted as a tremendous stimulant to the artists' creative powers."⁷⁶

Woodward's artists gave little argument. He had hired a total of one hundred nine of them, few more grateful than Catherine Howell. She

⁷⁵ "PWAP," RG 121/110, (NA); "PWAP Report Concerning its Activities and Liquidation," RG 121/106, (NA); Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, p.46; McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp. 29-31.

⁷⁶ Forbes Watson to Edward Bruce, June 3, 1934, RG 121/106, Box 4, (NA); Untitled manuscript dated May 11, 1934, RG 121/105, Box 5, (NA); "Final PWAP Report, RG 121/115, (NA).

was an oil painter whose depiction of old men shucking oysters became part of the White House collection. Since the Depression her brother had supported her and her two children, a burden, Howell insisted, no man should have had to bear. She tried several times to express her gratitude in writing, tearing up any number of efforts. Finally she offered thanks for two men, her brother and "the gentlemen in the White House," and let it go at that. Others sounded grander notes, among them Gideon Stanton, another painter. "Expeditions succeed each other to explore into the ruins of past civilizations and to excavate for works of art of remote ages," he intoned, "but these are as nothing as to have one's own Government reach out to the corners of this country to set in motion an art movement that the Old World, with its centuries of culture, including Italy and her Renaissance, might be proud of."⁷⁷

Somewhere between the extremes there emerged some consensus, a thanksgiving for a living wage and the opportunity to work in one's chosen craft. Many believed that the weekly wage represented as much a moral as a financial boost, though none cared to speculate on the connection. The artists believed Bruce's revolutionary rhetoric; they believed themselves to be participants in a national movement, whose solidarity many expressed through martial imagery. "I do feel a genuine thrill in being one of the army of 2500 American artists planting the seeds for the cultural expression of my nation," wrote Angela Gregory. "Now we have an army of...enthusiastic, patriotic, trained men and women expressing what they yearned to do," added Gardner Reed, as if to finish

⁷⁷ "Final PWAP Report, RG 121/115, (NA); Catherine Howell to Edward Bruce, n.d.; Gideon Stanton to Bruce, January 17, 1934, RG 121/108, (NA).

Gregory's thought.⁷⁸

Artists and officials alike cheered the inroads made for art throughout Region Six. Mobile, Birmingham, Montgomery, Shreveport, and Jackson, all these had artists working in their area, even Dothan, Alabama. Walter Anderson completed a mural in mosaic tiles at Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Joe Greenburg painted a mural on the wall of City Hall in Bogalusa, Louisiana where onlookers clustered so thickly around his scaffold and raised such a din that the artist offered free evening art lessons in return for the quiet needed to finish his work. Beyond this, exhibitions were held in cities across the region, including two large showings in New Orleans.⁷⁹ Still, for all the enthusiasm of its supporters, for all the claims made on its behalf, judging the relative success or failures of PWAP is at best problematic. Surely much was done with little at hand. Artists had been put to work and they had labored diligently. On the whole, their work had been well received despite various conflicts and controversies. Yet no great revolution in art had occurred, especially in Region Six. Woodward's efforts to curry favor with the local press all failed. No great publicity scandals rocked his region as they did others, but Woodward's artists labored in a silence equally disconcerting. Nor had the allocation of art met Woodward's hopes. Local institutions did not become repositories of

⁷⁸ Angela Gregory to Edward Bruce, January 28, 1934; Gardner Reed to Bruce, January 28, 1934, *ibid.* For additional comments made by the artists of Region Six, see Harry Coughlin to Bruce, January 30, 1934; J.H. Coughlin to Bruce, January 31, 1934; Werner Hoehn to Bruce, May 4, 1934; Nell O'Brien to Bruce, n.d.; Randall Davey to Bruce, n.d., *ibid.*; Alvin Sharpe to Ellsworth Woodward, March 4, 1934; Woodward to Bruce, March 16, 1934, RG 121/105, Box 4, (NA).

⁷⁹ Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, January 26, 1934, RG 121/108A; Elizabeth Lawes to Bruce, March 21, 1934; Joe Greenburg to Woodward, March 30, 1934, RG 121/107; Item, February 22, 1934.

local scenes executed by native artists. Most of his best work went to Washington where it stayed. Pieces not selected by the various congressional delegations were used to decorate the expanding office space created by the proliferation of emergency agencies. Woodward forwarded twelve paintings to the Brooklyn Navy Yard for decoration of the destroyer New Orleans. He dispatched others to colleges and universities within his Region and to several state offices; but he never realized the ambition of spreading artwork on an unprecedented scale throughout the Gulf South.⁸⁰

Yet somehow PWAP retains a significance all out of proportion to its brief existence and its improvisational character. Measured against the scale of subsequent art projects, it was the trickle before a flood, and a quintessential representative of the early New Deal. It was a cautiously liberal experiment, begun when an old friend gained the President's ear and ended by the bogey of an unbalanced budget. It engaged a nationalist, even an isolationist form, American Scene painting, in hopes of ameliorating the suffering of a specialized group in society dislocated by the Depression. It was designed and administered by specialists in the field of art, owed its life to a gentlemen's agreement between the national government and the American art community, ran its course on a faith in the power of a government

⁸⁰ No exact allocation records survive for Region Six. Some references to this topic are available, however, in "PWAP Report Concerning its Activities and Liquidation," RG 121/106, (NA); "Artwork Returned to the Regions," RG 121, Entry 109, Miscellaneous Central Office Files, Box 1, (NA); Cecil Jones to Anne Craton, March 30, 1934, RG 121/106, Box 2, (NA); Edwin L. Stephens to Edward Bruce, May 3, 1934, RG 121/105, Box 1, (NA); "Requests For Pictures," *ibid.*; Robert Maestri to Edward Rowan, July 23, 1934; Sen. John Overton to Edward Bruce, May 29, 1934, *ibid.*; "Exhibition of Water Colors Loaned to Army Camps by the Section of Fine Arts," *ibid.*, Box 5; "Congressional Correspondence-List of Artwork Allocated to Senators and Congressmen," *ibid.*

subsidy, and ultimately sought to rationalize the art market by controlling production and stimulating consumption. It reached for vastly more than it could ever have hoped to grasp; but in the reaching it raised questions and revealed inconsistencies whose nature made the Project a point of departure for all subsequent art programs.

Even more, through its organization and its artistic focus, PWAP reflected American society in one of its most crucial moments of development. Cautious though it was, the experiment represented a significant departure from the past. It marked not only the first large-scale patronage of art by government in the life of the republic, but the emergence of a national cultural expression, industrial in form and intended for mass consumption. PWAP artists were drawn from a ready labor market and worked set hours for fixed wages. A central office procured raw materials, set minimum standards of production, enforced working regulations, directed publicity, and oversaw distribution of a product calculated to have the maximum popular appeal. It even provided for destruction of inferior products, those inevitable mistakes made on the assembly line. When the Project closed, PWAP officials defended the experiment through the traditional industrial fashion. They loosed a barrage of statistics hoping to prove that the finished item justified the cost of production, a tactic, in the assumption of one historian, designed to underscore the economical production of "art by the yard."

Along with other emergency relief measures, the administration of PWAP posed a formidable challenge to traditional balances of political power. It laid down a grid-like bureaucratic network across the nation transcending regions and states. Just as the New Deal administered its variety of relief agencies through a complex web of federal-state

political relations, so did PWAP gather dozens of local art movements into the first national art community dedicated to the depiction of a national art form. In art as in politics these were steps taken tentatively; for the tradition of localism ran deeply through both. Indeed, so strong was the appeal of locality, as a political faith and aesthetic assumption, that the New Deal in general and the PWAP in particular took great pains to pay it lip service. Nevertheless, centralization characterized both.⁸¹

The Project occurred amidst one of the great upheavals in American history, a period when the national self-image changed fundamentally, and the idea of an American culture was discovered, described, and celebrated. Yet this happened only in halting fragments. It bound up defenders of old traditions and creators of new departures in a complex relationship of conservation and innovation. Many showed one foot planted in either camp, including Ellsworth Woodward and Edward Bruce. These staunch defenders of traditional artistic craftsmanship oversaw the industrialization of American art, and in so many ways, helped to sow changes they intended to prevent. Both men hoped to make art an everyday experience throughout America while preserving aesthetic and social standards under siege. Yet by their very efforts, by the composition of PWAP and its artistic focus, they helped to ensure the demise of what they sought to preserve.⁸²

This very enigma surfaces in much of the PWAP artwork. In Region Six, Woodward's struggle to document the passing of what he hoped to

⁸¹ For an excellent discussion of localism and the politics of the New Deal see Karl, The Uneasy State, pp.80-181.

⁸² Warren Susman, Culture As History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century, (New York, 1973), pp.150-210.

preserve surfaces most poignantly in a series of paintings done by two of his artists, J. Kelly Fitzpatrick and Josephine Crawford. Fitzpatrick, an Alabamian, recorded several rural scenes, all oils, in a romanticized impressionist style reminiscent of Woodward's own. They earned the master's praise. Evident, too, is the Director's philosophic spirit, his desire to record the "dying scenes of the south." The works [figs.1-3] depict views of traditional agricultural practices and the plain board outbuildings of a local sawmill.⁸³ These are contrasted in style and content by the works of Josephine Crawford, a young New Orleans painter whose canvases done in and around the city recorded such landmarks as the monument on the Chalmette battlefield and the old Spanish Arsenal. She also did an industrial series [figs. 4-6] including views of the American Sugar Refinery, a cement plant, and an oil refinery in nearby Norco, Louisiana. Crawford's plain, almost severe style won the attention and acclaim of local art critics. Kenneth Knoblock of the Item, noting the pale, almost colorless shades of the works, ranked her studies among the finest in the first of Woodward's two major PWAP showings.⁸⁴ The style, unmistakably modern, accentuated the linear emphasis and the block-like appearance of the factories, providing a sharp contrast to Fitzpatrick's work. There are no people, no rich brushstrokes, no romantic feel for the region's agrarian past. Tone, style, and content all suggest a clear break with the painterly techniques taught by Woodward and practiced by

⁸³ Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, March 27, 1934, RG 121/108A,(NA); National Archives Still Pictures Branch, RG 121-PWAP, Records of the Public Buildings Service, "Prints, Public Works of Art Project, 1933-34," Box 2. [hereinafter cited as "PWAP Prints," Still Pictures Branch, (NA)].

⁸⁴ Item, February 22, 1934.

Fitzpatrick. Crawford herself seemed to sense this difference, seemed to grasp the enormous transition suggested by the divergent styles and subjects. Among her industrial series she included a painting she entitled "Old and New Skyline of New Orleans." In the foreground she depicted two powerful symbols of the past, the facades of the French Quarter and a tugboat, so vital to river commerce. Behind these, in contrasting tones, loom columnar storage tanks, an industrial landscape dominating the foreground. Color thus informs the canvas, underscoring the tension between commerce and manufactures. Yet, Crawford's painting reflects a great deal more. It represents a momentous transition in art and society and politics, a point of departure, not only in her native city but across a nation caught up in a process of upheaval and dislocation. It reflects fully the collision of values and ideals that typify the years of the Great Depression, an anxious era whose uneasy spirit the artist conveyed when she christened her idle tug Torrent.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ PWAP Prints, Still Pictures Branch, (NA).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

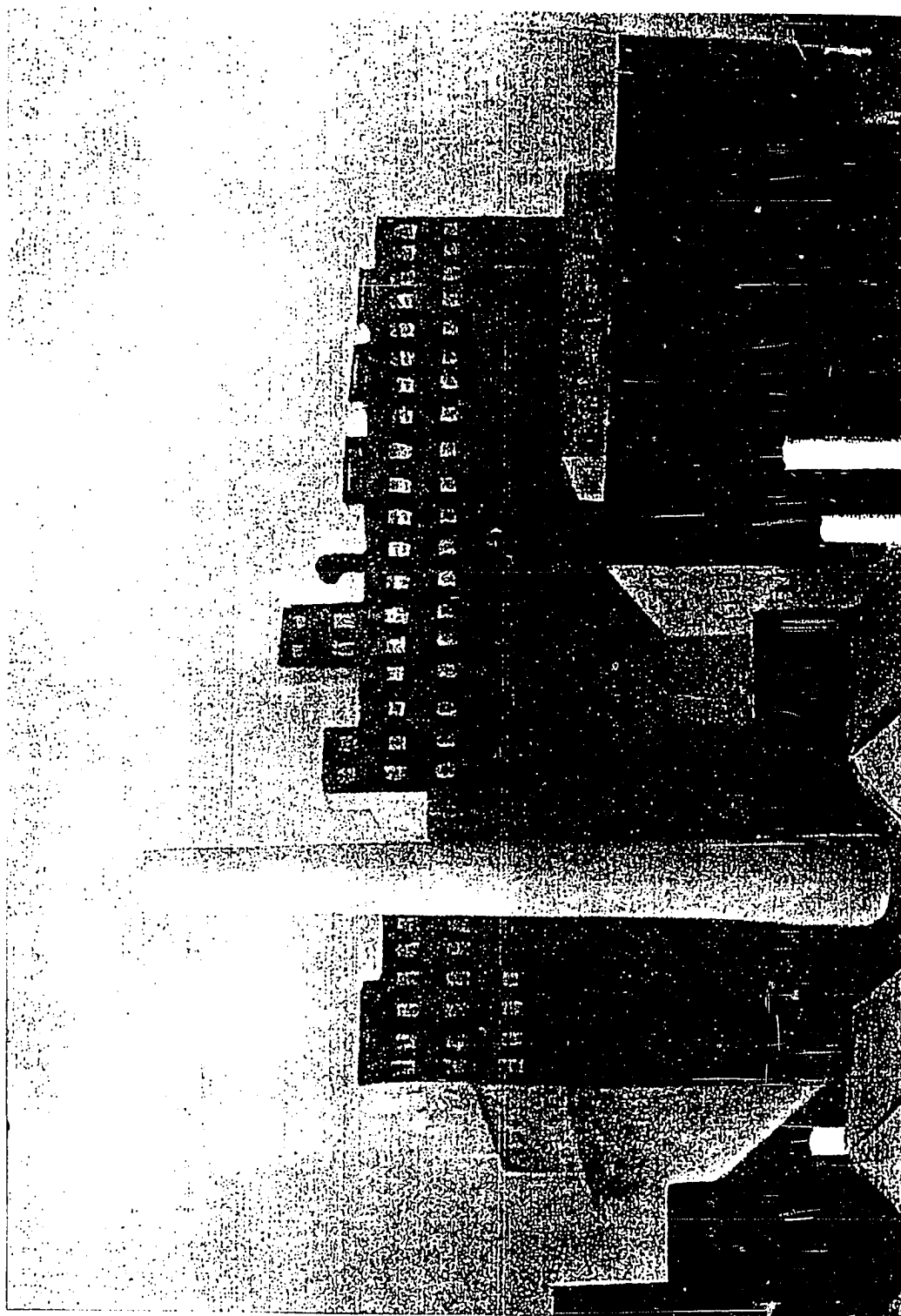


Figure 4

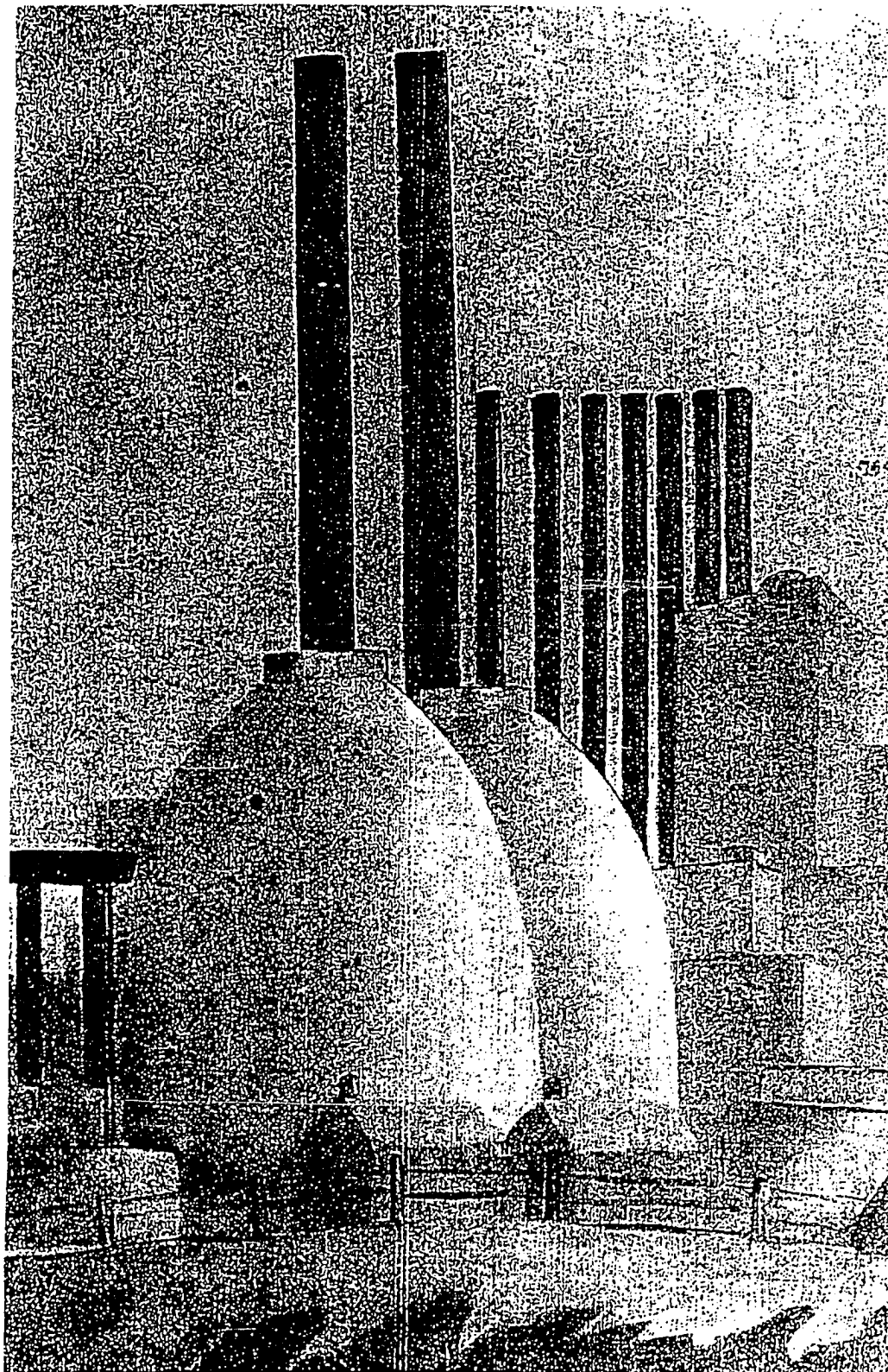


Figure 5

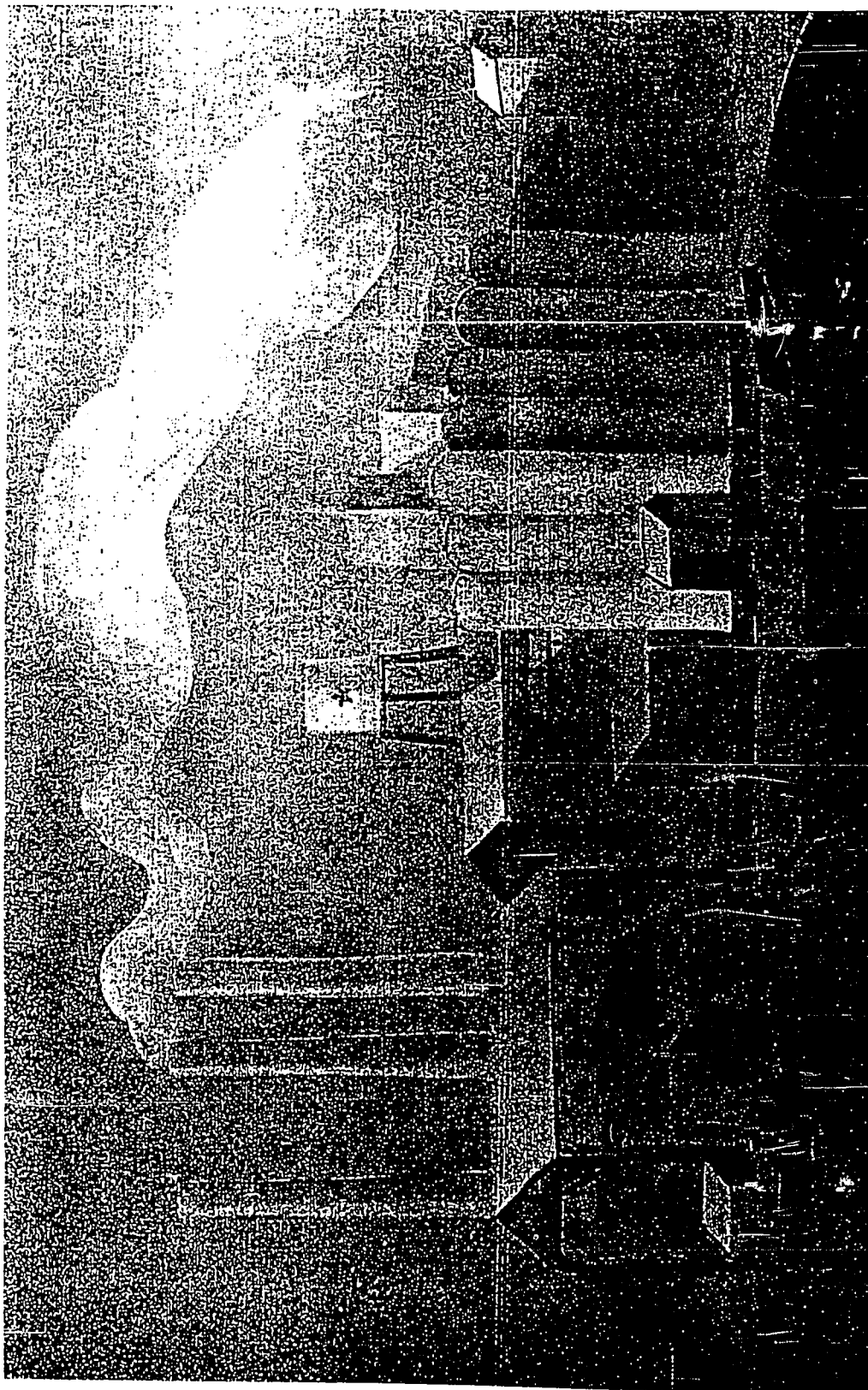


Figure 6



Figure 7

CHAPTER TWO

WALL-TO-WALL LOUISIANA: TREASURY SECTION MURALS AND THE SOUTHERN FUTURE 1934-1943

1. "Cotton Time"

Up in Bienville Parish, through piney hills rolling toward the Ozarks, the road winds down a sweeping curve, rises abruptly, and enters Arcadia, Louisiana. Main Street parallels an abandoned railroad track and runs along eighty yards of brick-faced storefronts. The usual concerns flourish: a flower shop, an insurance agency, the pharmacy, and a second-hand furniture store. There is also a Baptist revival hall, but people point it out for another reason. Years before it was a House of the Lord the building was a home for the dead, a funeral parlor, and as such, briefly, the focal point of national attention. That was in 1934 when, shortly after the sheriff sprang his trap along the parish line, the corpses of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were fetched back to town and propped up on slabs leaning in the undertaker's window. Tellers of the tale usually smile at the irony, but it is not the only one Arcadians can claim. Across the street and down the block from the morgue cum revival home stands a United States post office built during the Great Depression. It conforms to the standard floor plan then in vogue, and at one end of the main hall, over the postmaster's door, hangs a mural whose warm pastels convey a soothing subject. The painting depicts an abundant cotton harvest. Black pickers dot the field, sacks filled to bursting. A white driver crests a hill in a wagon brimming over with the yield and descends a road leading toward

the mill. Surrounding hills stretch to the horizon (see figure 1).

There are people who have lived for a number of years in town but who cannot recall the mural's existence. Others with sharper eyes or clearer memories notice its flawed details. The cotton plants are too small and too green. The pickers' sacks are too short and their movements are too relaxed. Picking cotton, these critics assert, is a good deal more strenuous in reality than it appears in paint. Still, few who view the mural grasp either its purpose or meaning, and failing this they miss the implications of the town's other historical irony. The painter's composition reflects the southern society it depicts, a predominantly agricultural world dominated by whites. Blacks who form a statistical majority on the canvas nevertheless occupy an inferior social position. They harvest a crop marketed by the white boss, who presumably will retain the principal share of the profits. But "Cotton Time," the Arcadia mural, also charts a path towards an idealized vision of the region's future, one bursting with a promise conveyed by the crucial position of the driver. He is the focal point of the work and the key to its interpretation. Symbolic of his own racial superiority, he dominates the pickers, whose marginal position in southern society is reinforced by their placement on the canvas. The anticipated movement of the wagon suggests the southern future. It and its driver descend out of the agricultural past, sweep sharply downhill and across the entire plane of the canvas along a road disappearing off to the left. A ridgeline parallels the movement, drawing the viewer's eye back across the composition to a second focal point, the oil well located at the distant upper right. Here looms a powerful symbol of industrial might poised on the southern horizon. It reaches for the heavens, dominating

the mill below, and rivets the driver's gaze, this iron-latticed answer of twentieth century Americans to the mulberry trees their forbears thrust into the mudflats along the mouth of the James River. The road may wind, but the path is clear, and the journey seems easy as though the process of southern industrialization involved no more than a lazy ride down a country lane leading to easy wealth. Arcadia is home to an arcadian mural.¹

"Cotton Time" reflects its historical moment with uncanny accuracy. It depicts a southern society just emerging from the cotton patch and making off for the oil field, advancing with a characteristic American blend of optimism and nostalgia. It conveys a faith in the technological future even as it pauses reverently to mourn the passing of its agrarian past. The mural underscores the seamlessness of the national story, the unbroken road rolling out of the past and into the future, too afraid or too naive to ponder the consequences of the coming industrial order. By virtue of its very placidity, its escapist dimension, the mural conveys an inverse index of the heightened anxiety

¹ The pertinent correspondence documenting the assignment, supervision, and completion of Treasury Section commissions is kept in Entry 133, the so-called "Embellishment Files" of Record Group, 121, Records of the Public Buildings Service, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Hereinafter, citation to specific mural decorations will be by "File," RG 121, Entry number and description, Box #, (NA). The placement of the oil well was no accident. It appeared at the suggestion of Section Technical Director, Edward Rowan, who thought the artist's original composition too stark. "The general scene that you are depicting seems rather dismal," he wrote, "and it might be well for you to give further thought to the landscape in the hope that you will be able to introduce some piece of architecture that has a note of reassurance. Could this not accomplished on one of the far hills?" Edward Rowan to Allison B. Curry, September 5, 1939, "Arcadia P.O.," RG 121, Entry 133, "Embellishment Files," Box 37, (NA). A succinct overview of each mural or sculpture decoration for every Section commission completed, including an explanation of the work and a capsule biography of the artist, is available in RG 121, Entry 135, "Letters Received and Other Records," (NA).

of the 1930s, a period of tremendous upheaval nationwide and in Louisiana.

2. "Painting Section"

Depression mural painting, perhaps the best remembered of all New Deal art forms, is certainly among the least understood. There has been a tendency in both the scholarly and popular mind to associate murals and the thirties with an inseparable closeness. Indeed, the terms "Depression" and "mural" have become virtually synonymous, as though the form did not exist either before or after the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Confusion also surrounds the New Deal agencies responsible for creating the murals. Since murals were painted under government sponsorship, it is widely thought, these must have been commissioned by the WPA. This is only partially correct. The Federal Art Project(FAP), an administrative division within the WPA, painted any number of murals nationwide; yet, at one time or another, so did each of the other three New Deal art agencies, especially Edward Bruce's Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture. Later named the Section of Fine Arts and commonly dubbed "The Section," this organization decorated federal buildings raised or renovated, usually post offices and courthouses, with two principal media, sculpture and mural paintings. The Section commissioned works according to its own aesthetic principles and organizational desires, ones quite distinct from the FAP, and commissioned them on a scale large enough to make it and not the WPA the major sponsors of the American mural movement of the 1930s.²

² Overviews of the Section appear in Contreras, Tradition and Innovation and McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists. The best survey of Section artwork appears in Karal Ann Marling, Wall-To-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression,

The movement itself is equally misunderstood. American mural painting did not spring sui generis from the rubble of the Stock Market Crash. The form has ancient roots and traditions. In America, since the creation of the Republic, these had been utilized by a small, if dedicated, group of native craftsmen. The form enjoyed a brief vogue at the close of the nineteenth century and was revived by the industrial patronage of the 1920s. By the early years of the Great Depression mural painting in America had become a movement of gathering momentum. Much of the impetus was directly attributable to the influence of three Mexican muralists, Diego Rivera, Donald Siqueros, and Jose Orozco, acknowledged leaders of a popular mural program sympathetic to the ideals of the Mexican Revolution. Indeed, George Biddle, FDR's Groton classmate, had only recently returned from Mexico before suggesting to the President that the administration pay American muralists to depict in oils the social values of the New Deal. Yet, although many American artists were attracted by the aura of romance surrounding the Mexican Revolution, while others proclaimed their solidarity with the Revolutionaries, the two movements were fundamentally different. One was Revolutionary, the other was not. One was agrarian and rural, the other industrial and urban. One was proletarian, the other merely popular, or as scholars have mused since, the Mexican movement, with its Marxists overtones, sparked in America the creation of hundreds of

(Minneapolis, 1982). See also, Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal, (Philadelphia, 1984). For an interpretation of Southern post office murals, see Sue Bidwell Beckham, A Gentle Reconstruction: Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture, (Baton Rouge, 1989). The best contemporary survey of Section artwork appears in Edward Bruce and Forbes Watson, Art in Federal Buildings, Mural Designs, 1934-1936, (Washington D.C., 1936).

murals devoted to the blessings of capitalism.³

Perhaps the most arresting characteristic of the American movement is its very existence. Since Americans were not painting murals to celebrate Revolutionary ideals or its heroes, a landless peasantry, the question remains as to what American painters were hoping to accomplish through the form. The answer is at once elusive and tantalizing. New Deal murals, wherever they were hung and wherever they still hang, remain a visible legacy and cogent reflection of the society that produced them. Few people of the twentieth century, the Russians excepted, have pursued the meaning of their own identity as a people and as a nation with greater intensity than the Americans. And at no point was the search more intense or more uneasy than during the years of the Great Depression, when the thirst for self-knowledge manifested itself in an art form hauled across the border without much knowledge and with less understanding of how mural painting had been conceived of and practiced by its Mexican champions. American murals, especially those sponsored by the Section, reached their moment of greatest influence and widest popularity toward the close of the decade, and did so for a variety of complex reasons. Section murals were commissioned long after the most critical moments of the Depression had already passed. By then, most painters, as well as other artists, had abandoned their

³ A good summary of American mural painting appears in Bruce and Watson, Art in Federal Buildings, pp. 6-13. Though Biddle's suggestion ultimately found institutional expression in the Treasury Section, Biddle remained critical of this organization. George Biddle, An American Artist's Story, (Boston, 1939). Thorough studies of the Mexican mural movement appear in Anita Brenner, Idols Behind Altars, (New York, 1967); Jose Clemente Orozco: An Autobiography, trans., Robert C. Stephenson, (Austin, 1962); Bernard S. Myers, Mexican Mural Painting in Our Time, (New York, 1956). An illuminating comparison of the American and Mexican mural movements appears in MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp. 354-7.

indictment of American capitalism for subjects and themes affirming the spirit of the American people, and murals seemed the ideal form. They were big and sprawling; their size made them the perfect conveyance for grand images and epic themes, a form capable of depicting Americans as heroes of Heroic proportion, a proud people with broad shoulders and tautened muscles and firm jaws, defiant in adversity. Murals also confirmed the essential facts of the American experience, political democracy and social equality. Advocates of the form believed they depicted democratic values through a democratic form. This was especially true of Section work, or so its directors asserted, for these artworks were executed by people selected in anonymous (and hence democratic) competitions, whose efforts were rendered on behalf of the American taxpayer and hung in public buildings, the chief gathering places of the democratic social order.⁴

This and more. A closer look at the Treasury Section murals, at the art form itself and the way these pieces were created, at the intentions of the sponsoring agency, at the symbolic language they invoked and values they stressed, and at the response of the community for which each work was created, reveals the uneasy character of the state and the nation during the Great Depression. Treasury Section murals were born of and existed within an atmosphere of paradox. Generally, they celebrate traditional values of work, family, and community; yet many convey their message through a modern cubist style

⁴ Steven M. Gelber, "Working to Prosperity: California's New Deal Murals," California History, 58(Summer 1979), pp.98-127; "Bulletin, Section of Painting and Sculpture, no. 1, (March 1, 1935), RG 121, Entry 130, Bulletins of the Section of Painting and Sculpture, 1935-41, Box 42, (NA); "Section of Fine Arts," (speech delivered at a session of the American Artists' Congress, June 8, 1941, by Robert Cornbach), RG 121, Entry 122, General Correspondence File, Box 165/24, (NA).

and a visual language of mass communication. They were intended to express messages of hope and reassurance, conveying a politically acceptable message through an aesthetically attractive style, yet their very appearance on the walls of county courthouses and village post offices symbolized, and sometimes exacerbated, an immensely controversial expansion of federal power. The murals were intended to help advance a revolution in American art and society, one that would elevate the quality of democratic life by making art an everyday experience in small towns nationwide--sometimes without their approval, more often without their interest, but art intended to uplift could also condescend. If the form seemed paradoxical, then often so did the content. These messages of hope and optimism were created in the face of unparalleled social upheaval. Amidst widespread poverty the murals depicted scenes of abundance. At a moment of massive unemployment they celebrated work as an American ideal and the worker as an ideal American. In the face of economic calamity, with the nation's industrial machinery idle, some idealized an Edenic future made possible through technology. Others romanticized an agrarian past, and no few, like "Cotton Time," tried to reconcile the two. In an era of intense social and political tension, with a considerable portion of the agricultural population dispossessed from the land and adrift in society, with blacks and union organizers challenging traditional systems of race and labor relations, Treasury Section murals blithely depicted scenes of communal harmony alternately in a romanticized past, an impossible present, or a utopian future.⁵

Genuinely optimistic or cynically escapist, Treasury Section

⁵ Marling, Wall-To-Wall America, pp.3-27.

artwork reflected for the most part the ambitions of its Director, Edward Bruce and Bruce's hand-picked supervisor of the Washington headquarters, Edward Rowan. The failure of Bruce's short-lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) to instigate the sort of revolution in American life he envisioned did nothing to dampen the Director's characteristic ebullience. Instead, he rested for a summer, painting in Vermont, then returned in the Fall of 1934 to establish the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture. The organizational name had changed, but the Director's goals remained fundamentally the same. American society, thought Bruce, had arrived at the proper moment of its historical development to commence a fundamental reorganization of its cultural priorities. Heretofore, the challenge of the western frontier had directed American energies along two paths not unrelated: continental expansion and economic growth. Material abundance had followed, but only at the cost of spiritual development. Now that the frontier had closed and with it the "era of easy money," Americans could as a people redress the disparity. Art, like capital, was something unevenly distributed, wrote Bruce, and both inequities demanded adjustment.⁶

Having identified the problem, the Director offered a solution. While dollar-a-year economists primed economic pumps, Bruce hoped to busy his fellow citizens about the task of conquering a new frontier, one aesthetic and not physical, one that would not strip the land of

⁶ Although Bruce was the "Chief" of the organization, he was frequently away from the office and entrusted its day-to-day operation to Rowan. Several thick files illuminate the relationship between these two men in RG 121, Entry 124, Correspondence of Edward Bruce, Box 10, (NA); "Government Patronage of the Arts," RG 121, Entry 118, General Administrative and Reference File of the Chief, 1935-7, Box 1, (NA).

hidden riches with no regard to their distribution, but would tap a virgin reservoir of cultural desire. "Every human being has latent in him the wish to be a writer or painter or musician or a craftsman," Bruce insisted, "I believe that there is innate in the soul of man at all times the wish and longing and the ability to develop the richness of spirit, the beauty of life. Here we have a vast field of new wealth in terms of a true standard of living, in terms of well-being and contentment." Such talent, he continued, should no longer be wasted by forcing artists and writers on relief to dig ditches. Workers placed in their proper sphere would produce untold dividends. They would not simply paint pretty pictures or write good stories, they would provide the cultural foundation of a great civilization. They only lacked a patron. Previously, explained Bruce, American art had been subsidized by its wealthier citizens, people worthy of adulation for their efforts, "their voluntary share the wealth movement," yet people upon whom the nation could no longer rely. Many had lost their fortunes in the Depression, others had economized at the expense of art patronage, and all were now participants in a not-so-voluntary share the wealth movement otherwise known as the federal income tax and inheritance program. By default then, argued Bruce, having appropriated to itself the nation's discretionary income, the federal government had also inherited the responsibility of sustaining the national arts and letters. Recently, he wrote, it had begun to discharge this duty through establishment of the PWAP, whose most significant achievement in the estimation of its former director was the demonstration of a national thirst for beauty.⁷

⁷ Bruce, "Government Patronage of the Arts," *ibid.*

More recently, it had established the Treasury Section, Edward Bruce's latest assault on the newest frontier. This unit sprang from the same motives as the PWAP but adopted different tactics. The PWAP had attempted to stir a nationwide cultural interest that would reshape American attitudes about art and transform the role of the artist in the democratic society, and had operated not unlike colonial committees of correspondence. Regional PWAP committees existed, more or less, independently of each other, operating in the hope that isolated fires of artistic interest, once kindled, would fan themselves into a national conflagration. Yet, despite Bruce's optimism, this had not happened, especially in Region Six, where Ellsworth Woodward frankly admitted failure for a variety of reasons. The PWAP, after all, had only operated briefly and with severe budget limitations. Woodward specifically lamented his own frustrated attempts to cultivate for his project a sympathetic public opinion. More importantly, though, the PWAP effort, in Region Six and nationwide, suffered from a crippling inconsistency of purpose. Bruce, like Woodward, had insisted that the American cultural thirst could not be slaked with bad art. No one recently emerged from the desert, they agreed, should be forced to drink rusty water, and herein lay the rub, for Bruce's unit was a relief agency. Theoretically, it existed to aid needy artists regardless of their talent, presenting a conflict of insoluble dimension.

Bruce knew this and made certain to bypass this obstacle in his new organization. The Section was not a relief unit. It employed artists who were needy, but it did not hire them because of that; rather, artists were chosen whose work met an aesthetic standard devised and maintained by Section officials. Only work judged worthy enough

would merit display in public buildings, meaning work of the highest craftsmanship for use in this new campaign to satisfy the public craving for beauty. The rest of the plan was deceptively simple. Regional competitions would yield a harvest of designs whose artists would be awarded commissions to decorate public buildings built or renovated with public funds. Most were in small communities chosen in part by their size. Section officials usually associated the size of a town with the level of its cultural development or, more accurately, cultural ignorance. Artists, once chosen, were instructed to visit the community or otherwise contact some of the local citizens, usually the postmaster or local librarian. This initial contact was to produce a topic for the mural acceptable to local interest. Artists then worked-up a preliminary design sketch followed by a scale drawing, a full-scale cartoon, and finally the completed mural with each step falling under Section review. Ultimately, the artist would either accompany his mural to the community to oversee its installation, or better still from the Section's perspective, would paint the mural directly on the wall of the building, working under public scrutiny.⁸

In either case, there would occur a scene Edward Bruce must surely have often dreamt about. Once the paint dried, or once the mural had been installed, it would be unveiled to the public when, for at least an instant--Bruce hope a good deal longer--a piece of artwork, something of beauty crafted according to centuries-old traditions and dispensed by a benevolent patron, the federal government, would become the central

⁸ Edward Rowan to Edward Bruce, January 6, 1935, RG 121, Entry 122, General Correspondence File, Box 33/174, (NA); "Exhibition of Preliminary Sketches for Murals, Section of Fine Arts," Entry 135, Box 203, (NA).

focus of communal life. In this sense, at least to Bruce, post office lobbies decorated by his Section became something more than federal buildings in local villages. Rather, each by the physical arrangement of its space became a reflection of the proper ordering of American society. The lobbies, he might have argued, typified the principle of political federalism just as the decoration fulfilled the government's obligation to patronize the arts. The location of murals, distributed as they were across the hinterland in a campaign of cultural parity, reinforced the principle of equality, the fundamental organizing principle of American society. Even the location of the mural itself, over the Postmaster's door, reflected the position of art and the artist assigned by Bruce in the ideal democratic society, one that elevated art above the people, made it something communicated downward, giving it an intentional didacticism.

Edward Bruce had other motives as well. In his official correspondence he consistently reminded his artists that they were creating art for people unaccustomed to viewing it. Therefore, he warned, the murals must be understandable; they must communicate themes chosen by the townspeople in designs none would confuse. Since these usually depicted scenes of communal harmony and progress, Bruce believed that they would inspire faith in democratic values and ideals. They would also, in the Director's opinion, achieve something equally important, something he had come to believe through his own experience. Edward Bruce had a fluttering heart he eventually overtaxed, and there were occasional hints to this effect, such as the heart attack he suffered in 1931. It required a long convalescence but produced a story Bruce told the rest of his life. Laid up in the hospital, he became

fascinated with a series of pastoral landscapes hanging on the wall of his room. The paintings projected a tranquility that produced within him an internal calm, or so he insisted, one that ensured the completeness of his recovery. It was something he never forgot and, given the opportunity as Director of a government art project, an aesthetic shinplaster he hoped to apply to American souls troubled by the Great Depression. Bruce's Section thus communicated on two levels. Viewed from the lobby floor, murals intended to inspire and uplift. But they also conveyed a message of tranquility, as conveyed by the artist in his role as articulator of community values and creator of enduring beauty, the vital middle man in a symbiotic relationship between art and citizen.⁹

Art historians have routinely observed that Bruce's idealism resulted in a good deal of bad art. Perhaps, but the creation of bad art can still make good history, especially in this case, where so stark a contrast exists between the ideal and the result. Many things frustrated the Section's desire to make art an everyday American experience. The regional design competitions generated substantial criticism, usually from the losers who complained, sometimes with reason, that judges governing the competitions were naturally predisposed to a small clique of favored painters whose distinctive styles afforded easy recognition. Nor did these competitions regulate the regional distribution of working artists. If only approximately, Section officials hoped to provide communities with native artists, a practice, ultimately, more honored in the breach. Quite simply, there

⁹ Bruce, "Government Patronage of the Arts," RG 121, Entry 118, Box 1, (NA); Edward Bruce to Josephine Roche, October 18, 1940, *ibid.*, Entry 124, Box 10, (NA).

were more practicing artists in New York City than in Bunkie, Louisiana, and the ones in New York submitted more and better designs than the ones in Bunkie. Thus, a preponderance of Section artists worked for and in communities with which they were unfamiliar. There also remained the separate concerns of the Section officials, the artists, and the recipient communities. In this sense, each mural was something unique, something of a chemical experiment dependent on at least three fundamental compounds, each of them volatile. Section officials threaded an uneasy case-by-case course between an enforced aesthetic orthodoxy, American Scene Painting, and the freedom of artistic license. Artists, of course, were sometimes forced to choose between "their art," the integrity of their design, and the paycheck it would earn them. The more expedient, some might say cynical, among them learned early what Bruce and his subordinates were looking for and developed a specific style they dubbed "painting Section." Then too, the communities themselves, either through active or passive roles in the selection of mural designs, risked creating an unfavorable impression of themselves, either in paint or print, not to mention a loss of local autonomy in exchange for a moment of national celebrity. This capacity for conflict, always potential, was often realized. The Section sometimes badgered, the artists sometimes bucked, and the communities responded with either acclaim or hostility or, more often, with indifference. Yet in any case the legacy of these murals recorded in the method of their creation and reception provides no mere record of national aesthetic preferences, but a valuable glimpse of an anxious society in uneasy transition.¹⁰

¹⁰ Marling, Wall-to-Wall America, pp. 3-71.

3. "Are There No Chickens?"

For the most part, Treasury Section muralists depicted a thriving country sprung from a bountiful past and facing a promising future. Harmonious and tightly-knit enclaves of rugged individuals roved across the American mural landscape, ideal democratic communities dedicated to the greater good of each and the greater good of all, untroubled by the slightest hint of conflict between the two. Thus, the archetypical family paces a westering band of pioneers painted by John Steurt Curry in his "Movement of the Population Westward." Betrand Adams, in "Early Settlers of Dubuque," manages on a single canvas to reconcile white settlers newly arrived in Indian territory, a newly-built bridge and a ferryman, and the pastoral beauty of the landscape with nascent industry. With equal dexterity, Minetta Good's design for the post office in Dresden, Tennessee, manages to harmonize farmers and coachmen with the coming of the Iron Horse. Other conversions were even more contrived, such as those that transformed a bucolic southern village, Paris, Arkansas, into a thriving and progressive boom town.¹¹

Such visions of the ideal resulted from carefully enforced Section policy. In virtually all instances, Bruce and his supervisors cautioned artists to provide the public with satisfying images of hopeful, or at least tranquil, themes. There were many conversions of the Paris, Arkansas, sort. Nudes were kept to a tolerable minimum. And as in the case of a mural depicting a mine cave-in for the mining town of Kellog, Idaho, on those rare occasions when the Section did endorse more weighty

¹¹ Ibid., pp.115-7; 134-7; Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas pp.138-77.

themes, they were accompanied with promises of additional, more light-hearted panels. In Louisiana, too, Section officials endorsed this thematic orthodoxy. Two of the Louisiana projects conformed expressly to the Director's therapeutic notion of art. One commissioned wood carvings for the recreation center of the Marine Hospital in New Orleans. The other, the largest undertaking of its sort, sponsored a nationwide water color competition whose winning entries were used to decorate the walls of the state leper asylum in Carville.¹²

The Louisiana muralists also put their best face forward. For instance, when Conrad Albrizio, a frescoist and art instructor at LSU, executed a design for the DeRidder post office, he capped a hopeful scene by changing the facial expression of his principal figure from a frown to a smile. Even the landscape surrounding the figure was altered to convey to the villagers a message of hope. In the original design, Albrizio perched a long-faced farmer atop a rail fence waiting glumly while the postman astride his motorcycle fished in his satchel (see figures 2 and 3). In the completed mural, however, the postman has already left and the empty space is filled with a cluster of grazing sheep (see figure 4). This is no accident. DeRidder was one of many Louisiana lumbering towns established in the late 19th century whose livelihood had played out by the Depression. Some were simply abandoned while others, like DeRidder, searched for a new economic base. There the people chose diversified farming, a combination of grain and livestock production. Albrizio's mural, with its fat lambs and lush

¹² "N.O.--Marine Hospital," RG 121, Entry 133, Box 41, (NA); "Carville--Marine Hospital--Water Color Competition," *ibid.*, Box 39, (NA); Public Buildings Administration, "Bulletin no. 22, Announcement of First Water Color Competition, *ibid.*, Entry 130, Box 10, (NA).

corn, tidy fences and deep furrows, suggests the wisdom of the choice and the brightness of the future. The farmer still perches atop his fence, only now the mail has come and the news is good. He sits, hat pushed back, reading an opened letter with a broad grin across his face.¹³

In Eunice, Louisiana, the transformation from despair to hope was even more contrived. In 1939, Eunice was a quiet village of three thousand souls located in the heart of Acadiana. Because it sat astride a major east-west highway bisecting the state, Eunice earned mention in the Louisiana Guide. Because Lyle Saxon and his writers had a good number of larger topics to treat at greater length, they dispatched Eunice with nineteen lines on a single page. But in 1939, Eunice became the focus of national attention when Treasury Section officials decided to organize a nationwide competition to commission a mural design in each state. They called their promotion, the largest of its kind, the "48 States Competition." Nearly one thousand artists participated, submitting more than fourteen hundred designs in an attempt, as Edward Bruce explained, to cover the entire nation with murals "which make me feel comfortable about America." Not everyone agreed. Once the contest was over, Life magazine devoted three pages to the winners, creating in the process no small confusion. Regional participation in the competition had been, as usual, uneven. Some towns selected for commissions received no entries at all, while others received several. A judicious amount of juggling was required, for artists as well as designs; but no one informed the editors at Life. To correct the imbalance, runners-up were awarded commissions which had generated no

¹³ "DeRidder, P.O.," Ibid., Entry 133, Box 39, (NA).

interest, but as residents in several towns learned, with varying degrees of bemusement and anger, the design chosen for their post office had originally been intended for one in a different state or region. Eunice was a case in point. A young woman then living in New Orleans, Laura Lewis, won the commission on the strength of a design she submitted to the competition for the post office in Marfa, Texas. She was delighted. The people of Eunice were considerably less enthusiastic. They had little interest in her design, a study of a deserted Army base in West Texas, and were less amused by Life's glib assertion that the artist's "sketch of a sultry Southern scene will be changed to fit Louisiana's more active life."¹⁴

Ed Rowan had already taken steps to correct the oversight, and Laura Lewis was nothing if not amenable, as the evolution of her mural design suggests. Though she was happy to have earned a commission, she was also confused by the switch. She wrote to Rowan wondering whether or not she should alter her design. He did not leave the door open for very long. "Since the artists employed under this program are working for the public," he replied, "we have found that art has more meaning to that public when the subject matter is related to or reflective of the locale in which the mural is placed. For this reason I think it is important that you confer with the Postmaster and, if possible... make a visit to Eunice to acquaint yourself with the locale." She did. Early in 1940, Lewis drove to Eunice, discussed her project with several of the townsfolk, and met with the Postmaster. An expansive man and

¹⁴ Marling, Wall-to-Wall America, pp.81-9; Edward Rowan to Laura B. Lewis, October 16, 1939, "Eunice P.O.," RG 121, Entry 133, Box 39, (NA); Federal Works Agency, Louisiana: A Guide to the State, (New York, 1941), p.453.

"most kind," he spoke at length about various crops grown in the area. His talk and her drive through the surrounding countryside convinced Lewis to illustrate the typical Eunice farm, one that would convey the "sweep and space and open fields and wide skies" of the landscape, its stark beauty.¹⁵

She succeeded all too well. Her new design revolved around a two-room pine-board farmhouse located as the focal point in the center of the composition. Fences, alternately of wood and wire, ran at right angles enclosing the yard. An empty barn loomed in the upper left, and on the right the solitary figure of a woman leaned against the wire fence, gazing blankly at a field of empty furrows converging on the horizon (see figure 5). As a study in rural bleakness, the design rivalled early FSA photography. Rowan was appalled, and his suggestions for improvement typify Treasury Section desires. "It is our feeling that you probably would be able to create a little more interest in your design if you introduced some further elements to relieve the starkness of the barren house," he advised. "Are there no plantings around the house in the way of one or two shrubs? Are there no chickens? It is my frank opinion that the sheer design is not enough to carry the forsaken quality which is all but overstated."¹⁶

By "interest," Rowan meant acceptance, a point not lost on the artist. Lewis apologized, repeated her enchantment with the "simple forms" of southwestern Louisiana, and promised to soften the starkness of her design. Ultimately, she incorporated each of Rowan's suggestions

¹⁵ Lewis to Rowan, January 16, 1940; Rowan to Lewis, January 19, 1940; Lewis to Rowan, April 28, 1940, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Rowan to Lewis, May 28, 1940, *ibid*.

and added a few touches all her own. In the completed mural, hens and roosters fairly dot the lawn. One kitten paws a crevice in the porch while another laps milk from a dish set by the front door. Sunflowers guard a house surrounded by small plants and flowers. The barn appears again at the left but much of the lawn, once empty, is filled by a tractor-pulled disk harrow (see figure 6). This was the crucial addition. In the initial sketch, the empty barn and field suggest an infertile and unyielding land, a barrenness reflected by the woman's pose. She stood in a worried attitude, arms wrapped about her torso as though huddled against the cold landscape. The disk harrow changed all this. It made a barren land productive, straightened the furrows, deepened them and organized them into an orderly procession advancing to a point on a rosy skyline more clearly defined than in the first sketch. Mechanized agriculture, the mural implies, makes for a far brighter future, a conclusion once more sustained by the woman at the fence. Her anxious vigil has ended. The arms have unfolded. One hangs freely at her side while the other leans against the fence, leaving her free to scan the horizon, either greeting a new dawn full of promise, or relishing a sunset with the sort of satisfied fatigue that comes from productive labor.¹⁷

Yet the champion optimist among Louisiana muralists was Xavier Gonzales whose, cycles of hope were a model of Section art. Born in Almeria, Spain, the day the Maine exploded in Havana Harbor, Gonzales came to art more by association than choice. His uncle, Jose' Arpa, was an artist of national fame and from him the young Gonzales received his first instruction. At thirteen, he ended his formal education in order

¹⁷ Ibid.

to see the world. Five years later, he was in Revolutionary Mexico, planning to become a mechanical engineer in a gold mine. He returned briefly to Europe but in 1921 was off again, this time to the United States. Gonzales settled in Chicago, worked an assortment of odd jobs, and completed his art training by taking classes at the Art Institute. Then he moved south, first to Texas where he taught art in the public schools of San Antonio, and later to New Orleans where he joined the faculty at Newcomb College.¹⁸

He was seldom idle in any place. Gonzales maintained an exhausting schedule, dividing his time between teaching duties at Newcomb and projects in his own studio. Each summer he abandoned New Orleans for the drier heat of West Texas, frequenting an artists' colony situated near San Marcos and, often as not, teaching summer sessions at various West Texas colleges. In school or in his studio, Gonzales' principal interest was mural painting. At Newcomb, he commandeered the cafeteria walls for his students' use. In New Orleans, his influence permeated the local arts scene. At least two of his students became Treasury Section muralists. One was Laura Lewis, painter of the Eunice commission, and the other was an attractive brunette named Ethel Edwards. She, too, earned a Section commission in the "48 States Competition," a design for the post office in Lake Providence, Louisiana. Also like Lewis, Edwards credited her success to her teacher who, since 1935, was also her husband. By then, Gonzales was himself an established muralist of widening reputation. He had already completed a variety of commissions, public and private, including ones for the Civil Auditorium in San Antonio, Texas, and a more ambitious project at

¹⁸ "Xavier Gonzales," Artists' Files, (THNOC).

the newly-built Shushan Airport on the New Orleans Lakefront. No surprise then, that the Section made full use of Gonzales' well-established talent and abundant energy. Indeed, the artist was among the Section's most prolific muralists, completing no fewer than five commissions, all in the South and two in Louisiana.¹⁹

Gonzales was not only prolific, he never forgot for whom he worked. His style was crisp and representative, much in the tradition of the American Scene, and his themes were sure to warm the heart of any New Dealer. His Louisiana work, good examples of his overall style, was done at an interval of three years and hung in towns not thirty miles apart. He finished the first in 1936, a design for the post office in Hammond, Louisiana, executed for the diminutive Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), a small moon in the Section's orbit. Hammond sat in the heart of the Louisiana strawberry districts and became a frequent stopover for Farm Security Administration photographers. But unlike these photographers, who depicted the plight of migrant berry-pickers, the painter rendered an optimistic portrait of the agricultural cycle. Where photographers such as Ben Shahn and others found heartache and despair, the sort of rural poverty and exploitation that made migrant laborers symbolic of all that was wrong with American society, Gonzales depicted a seamless cycle of abundance. Eight canvases depicted the various phases of strawberry cultivation and were hung so that the daily passage of the sun illuminated each in its proper chronological sequence (see figures 7-10). This was a clever tactic. The mural tranquilized;

¹⁹ Ibid., Morning Star-Telegram, (Fort Worth), in RG 121, Entry 124, Box 2, (NA). Aside from his two Louisiana commissions, Gonzales completed at least three others, one for the courthouse in Hunstville, Alabama, one for the post office in Alpine, Texas, and another for the post office in Amarillo, Texas.

it conveyed to its viewers a sense that the cultivation of strawberries, however harsh it might be for the lives of migrant pickers on which it depended, was nevertheless a part of the natural order of things, timeless, like the daily passing of the sun. Repeated each day, the drama of the agricultural cycle came to a happy conclusion. Every panel in its turn skirted the myriad hazards of agricultural labors. No droughts, no damaging hail, no bank foreclosures, no federal inspectors disturbed the process. Instead day in and day out the right portion of sunshine and rainfall brought forth a bumper crop judged, weighed, crated, and shipped to market, the ideal harvest for the ideal village.²⁰

Such abundance, with such certainty, also informed Gonzales' other Louisiana mural, a Section commission completed for the post office in Covington, Louisiana. Covington was just south of Hammond, a small town on the northern rim of Lake Ponchartrain above New Orleans, and a region in transition. Like DeRidder, Covington had been lumbering country until recently, and like DeRidder its mural would ease the economic transition, in this case from timber to the production of tung oil. In addition, the Covington mural offered a quintessential New Deal parable; for in Covington the indiscriminate harvest of timber had nearly ruined the production of oil extracted from the tung nut and put to a variety of uses. Disaster was narrowly avoided, or so it seemed, until Xavier Gonzales came to the rescue with fifty-six square feet of canvas solution devoted to the progressive values of scientific study, rational planning, and replenishment of sources. The mural itself (see figure

²⁰ For an overview of the TRAP see, "Final Report Treasury Relief Art Project," RG 121, Entry 119, Box 1, (NA). A valuable summary of TRAP aspirations and operations written by its director is Olin Dows, "The New Deal Treasury Art Programs, A Memoir, Arts in Society, 2(no. 4 1964), pp.50-88. "Hammond P.O., Gonzales," *ibid.*, Box 12.

11), a single panel, reads from left to right, beginning with standard symbols of deforestation: denuded stumps, a whirling saw, and a woodsman, forearm drawn over his eyes, blind to the consequences of his actions. The results are inescapable. An ominous landscape looms in the distance, featuring the sawmill and its burner. Reclamation begins in the next section. Here, experimentation seeks to rehabilitate the scarred land. Young trees are rooted and replenished. A man prunes and grafts and, before long, other figures begin the harvest of tung nuts. These are bagged and shipped to the oil mill in the background right, whose tangible profits, the thriving town, appear at right.²¹

The Covington mural is an archetype of its genre, the ultimate New Deal fantasy. Here in a simple canvas, Xavier Gonzales replenishes, reforests, and restores not merely a forest, but hope and lasting prosperity to a stricken community founded on those cardinal principles of middle-class belief: thrift, order, and industry. Here, too, through the device of scientific planning, by the rational use of natural resources, Gonzales makes a painless transition from agriculture to industry. At center, the billowing tung blossoms and rustic roofs, a banjo-picker, and a front porch rocker all spin the traditional myth of rural arcady. This, the artist insists, is the basis of material profit that sustains a civilization, whose citizens must guard against a return to the careless practices of the past lest they once more threaten the democratic community and all its attendant values: religion, education, and social harmony. Yet the transition from despair to prosperity was never so easy as it was in DeRidder or Eunice or Hammond or Covington. Inconsistencies and tensions within and among other Louisiana

²¹ "Covington P.O.," RG 121, Entry 133, Box 39, (NA).

decorations suggest that the cultural transformation of the American nation, underway throughout the 1930s, occurred with a good deal more anxiety than ones accomplished with the brushstrokes of Conrad Albrizio, Laura Lewis, or Xavier Gonzales.

4. "A Southern Pattern"

One August afternoon in 1941, Hy Knight, the Postmaster in Ferriday, Louisiana, rolled a fresh sheet of stationery into his typewriter, and in his relaxed grammatical style clacked out a short message to notify the Federal Works Agency that the new mural in his post office had been installed properly and met with his approval. "Mr. Stuart Purser has completed the installation of the mural in this Post Office," he relayed. "It is apparently a high class painting and adds quite a lot to the lobby of the office. I have heard many compliments concerning same." Three sentences later, having completed this bureaucratic chore, the postmaster stuffed it into an envelope, enclosed a short article clipped from the local newspaper describing the mural, and sent it off, without apparent haste, second class.²²

Knight's letter was the final piece of red tape in a year-long process begun the day the Section awarded the Ferriday commission to the Louisiana artist, Stuart Purser. For Purser, who lived nearby in Pineville, home of a small Baptist college where he worked as the art instructor, the commission capped a summer of uneven fortune. The previous May, on the day his son was born, fire razed the artist's garage studio, burning everything from frames to finished paintings, his supplies, and even his automobile. He and his wife, also an artist, had been forced to paint furiously all summer long in order to complete a joint exhibition in August for the museum of art in Jackson, Mississippi. Amidst this rush Edward Rowan awarded Purser the Ferriday

²² Hy Knight to Federal Works Agency, August 22, 1941, "Ferriday P.O.," RG 121, Entry 133, Box 40, (NA).

job. He must have been exhausted; still, he was eager to tackle the design, so Purser drove to Ferriday, chatted with Knight and several other townspeople and, within a week, worked up a preliminary design sketch treating a subject dear to local hearts. "It seems that cotton is the only industry of importance," he advised Rowan, "and it is the only subject that was suggested by the individuals in Ferriday with whom I talked."²³

Cotton it would be. Purser sketched a scene he had witnessed the previous Saturday at Panola Plantation, near Ferriday. It was late afternoon of payday. Black field hands crowded around their white foreman. "Dressed in bright colors," they waited in a nearby wagon for wages that would fund the trip to town. In the background, as Purser described, appeared "an old type cotton gin, with a brick stack, that is one of the few remaining gins of that design in the South. To the residents of Ferriday, the gin seems to be one of the outstanding things of interest in that section (see figure 12)." Rowan liked the idea and approved the design, but in the interim, while letters criss-crossed between the two, a fresh inspiration struck Purser. He returned to Ferriday, this time to visit the local cotton mill. Taken with the design potential of its interior, Purser forwarded a second sketch, one Rowan liked even better. Then, some time shortly after the Thanksgiving holiday, Stuart Purser laid aside his original sketch of Panola Plantation with its antiquated cotton gin to concentrate his efforts on the second design, "a modern southern four-stand cotton gin in full

²³ Rowan to Purser, July 9, 1940; Purser to Rowan, August 12, 1940; Purser to Rowan, September 10, 1940, Ibid.

operation (see figure 13)."²⁴

The switch was anything but insignificant. Despite the necessity of dividing his time between the classroom and the studio, Purser's work progressed swiftly. Section officials approved his full-sized cartoon with minor changes the following summer. Purser finished his mural by mid-July. Two weeks later, it was hanging in Knight's new post office. Two weeks after that, the Postmaster crouched behind his Underwood and pecked out his note to the Federal Works Agency, assuring all of local enthusiasm and offering his own assertion that the work must be "a high class painting." It was this and more. The evolution of Purser's sketch, from plantation scene to "modern southern four-stand cotton gin" reflected the ongoing transformation of Louisiana society (see figure 14). Louisiana's mural landscape, like the physical state it represented, was primarily agricultural. In oil and tempera, in wood, limestone and water color, the Louisiana depicted by Section artists was one of rural abundance, usually conveyed by focusing on the crucial moment of any agricultural cycle: the harvest. Mural harvests invariably produced bumper crops, tall cane and thick cotton, rich grain and handsome pelts, or as in the cases of murals done for the post offices in Abbeville and in Haynesville, generous portions of each (see figures 15 and 16).²⁵

Stuart Purser's Ferriday design is a rare yet immensely important exception. Its subject is agricultural, but only peripherally.

²⁴ Rowan to Purser, August 19, 1940; Purser to Rowan, November 28, 1940; Rowan to Purser, December 9, 1940, Ibid.

²⁵ Rowan to Purser, July 5, 1941; Purser to Rowan, August 5, 1941; Rowan to Purser, August 13, 1941, Ibid. "Abbeville, P.O.," Ibid., Box 37, (NA); "Haynesville, P.O.," Ibid., Box 40, (NA).

Purser's real interest was the manufacture of the southern staple, particularly the machines themselves. He was clearly fascinated by the power and symmetry of the mill, the neat row of bins, the ordered pipes and belts and cogs, each with a specialized function vital to overall production, a symmetry he extended to the mill workers. In his original sketch depicting payday at Panola Plantation, Purser had left little doubt as to the importance of the white foreman. He was sketched at his moment of supreme power, dispensing among the gathered laborers their very means of survival. But the social and racial significance of the old plantation system disappears in Purser's completed mural. Instead, the machine now dominates the mural space. It dwarfs the workers, white and black, reducing the races to roles of approximate importance. Yet, this is not integrationist art. Purser carefully divided his races by emphasizing the vertical thrust of the Postmaster's door with the pipe in the middle background. Still, separation is a long way from the racial dominance so overtly suggested in the Panola sketch. Rather, as the machine depends on each of its variable parts, the manufacturing process also depends upon its specialized laborers, each with an individual function vital to the group effort. Industrialism had come to Louisiana, in the mural world and the actual, accompanied by the egalitarian emphasis of the manufacturing process itself. The logic of specialized labor and interchangeable parts carried with it a social corollary that threatened to upset the traditional operation of Southern caste and class relations, making the title of Purser's mural, "A Southern Pattern," less description than prophecy.

Two other muralists incorporated racial themes into their Louisiana decorations, reaching conclusions similar to Purser's. The

mural for Tallulah, Louisiana, painted by Frances Negueloa, depicted a scene from the Flood of 1927, an event still fresh in local memory. Negueloa based her painting on the eyewitness account of a local survivor published in the Atlantic Monthly, one that praised local blacks for their service in the emergency in distinctly patronizing tones. Ten years later, the painted version of the event provides a more flattering portrait of its black participants in a last-ditch attempt to head off the rising waters. Here rather than the shiftless darkies requiring constant supervision that populate the published piece, Negeuloa depicts strong, self-directed blacks playing an integral part in the emergency effort. Small wonder, then, that the black villagers of Tallulah became enchanted with the Frances Negeuloa's mural, where the forces of nature level with a power equal to Purser's machinery.²⁶

Blacks also received sympathetic treatment in the hands of Hollis Holbrook, a Florida artist awarded the post office commission for Jeanerette, Louisiana. Holbrook's mural evolved in a fashion similar to Purser's. Shortly after receiving his commission, the artist contacted the Jeanerette postmaster, who recommended a sketch of an antebellum scene with all the trimmings. Holbrook complied. In his preliminary sketch the obligatory "Big House," a mansion modelled on the postmaster's home, dominates the scene. A fine carriage passes beneath the vigil of a tingioned mammy, her bundle of washing balanced upon her head (see figure 18). But Holbrook grew uneasy with this sentimentalized glimpse into the southern past, so he made a second

²⁶ "Tallulah, P.O.," Ibid., Box 41, (NA); Helen Murphy, "Overflow Notes," The Atlantic Monthly 140(August 1927), pp.223-30.

sketch. His concern for the plight of minorities in American society, evident in the mural he completed for the Natick, Massachusetts post office, resurfaced in his second sketch, ultimately the design for Jeanerette (see figure 19). While the Natick mural suggested the eclipse of the Indians by the arrival of the white man, the Jeanerette decoration depicted the plight of southern blacks, whose treadmill existence Holbrook paralleled with mules, the other southern beasts of burden. Backs bend pathetically under the strain. In this, the most sensitive portrait of black life completed in Louisiana, broken cane stalks fall from the grinder in a powerful and unmistakable reflection of the workers' lives played out in the shadow of the big house (see figure 20).²⁷

There were, naturally, limits to the work of Purser, Negeuloa, and Holbrook. None did more than hint at things to come, nor advocate change with any degree of openness. Identifying the growing influence of the machine in southern society and suggesting its influence on the future of southern race relations, or praising black efforts in the face of disaster, or even identifying the harshness of black labor in the South was one thing. Advocating change was quite another, and judging from the reactions of local residents no hint of such was ever discovered. In Ferriday, Hy Knight thought the work a high class painting, passed along the favorable comments of other townsfolk and let it go at that. In Tallulah, both the postmaster and the newspaper editor noticed the popularity of the mural among local blacks, but reported the circumstance with nothing more than paternal bewilderment.

²⁷ "Natick, P.O.," Ibid., Box 52, (NA); "Jeanerette, P.O.," Ibid., Box 40, (NA).

Across the state, in Jeanerette local viewers all but ignored Hollis Holbrook's black workers. They were too busy ogling the mansion, to be sure, relegated to the periphery of the final composition, but still a piece of local architecture, and as such immensely popular among the villagers. Viewed over the prostrate backs of southern black laborers, it seems, the scene suggested a glimpse of things as they were and should be, inspiring neither remorse nor outrage.²⁸

Still, if murals such as Purser's merely hinted of future conflicts, then other Louisiana designs pointed more directly to them. Despite Xavier Gonzales' optimism, the incorporation of Louisiana into the national industrial web begun at the turn of the century and accelerated during the Second World War, would produce tensions suggested in contrasting visions of nature among two murals completed in 1939. Paul Rohland, Brooklyn landscapist and a frequent section muralist, professed an attraction to the natural beauty of the American South. Frequent sketching trips through the region left him with the conviction that he knew the South well enough to "visualize the landscape and people." Not surprisingly, then, of his three Section commissions all were landscapes and two were southern, including the one he did for the post office in Ville Platte (see figure 21). "Louisiana Bayou," installed in March, 1939, depicts what the title suggests. It is a picture post card vision of exotic Louisiana, evocating the romantic appeal of the region as natural wonderland. Painted with rich colors, "Louisiana Bayou" assembles an impressive array of flora and fauna beneath the embracing arm of a cypress bough cloaked in Spanish

²⁸ R.M. Almond to Treasury Department, Procurement Division, August 2, 1938, "Tallulah, P.O.," Box 41, (NA); Times-Picayune, September 8, 1941.

Moss. Here is nature as redeemer, an aesthetic inspiration close to Ellsworth Woodward's heart, the sort of pastoral tranquility the teacher held up as a haven from the industrial world. Then in the fall of 1939, in Winnsboro, Louisiana, Datus Meyers unveiled his view of a native cypress swamp, one distinctly different from Rohland's. Meyers was from New Mexico, had visited Winnsboro, but had found nothing in the way of local history as a basis for his design. He toyed briefly with the familiar scene of antebellum splendor maintained by faithful retainers, but dropped this in favor of a study depicting the local industry (see figure 22). In Winnsboro this meant logging, the very antithesis of Rohland's study in natural splendor. Here the industrialized harvest of nature sustains economic life only at the price of aesthetic well-being, and with no resolution between the two. There is no transition of the DeRidder or Covington sort, nor any provision for reforestation. Instead lumberjacks saw happily away, creating the cut-over districts, denuded alike of natural harmony and economic sustenance. The transformation of Southern life would not occur, it seems, without its costs to the environment.²⁹

Nor would it occur without serious revision of the near and distant past. As various scholars have observed, numerous Section muralists looked to history for the subject matter and thematic assertions of their compositions. Such artists brushed contemporary morality plays set on historical stages onto the walls of the nation's public buildings in an almost ritualistic redemption of such values as courage, individualism, and perseverance. Here was "the usable past"

²⁹ "Ville Platte, P.O.," RG 121, Entry 133, Box 41, (NA); "Winnsboro, P.O.," Ibid.

searched for and written about by writers, artists, and scholars before, during, and since the Great Depression. Here was history as ideology, ascribed a precise function in society as escape from the harshness of current conditions, or as a source of reassurance, despite the danger of the moment, providing a sense of continuity between past glory and future greatness. Among the Louisiana muralists, two in particular invoked historical subjects to convey the thematic messages of their compositions. Searching unsuccessfully for a mural design capable of depicting the essence of Rayville, Louisiana, the New York artist Elsie Driggs turned to history for help. Her mural, "LaSalle Discovers the Mississippi," situates the French explorer, members of his expedition, and their native guides in a setting out of Paul Rohland's "Louisiana Bayou," invoking history as a metaphor for racial harmony (see figure 23). Glimpses of cosmopolitan tolerance were common in mural America, as were murals documenting the seamlessness of the American story. The tranquil flow of the American past into American present surfaced throughout mural Louisiana, but nowhere more overtly than in Gretna, across the river from New Orleans and the site of another mural painted by Stuart Purser. Purser's decoration depicts the glory of old steamboat days, when New Orleans stood unchallenged as the center of Southern commerce. It also invokes the commercial past as prologue to the industrial future, something visible in the modern landscape rendered along the mural's upper border (see figure 24).³⁰

³⁰ Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature (New York, 1943), pp. 370-406. Kazin is among the early observers of the phenomenon, but he certainly is not alone. See for instance, Warren I. Sussman, "The Thirties," in Stanley Cohen and Lorman Ratner, ed., The Development of an American Culture, (Engelwood, 1970), and his introduction in Culture and Commitment, 1929-1941, (New York, 1973), pp.1-24. See also, Karal Ann Marling, "A Note

The conclusions reached by either artist are insupportable, if illuminating. Quite literally, Driggs and Purser brushed aside two and one half centuries of racial violence and exploitation, and the uneasy transition of the New Orleans economy from commerce to industry. Yet it would be unfair to accuse either artist of being poor historians, since accuracy was not their primary consideration or the chief preoccupation of Section officials who supervised such efforts. Rather, all were engaged in an attempt to bring art to the people in a national experiment of social uplift, and here lay the most serious break with the past they envisioned and invoked. Section muralists, in unison with other American artists and intellectuals, sought to reconcile the American past, present, and future with an optimism bordering on the naive. But in their renderings of pioneers and patriots, by forcing the myths of the American past into ideological service either as an explanation of the American present or as a blueprint of the American future, the muralists revealed their commitment to an industrialized culture, itself a fundamental break from the myths they sought to invoke. The conversion of history from myth to ideology, as its principal historian has suggested, began in the 1890s and continued for the next half century as artists and others followed either the example or the advice of Frederick Jackson Turner, the brothers Adams, or Van Wyck Brooks, to make the past serve the present. For five successive decades observers and writers and historians, among others, strip-mined

on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth," Prospects, 4(Spring 1979), pp. 420-40; Alfred Hawthorn Jones, "The Search For a Usable Past in the New Deal Era," American Quarterly, 23, (December 1971), pp.710-24. For specific treatments of how the past was used in Section murals see, Marling, Wall-to-Wall America, pp.189-241. See also, Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, pp.29-46.

the past, fetching up nuggets and boulders used to reconstruct the American experience in such a way as to give it contemporary relevance.

This pursuit of "a usable past" ultimately swept away Woodwardian visions of a painterly priesthood creating enduring glimpses of local beauty, for it made the message superior to the form. But the pursuit also left little room in the middle for people such as Edward Bruce, who sought traditional ends through innovative means. Bruce, like Woodward, espoused traditional Renaissance values of discipline and craftsmanship, yet, through the medium of American Scene painting, he struggled to achieve ends that would have warmed the heart of Van Wyck Brooks. These ends included the integration of artist and community as well as the discovery of a usable past, usable in this case defined as the greatest good for the greatest number, meaning that art, as well as history, to have any meaning, must become a mass experience. This, as illustrated by another of the federally-sponsored cultural projects, doomed any plan to make artists simultaneous members and leaders of the democratic community.³¹

Treasury Section art, despite its insistence on local acceptance and local subjects for local patrons, became a powerful agent in the growth of an emerging national culture. The Section hoped to cultivate from among its local patrons a national audience attracted by a common representational style, and inspired by a common set of values. Section murals from Maine to Iowa to Arizona employed a common iconography, instilling among its viewers a common response: renewed faith in

³¹ Warren Susman, Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century, (New York, 1973, 1984), pp. 7-26; Richard H. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years, (New York, 1973), pp.9-42.

American values and a new devotion to art and artists as vital parts of the democratic community. As such, Section decorations developed a formulaic style, one that borrowed local faces made to symbolize national ideals, an "American Way of Life." This was a far cry from the local autonomy advocated by Woodward and given lip service at least by Edward Bruce. It smacked instead of a growing national conformity in an age whose painterly experiments in local uplift often crossed the line into expressions of cultural homogeneity.³²

³² An opposing position is taken in Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, especially pp.68-111 and 178-81.

5. Evangeline's Return

The "48 States Competition," the Eunice mural it produced, and the optimism of Xavier Gonzales reflect the larger drift of American culture during the Great Depression. Each typifies the transition of society away from its localized roots towards a more standardized and homogenized national self-image conveyed through the mass media. Localism, as an organizing principle of American art and society, did not vanish during the thirties. It was not extinguished by the New Deal or by any of its art projects, and it certainly has not been extinguished since. Localism was, however, altered to suit the demands of mass communication, and fewer examples of the transformation are more cogent than the 48 States Competition. This was a nationwide promotion to enrich the aesthetic lives of small localities through an artistic style fittingly called Regionalism. Earlier in its day, Regionalism had been a serious aesthetic movement; yet by 1939, as revealed by the 48 States designs, it had reached absurdly shallow dimensions. Some artists had their designs chosen for towns they had never seen. Other enterprising artists submitted multiple designs for several different states. "Local color" had thus become a national craze, and the same colors turned up everywhere. Laura Lewis' study of a small town in Texas won her a commission in Louisiana. Her fellow artist, Lew Davis, submitted a sketch for the post office at Safford, Arizona, and instead was awarded the commission for Los Banos, California. But where Lewis eventually created an entirely new design for her commission, Davis proved more inventive. With a few deft strokes of his brush, he transformed the original design, a study of mounted Indians in the

Arizona desert, into a study of mounted caballeros in the California hills. Artists were not only interchangeable, their designs were too. Appropriately, Section officials displayed this Regionalist collection in two suggestive ways. First, they debuted the 48 States show in the pages of Life, and later these glimpses of 48 separate localities in 48 different states decorated 48 buildings erected for the most part according to a common blueprint.³³

The designs of Section muralists mirrored the work of other government artists. In bulletins drafted to announce Section competitions, Rowan and his staff provided a short list of suggested topics, usually including such items as "Local History, Past and Present," "Local Industries," and "Local Pursuits." This resembled the sort of checklist of American life outlined in the American Guide Manual, and one that produced similar results. If the guides assembled a national portrait in letters from local studies, then the Section created a national mural portrait with essentially the same features painted in a variety of "local colors." The costumes might have been different, but the basic message was the same, in Arizona and in Maine, even in Louisiana. Laura Lewis had seen in southwestern Louisiana a simplicity of form and a starkness of line she considered beautiful. She had fulfilled and, in subsequent visits to Eunice, exceeded the minimum Section requirements for familiarity with her subject. She knew the land and painted it with frankness, but her work had been too real and she was obliged to soften her design by painting sunflowers around

³³ Mathew Baigell, The American Scene: American Painting in the 1930s, (New York, 1974); Marling, Wall-to-Wall America, pp.81-9.

the house, even though sunflowers were scarce in Eunice.³⁴

This was the Section's way of masking the harshness of the Great Depression. Yet, for all its efforts, despite the rosy image of American life depicted in such murals, the effort ultimately failed to blunt the sharper conflicts of the period. Within these murals and between them, too, a tension existed, a failure to reconcile divergent values, an inability to harmonize this nostalgic view of a rural America with the coming of an urbanized, industrial, and collective order. The transition from one to the other occurred over a protracted period and amidst the sort of controversy no amount of tranquil canvas could cover. For the mechanized disk, the implement that transformed the Eunice mural, bringing comfort to its solitary figure, had also cut countless others adrift from land their fathers and grandfathers had worked. In the South, they drifted toward the big cities, Memphis and New Orleans, and forced others to begin the long trek along Route 66, passing in either case before FSA cameras in a movement most unlike anything John Steurt Curry ever painted.

Similar contradictions surface within and between the other Louisiana murals, reflecting alike the anxiety of state and nation. Such an ambiguity permeates the mural art of Xavier Gonzales, a sort of false glibness, sprung not so much from the work itself but the from process of its creation. On the one hand Gonzales was a gifted artist bringing a hopeful message to a community needing it most; on the other hand, he was the local salesman of a national firm dispensing a standardized product tailored for local consumption. Certainly the

³⁴ "Bulletin, Section of Painting and Sculpture, no. 1," (March 1, 1935), RG 121, Entry 130, Box 42, (NA).

content of Ed Rowan's mural "America" was shaped according to local circumstances, but its intent, the general image of America and Americans, conveyed to these localities altered only slightly and never more than Rowan would allow. There is in the Gonzales murals this curious mix of local and national, just as there were curious portions of the agricultural and the industrial. When Hollis Holbrook painted his mural for Jeanerette, Louisiana, he insisted on using local residents for the head studies in his work, asserting correctly that this would delight the villagers. Gonzales employed resources even closer at hand. His wife, Ethel Edwards, appears in virtually all her husband's mural commissions. So does the artist himself. Jacques de Tarnowsky, who was Gonzales's assistant for the Hammond project, modeled for several figures, along with a local delivery man who happened to knock on the door at a crucial juncture. Gonzales, his wife, and the butler all appear in the Covington mural. Such practices are common for artists and stimulating to historians of the period. Here are art and politics in intimate parallel--a crucial moment in the development of each when the fundamental concerns of both were diverted from the local and particular to the mass. Despite the protestations of New Dealers who professed accordance with the traditional American value of local political autonomy, the Roosevelt Administration appropriated to itself, and then wielded extraordinary and unprecedented powers in an attempt to instill across America values associated with an industrialized, urbanized, middle-class nation. Despite touches of local color and subjects drawn from local circumstances, the mass appeal of the murals overwhelms such considerations, makes them mere props in a costume drama. The result, ultimately and inevitably, was a more homogenized

national self-portrait, a sort of artistic porridge served in great dollops, bland to the taste yet somehow nourishing. In this sense, the murals attempted, through their own visual language, to reinforce the efforts of other New Deal agencies. Many of these agencies, such as FSA farm cooperatives or various WPA projects, were designed to establish throughout the population a common set of social values and skills, often as not, in art as in hygienic practice, sanitized of local custom and usage, and typified by two Louisiana post office decorations.³⁵

Harry Lane was less than thirty years old when he painted his only Section commission, a decoration for the post office in Oakdale, Louisiana. Inquiries to the local postmaster and to the local librarian left the artist with little direction, so he struck out on his own, in an attempt, he asserted, to "suit any post office." He succeeded admirably. Thirteen months separated commission from completed mural, a study whose sparse details are reflected by the thin series of letters that passed between artist and supervisory agency. Lane was a disciplined painter and a model Section artist, who completed his mural

³⁵ Jacques de Tarnowsky, interview with the author, July 17, 1988; Marling, Wall-to-Wall America, pp. 3-27. Regionalism as a management style, an ideal among American social planners, and as an aesthetic movement was, perhaps, the preeminent focus of bureaucrats, planners, and artists during the 1930s, and as such, a cogent reflection of the anxiety of the times, one illustrating the uneasy transition of American society away from longstanding traditions of political, social, and cultural localism. For discussions of the varieties of regionalism in thirties America, see Daniel Aaron, "An Approach to the Thirties," William H. Jordy, "Four Approaches to Regionalism in the Visual Arts of the 1930s," and Arthur Wertheim, "Constance Rourke and the Discovery of American Culture in the 1930s," all in Luther Leudtke, ed., The Study of American Culture: Contemporary Conflicts, (DeLand, 1977), pp.1-62. For additional discussion of the topic and a valuable guide to its literature, see also, Burl Noggle, "With Pen and Camera: In Quest of the American South in the 1930s," in The South is Another Land: Essays on the Twentieth-Century South, ed., Bruce Clayton and John A. Salmond, (New York, 1987), pp.187-204.

steps on time, and whose design the Washington artists altered only slightly. The completed decoration, as Lane had hoped, would have been acceptable to anyone anywhere in the country, and therein lies the point. "Air Express," whose clean lines and neat interplay of light and shadow mark it as a genre piece, depicts the modern and efficient transportation of the U.S. mail (see figure 25). It depicts technological efficiency writ large, and a process utterly devoid of local circumstance. As originally designed, it was even unsullied by people. Only on Rowan's request do the figures appear in the lower left or at the middle distance. Here then lies a glimpse into the nation's cultural future, a society linked by systems of mass communication and mass transportation, reducing the component parts to Anytown, U.S.A.³⁶

Alice Flint's mural for the post office in Arabi, Louisiana was equally prophetic. Flint was a New York artist awarded the Arabi commission on the strength of designs submitted in the competition for the Bronx post office. She was also a veteran Section muralist, painter of the decoration for the post office in Fairfield, Connecticut. Although she completed the perfunctory steps required by the Section, contacting the local postmaster and soliciting local ideas for her mural design, she took no relish in the chore. She already had a design in mind, "a mural with horses and carriages, and riders of the aristocratic South of earlier days," and dreaded any interference from the postmaster (see figure 26). I trust he will not suggest any historical episode," Flint wrote, "as I detest that type of mural." Nor did she set any stock in the ability of any layman to understand the sophisticated procedures of mural composition. The postmaster, through his silence,

³⁶ "Oakdale, P.O.," RG 121, Entry 133, Box 40, (NA).

obliged on all accounts, much to the artist's relief. Undisturbed, she plunged ahead on her design, "Louisiana Pageant," completed in an orderly fashion save for one minor hitch. Having completed her preliminary sketches, Flint worked up a full-sized cartoon of the decoration, purposely elongating the legs of her horses and giving them extra joint above the fetlock to harmonize with the dimensions of the mural. Such unscheduled departures from representational designs frightened Ed Rowan. "We keenly feel the necessity of your restudying the legs of the horses and the mannerism which you use in drawing the extremities of the legs is one which is frankly disturbing to a number of people." By this Rowan meant prospective viewers, and he offered a little advice. "We feel that since the artists under this program are creating murals for a non-painting public it is essential that the artists avoid those characteristics which might confuse the issue in those minds for whom the work is intended."³⁷

Flint accepted the criticism graciously, redrew the legs, and finished her mural in the Spring of 1939. "Louisiana Pageant," as its title suggests and its artist intended, depicts the passage of a lavishly ornamented carriage driven by black coachmen and bearing an aristocratic couple. The coach was so lavishly decorated that local citizens took it for a Mardi Gras float and applauded this study of a local ritual. None knew, however, that the Arabi mural, designed it seemed with a specific local audience in mind, simply repeated the Fairfield decoration (see figure 27). Indeed, only the slightest

³⁷ Rowan to Alice Flint, August 5, 1938; Flint to Rowan, August 22, 1938; Rowan to Flint, August 29, 1938; Flint to Rowan, September 2, 1938; Flint to Rowan, September 30, 1938; Flint to Rowan, November 4, 1938; Rowan to Flint, November 19, 1938; Rowan to Flint, December 21, 1938, "Arabi P.O.," RG 121, Entry 133, Box 37, (NA).

variation separated the two, such as the addition of two horses, the subtraction of three riders, and the inversion of the couple's appearance. Aside from these minor touches the murals are identical. The same coach parades down the same avenue in Connecticut as in Louisiana, and it might have been the same in Adele, Georgia, the sight of Flint's final Section commission, had it not been for the insistence by Ed Rowan that another coach scene might smack of the repetitious. Still, Flint was little daunted. In Adele, the parade motif remains intact, expressed this time in the form of several black slaves, all in succession, and each bearing a trunk overhead. If not directly visible, the coach lurks just beyond sight, and its lavish ornamentation is suggested in the splendor of the trunks (see figure 28).³⁸

The murals of Harry Lane and Alice Flint represent the extreme, if logical, implications of the growth of national culture during the 1930s. One produced anonymity, the other produced interchangeability, and both provide a crucial frame of reference without which the meaning of a final Louisiana mural might otherwise be lost. In July of 1941 the mural version of Evangeline, Longfellow's romantic heroine, arrived in St. Martinville, Louisiana. She had arranged herself beneath her oak along the bayou, and resumed her vigil. White-capped and virginal she waited, the folds of her dress billowing among palm fronds and water hyacinths. A church loomed porcelain just beyond her shoulder. Spanish moss swayed overhead. One hand clutched her prayer book, the other rested demurely at her breast. She sat, as she always had, awaiting her

³⁸ Flint to Rowan, December 27, 1938; Flint to Rowan, April 6, 1939, in *ibid.*, "Fairfield P.O.," *ibid.*, Box 12; "Adele P.O.," *ibid.*, Box 24, (NA).

lover's return, while herons waded in the bayou.³⁹

St. Martinville, Louisiana, in 1940, was a town of fewer than 7,000 people, two hotels, several boarding houses, one movie theater, and a stop on the Texas and Pacific Railroad. It clung to Bayou Teche, snaked up from the Gulf, through the Acadian country, in the broad triangle of the Atchafalaya Basin just west of New Orleans. The French settled the town in the mid-18th century before giving it to the Spanish who made it a fort, the Poste des Attakapas. By 1800, it had become something of a counter-revolutionary haven, sheltering enough former French nobles that St. Martinville was dubbed Le Petite Paris. This invested the town with an aristocratic aura dazzling to the minds of its subsequent chroniclers. George Washington Cable described its jewelled minuets and summer opera society. Later, the Louisiana author Lyle Saxon mourned the decline of this noble order. It had been destroyed, he insisted, by the passing of the Steamboat Age and the coming of the railroads, the first in a series of financial setbacks and natural disasters that left the town in the hands of the "Cajuns," the present masters of St. Martinville.⁴⁰

The Acadians, or Cajuns, too, were exiles. They had arrived in St. Martinville shortly after the town was settled, following their expulsion from Nova Scotia at the end of the Seven Years' War. These were rural peasants then and since, a small and insular ethnic community, speaking a patois French, assembling at mass each Sunday on the summons of tolling bells, and clinging to an oral tradition of folk

³⁹ "St. Martinville P.O.," *ibid.*, Box 39, (NA).

⁴⁰ Federal Works Agency, Louisiana: A Guide to the State, (New York, 1941), pp.353-9.

tales and legends. They believed in the miracles of the Saints, in Loup Garou, the werewolf of the bayou, and they believed in the story of Emmeline Labiche. Emmeline was among those in the first boatloads of Acadians who fled from Canada, the lover of Gabriel Arceneaux. Amidst the chaotic exile, the two became separated. Emmeline roamed the breadth of America searching for Gabriel. She found him, finally, in St. Martinville, engaged to another woman. Grief-stricken, she lost her reason, weakened steadily, and died. The villagers buried her as their own and perpetuated her memory by repeating her saga. Nathaniel Hawthorne heard it and resolved to write a story from it. Instead, he mentioned it to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose epic poem "Evangeline" is the story of Emmeline Labiche.⁴¹

By 1940, Evangeline was, to the Acadian residents of the region, a powerful symbol of ethnic travail. "Cajuns" generally led isolated lives as farmers, trappers, and fishermen, consigned to the margins of society. They identified with Evangeline's patience and her long suffering, a myth enduring enough to permit a profitable exploitation. Emmeline Labiche's grave and the "Evangeline Oak," where the first emigres had landed and where Longfellow seated his heroine, were both thriving tourist spots. Calculators of larger stakes also understood her symbolic power and the depth of her appeal. In 1928, as a candidate for Governor, Huey Long had stood beneath the Evangeline Oak and stirred the air with rhetoric rich in her imagery. Evangeline was not the only one to have waited beneath this oak without reward, he told the crowd, for where were the roads and the hospitals and the schools, their just due, things always promised but never delivered? "Evangeline wept

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 623-4.

bitter tears in her disappointment," he closed, "but it lasted through only one lifetime. Your tears in this country, around this oak, have lasted for generations. Give me the chance to dry the tears of those who still weep here!" They did. One week later, on Election Day, Long swept the Cajun districts on his way to the Governor's Mansion in Baton Rouge. Nor did he forget them once he arrived. Acadiana received the full benefits offered by the Long social program and remained a solid base of his electoral power. After his death, Acadiana remained a persistent keeper of the flame.⁴²

After Long's death, St. Martinville became the recipient of largesse dispensed by an even greater patron. In 1938, the WPA remodeled the post office in town, a converted colonial mansion, and in 1939 the Treasury Section of Fine Arts undertook to decorate it. Harmony governed this project, from start to finish, in a town whose citizens communicated exactly what they wanted to a federal agency which, in this instance, gave it to them. Local residents seized the initiative, reversing the standard operating procedure maintained by the Section. The townspeople of St. Martinville did not wait for a federal artist to turn up among them asking questions about their town and how they wanted it represented in paint. Instead, the residents, knowing what they wanted, sought out the artist. No one knows who provided the idea to decorate the post office with a mural depiction of Evangeline, but if it wasn't the Postmaster, Howard Durand, he was certainly its chief promoter. Informed that the Section was to decorate the new post office, he busied himself collecting various bits of information depicting the town and its immediate vicinity. These included

⁴² Quoted in T. Harry Williams, Huey Long, (New York, 1969), pp.289.

photographs and postcards of his own plus some borrowed from reluctant neighbors who feared for their return. All were bundled and sent along to the local Congressional representative, Robert L. Mouton, who approached Edward Rowan. The two met frequently over the course of the next two weeks, providing ample opportunity for Mouton to impress upon Rowan the precise nature of what his constituents had in mind. Neither he nor they were vague. By the time Rowan appointed an artist for the job, he already had in hand a set of instructions no one could misunderstand:

The scene of Evangeline under the historic oak, Spanish moss swaying lightly in the perfumed breeze, the lilac of the water hyacinths at her feet mingling with the orchid of the evening sky, the toll of vesper suggested by the steeple of the church where now her body lies, give the scene an ineffable note of sadness and yet reflect the nobility of her selfless search /.../ something like that is wanted.

This and more. Four additional designs were requested, each a small circular decoration intended to harmonize with light fixtures suspended from the ceiling. Individual topics included azalea blossoms, magnolia blooms, pelicans, and crawfish, each selected to convey the distinctive flavor of the region (see figures 29-32).⁴³

It took little more than a year to translate the design into reality. Rowan assigned the project to Minetta Good, a lithographer and decorative painter then working in a studio in Freehold, New Jersey. Good, a New York native, a graduate of the New York Art Students League and, later, the New York School of Applied Design for Women, was also a

⁴³ Howard J. Durand to Hon. Robert L. Mouton, August 1, 1939; Commissioner of Public Buildings to Robert L. Mouton, August 11, 1939; Minetta Good to Ed Rowan, September 15, 1939; Rowan to Good, September 20, 1939; Ed Rowan to Minetta Good, October 12, 1939, "St. Martinville P.O.," RG 121, Entry 133, Box 39, (NA).

veteran Section painter. Her mural for the Dresden, Tennessee, post office, an interpretation of local history, had achieved critical and popular acclaim and, on the strength of this project, Rowan gave her the St. Martinville job. Her work went smoothly. By the end of January, 1940, she had completed her original design and submitted it for approval. Mouton, no doubt on the advice of Postmaster Durand, suggested that Good's original Evangeline was much too old. She should be a young woman of no more than twenty, he insisted. Then, too, he observed, Evangeline's dress lacked authenticity (see figure 33). The artist had no complaints. She made her girl look younger, this was easy enough, but the costume proved more difficult. Good rummaged through the designs at the Costume Museum at Radio City, but found nothing to her liking. Informed of her frustration, Durand stirred himself anew, supplying a photograph of native garb and suggestions as to color. For his part, Mouton volunteered a rotogravure edition of The Louisiana Tourist for use in working up the ceiling decorations. These and other more minor considerations were all obliged. Shortly before Christmas, 1940, Good finished the mural, accompanied it to St. Martinville, supervised the installation, and attended the unveiling. The people of St. Martinville were delighted. "Permit me to commend you on the selection of Miss Good," cooed Howard Durand, "her paintings are perfect in every respect and have brought word of praise from all who have viewed them." Very nearly so. On the day the mural was unveiled, local residents choked the post office lobby, craning their necks, uttering gasps of delight. At one point, though, a covey of elderly women approached the artist. They huddled only briefly before Minetta Good reached for her brush and called for a ladder. Moments later, the scene

had recovered its original ebullience. People still crowded the lobby and mutters of approval continued. Only now, these joined the effusive thanks of the elderly ladies, grateful to the artist for honoring their simple request. On their prompting, Minetta Good had scrambled up the ladder and painted a tiny cross necklace around the throat of the waiting Evangeline (see figure 34).⁴⁴

All were pleased with the St. Martinville project. Minetta Good fully accepted the limits of her artistic license; she had no quarrel with a younger Evangeline, or a more authentic garb, or even a tiny cross painted in at the last moment. Rather, she remained grateful for a chance to ply her skills for an adequate paycheck at a time when many of her colleagues could not. She left the experience enriched, not simply for this, but from her contact with the community of St. Martinville. Section officials were no less delighted. No private quarrel or public scandal had rocked this project as they had and would others. Instead, according to the organizational ideal of the Section, it had brought art to a place it considered culturally backward, thereby enriching the lives of all its residents. The people of St. Martinville, Howard Durand chief among them, were equally delighted. Here the townspeople had seen a familiar and trusted symbol, one central to their own self-definition as an ethnic group and as a community, preserved in oil and raised to prominence in a place of public

⁴⁴ Mouton to Ed Rowan, January 23, 1940; Ed Rowan to Minetta Good, January 30, 1940; Good to Rowan, February 12, 1940; Rowan to Good, March 13, 1940; Mouton to Rowan, May 1, 1940; Durand to Rowan, December 13, 1940; Good to Rowan, December 26, 1940; *ibid.*, (NA); The Weekly Messenger (St. Martinville), December 13, 1940.

access.⁴⁵

That all were happy is certain, but what this mural signified, what it represented in the eyes of its admirers, and what it means to its subsequent students is a good deal more elusive. It has been suggested that Evangeline represents an idealized version of southern womanhood, a sort of French-Canadian Melanie Wilkes, frail as ivory and ennobled through long and patient suffering. Such a conclusion fails to satisfy, however, for it invests the symbol of a French-Catholic community with Anglo-Saxon Protestant traits. Evangeline is not a symbol of gender but of culture, an ethnic flag run up the pole for any number of reasons. No record survives detailing the precise motives that initiated this project. St. Martinville, by 1940, enjoyed a thriving tourist trade, most of it based on the Evangeline legend. In this sense, a mural depiction of the heroine hung in a public building could only boost interest and, by inference, sales. Then, too, given their chance, the people of this small locale may have seized the opportunity to place themselves before the country in a fashion that afforded them at least vicarious association with the national fame of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Ultimately, however, what fascinates the student of the St. Martinville mural is the significance revealed in the timing of its creation.⁴⁶

Evangeline is purely and distinctly a creature of the 1930s. She exists by virtue of a political compromise struck between a national administration and its local constituent, one that enshrined a local

⁴⁵ Durand to Rowan, December 13, 1940; Good to Rowan, December 26, 1940, *ibid.*, (NA).

⁴⁶ Beckham, A Gentle Reconstruction, p.96.

symbol in a federal lobby. The authenticity of her costume and her obvious Roman Catholicism typify the New Deal value of cultural plurality. She even conveys the particular anxiety so characteristic of the period. Her existence rests on the most fragile of foundations, the tacit agreement between a federal agency and local community that gave one the power to define the nature of fine art and the other autonomy over what that fine art would depict. Such forces are in constant tension. Uncertainty also permeates the cultural dimension of the mural. The painting seeks to celebrate one of the central legends of a distinct and self-contained ethnic community at a moment when American in general, to unprecedented lengths, were celebrating the richness of their manifold ethnic and national origins. Still, uneasiness characterizes both celebrations, the one in the painting and the one nationwide, for each occurred at a point when systems of mass communication, begun in the 1920s, exerted unprecedented power and the ability to blend at once distinct elements of ethnic and national or racial culture into a new, homogenized, standardized culture dubbed The American Way. Signs of such were abundant in 1940, even in St. Martinville, where WPA writers and folklorists were busy recording the old customs and cultural practices before they vanished, where the traditional French language was passing out of existence, and where the young were giving up their parents' rural folkways for factory jobs in and around New Orleans. This is what gives the Evangeline mural its particular appeal, its holographic quality. Viewed one way she is the symbol of cultural pride, the long-suffering personification of a long-suffering people, with eyes empty from love too long-deferred. Look at her again and she has changed. The eyes are still empty and longing, though not through

jilted affection, but rather in a parting glance cast at a vanishing way of life.



Figure 1 - "Cotton Time" - Completed Mural

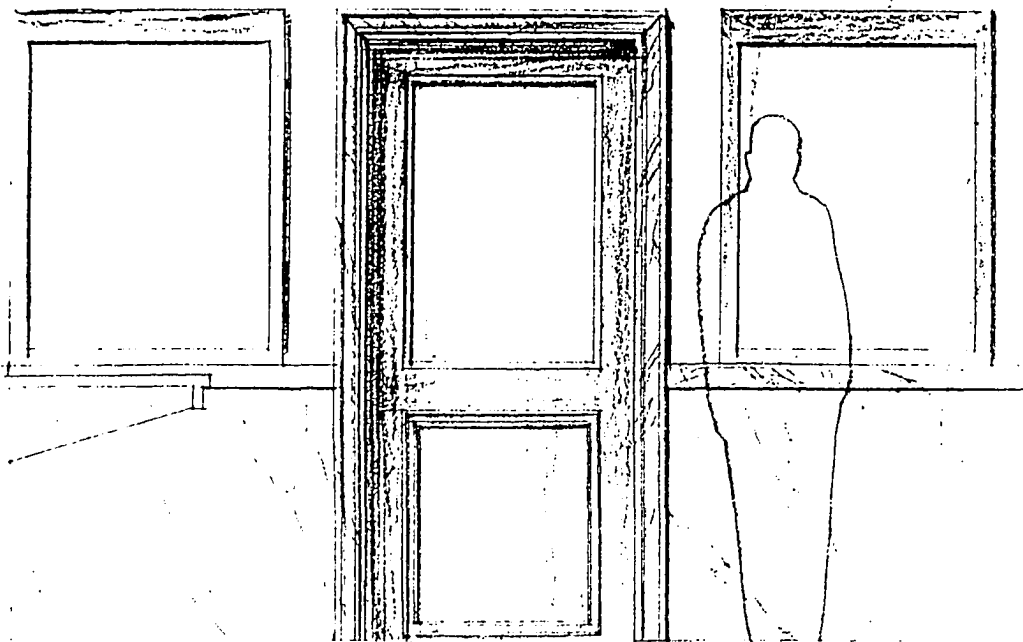
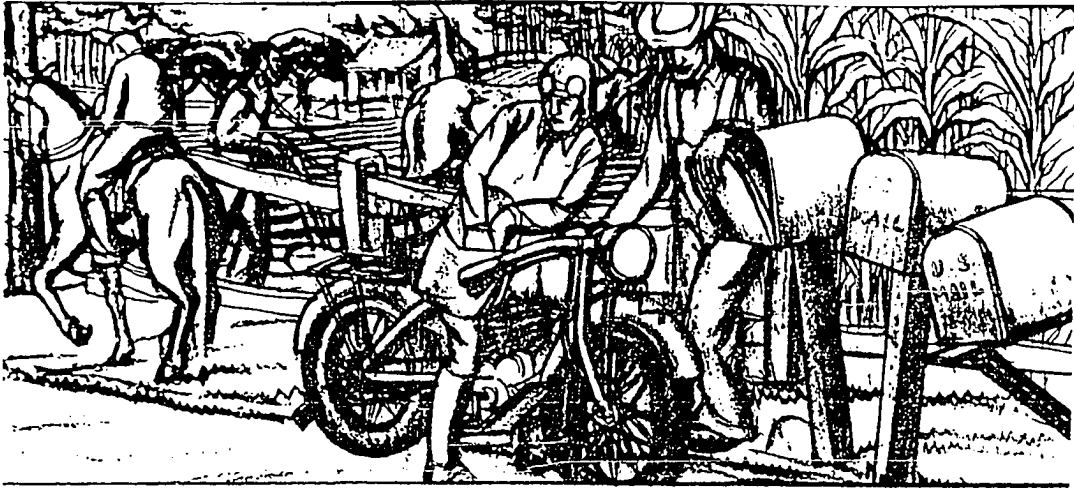


Figure 2 - "Rural Free Delivery" - Preliminary Sketch



Figure 3 - "Rural Free Delivery" - Preliminary Sketch



Figure 4 - "Rural Free Delivery" - Completed Mural - Installed

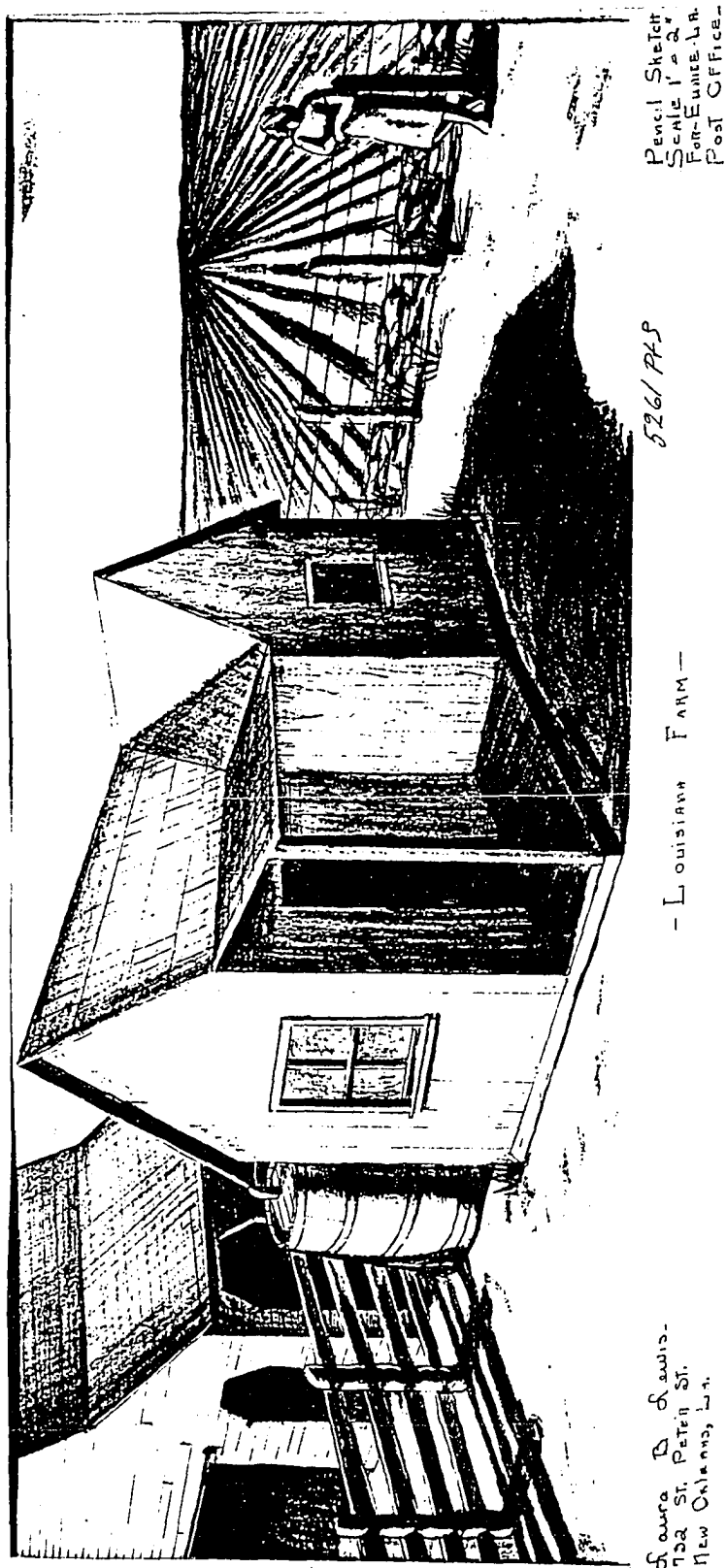


Figure 5 - "Louisiana Farm" - Preliminary Sketch

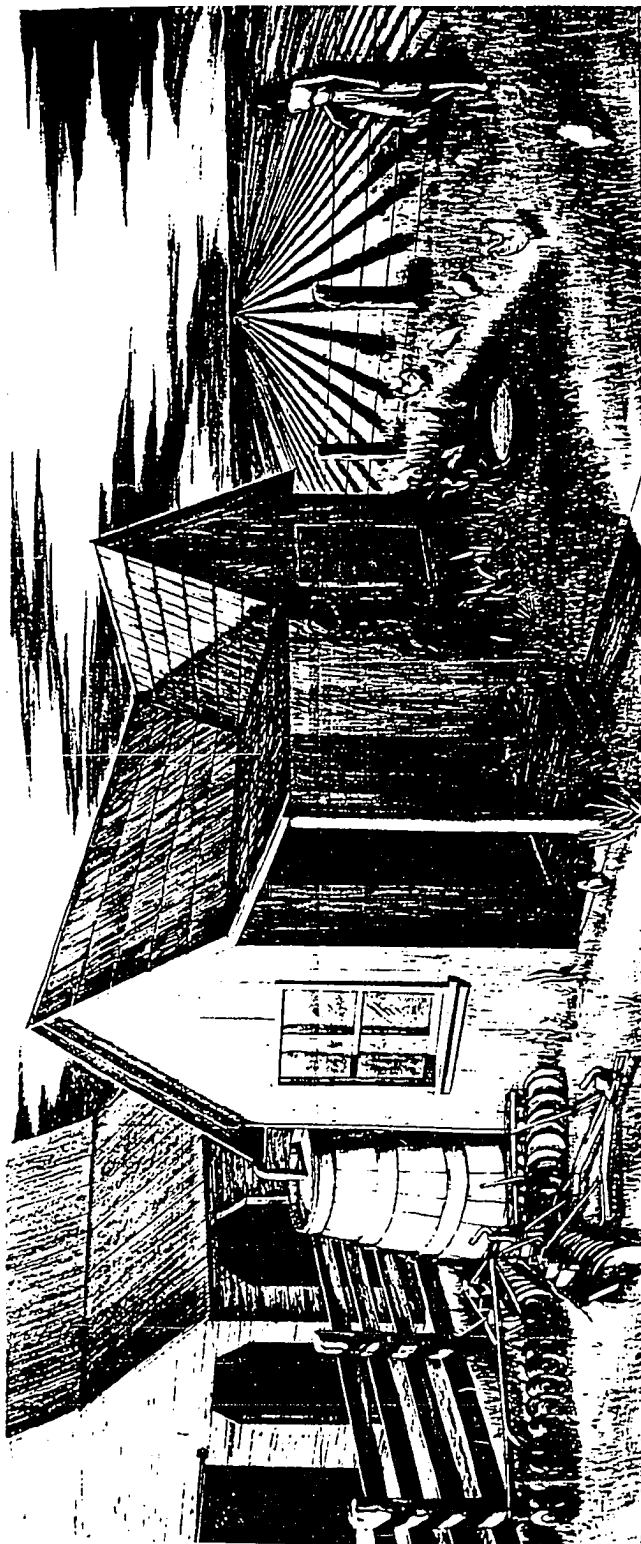


Figure 6 - " Louisiana Farm" - Full-Sized Cartoon



Figure 7 - "Strawberry Culture" - Finished Mural in Progress



Figure 8 - "Strawberry Culture" - Finished Mural in Progress



Figure 9 - "Strawberry Culture" - Finished Mural in Progress

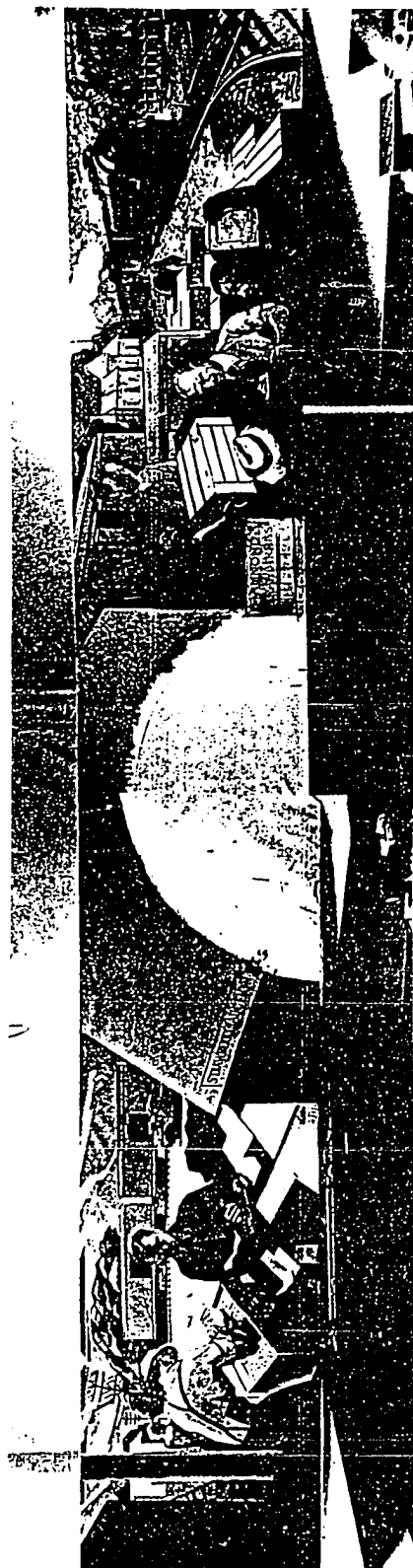


Figure 10 - "Strawberry Culture" - Finished Mural in Progress



Figure 11 - "Tung Oil Industry" - Full-Sized Cartoon

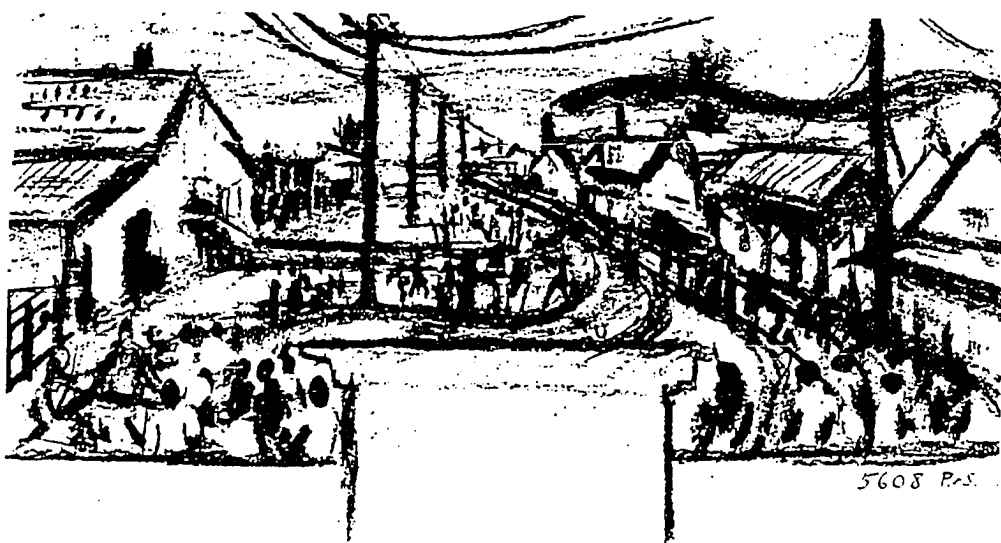


Figure 12 - Untitled - Preliminary Sketch

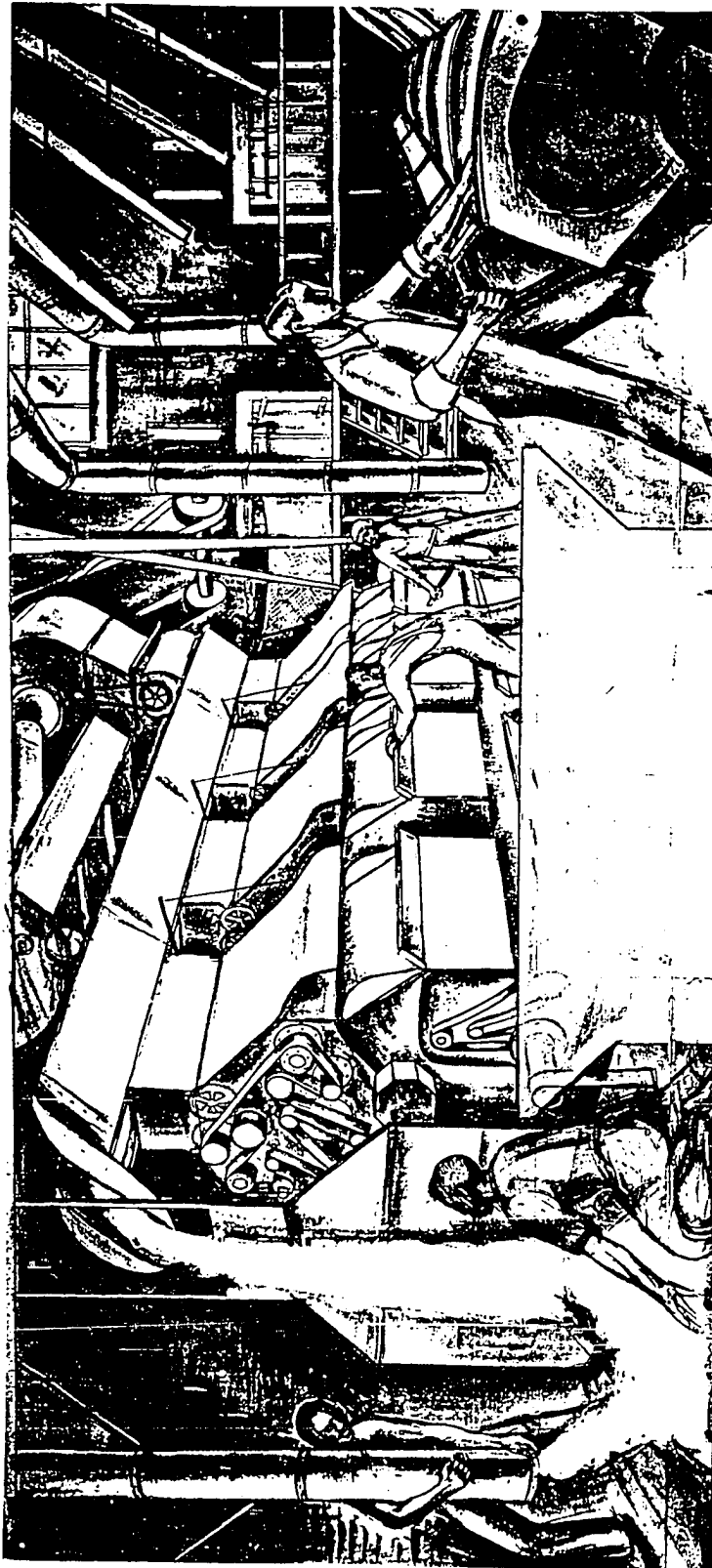


Figure 13 - "A Southern Pattern" - Full-Sized Cartoon



Figure 14 - "A Southern Pattern" - Completed Mural



Figure 15 - "The Harvest" - Completed Mural



Figure 16 - "Agriculture and Industry in Claiborne Co."
Completed Mural



Figure 17 - "The River" - Completed Mural

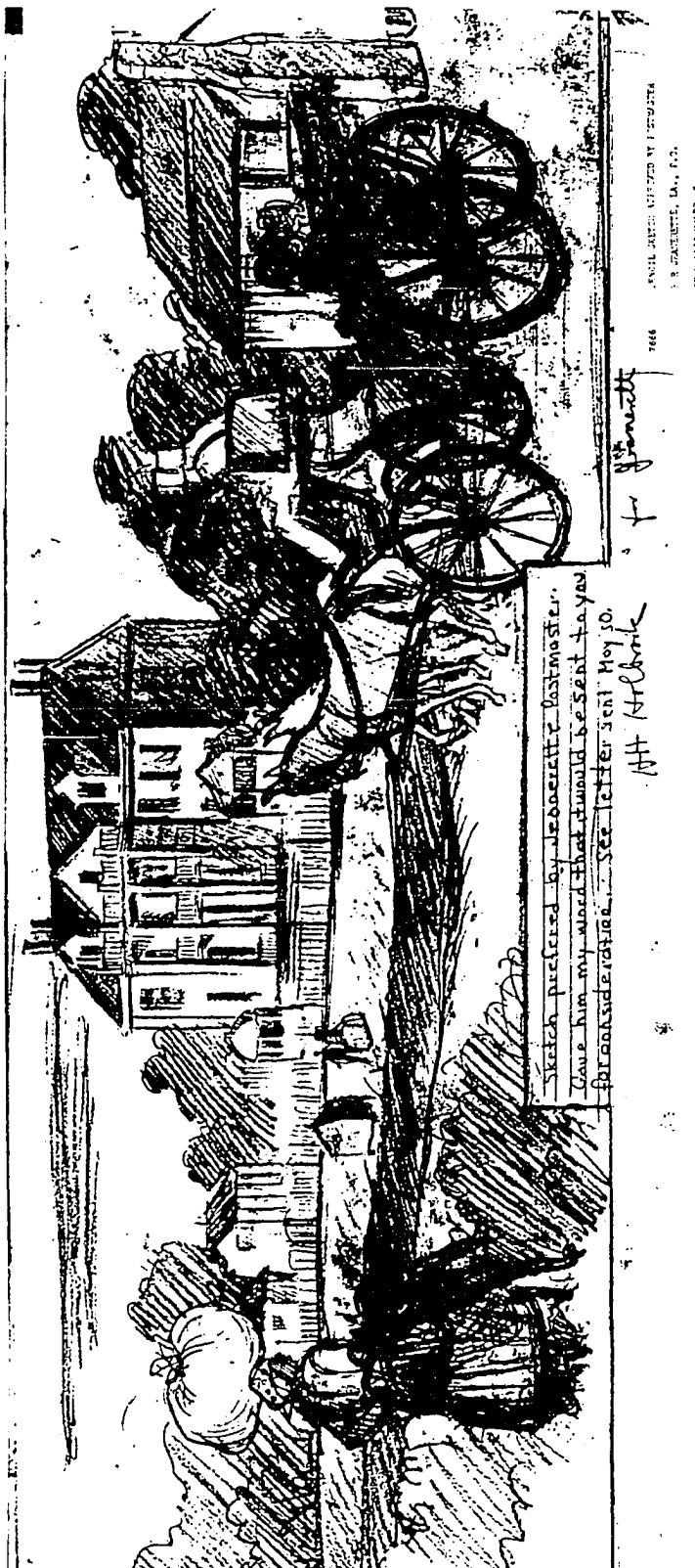


Figure 18 - Untitled - Preliminary Sketch

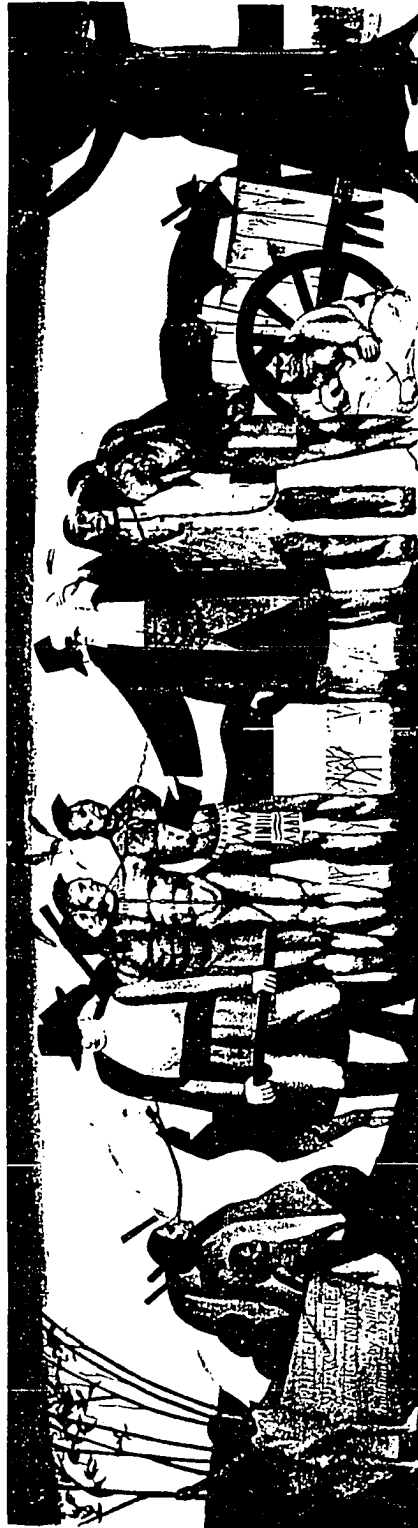


Figure 19 - "John Eliot Speaks to the Natick Indians" - Completed Mural



Figure 20 - "Sugar Cane Mill" - Completed Mural - Installed



Figure 21 - "Louisiana Bayou" - Completed Mural

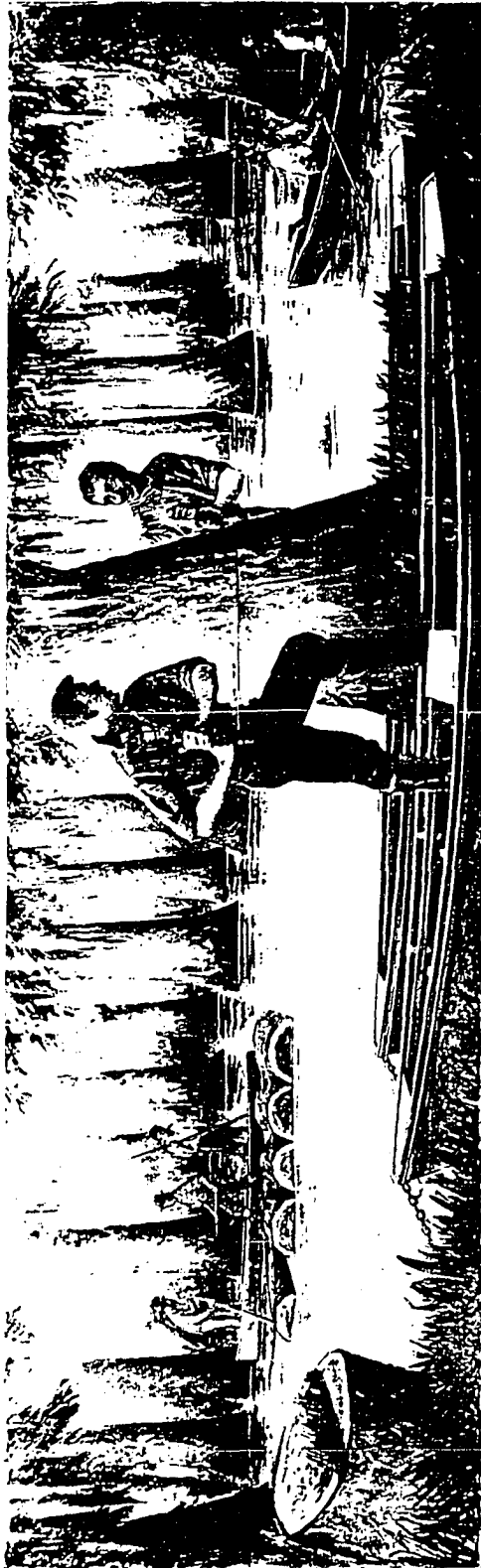


Figure 22 - "Logging in a Louisiana Swamp" - Completed Mural



Figure 23 - "LaSalle Discovers the Mississippi" - Completed Mural

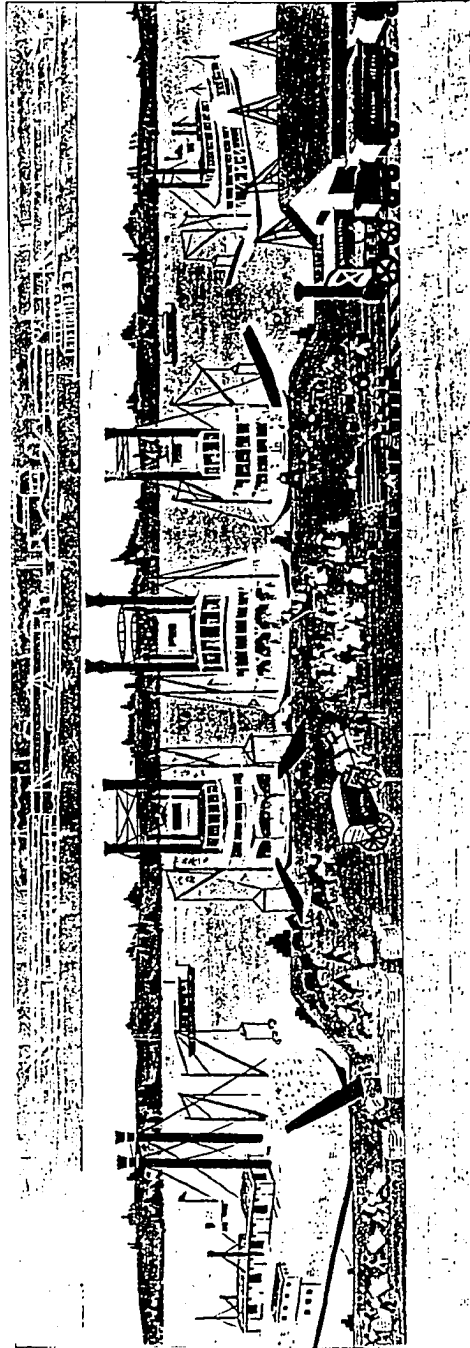


Figure 24 - "Steamboats on the Mississippi" - Completed Mural

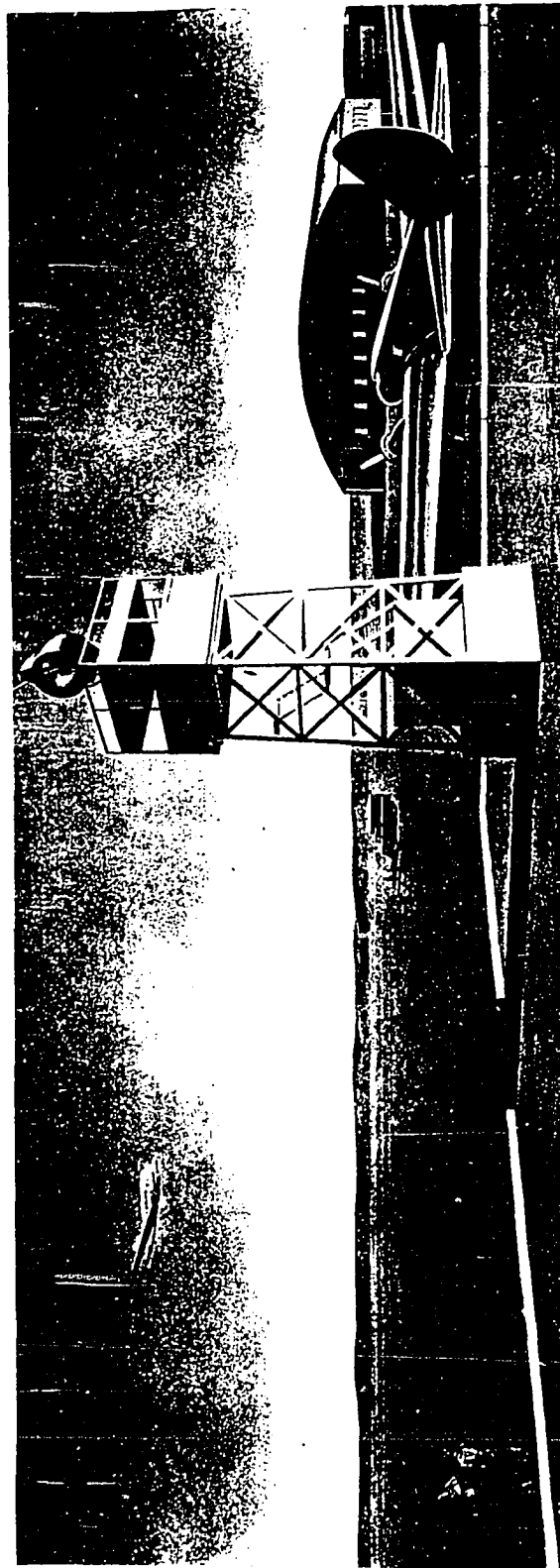


Figure 25 - "Air Express" - Completed Mural

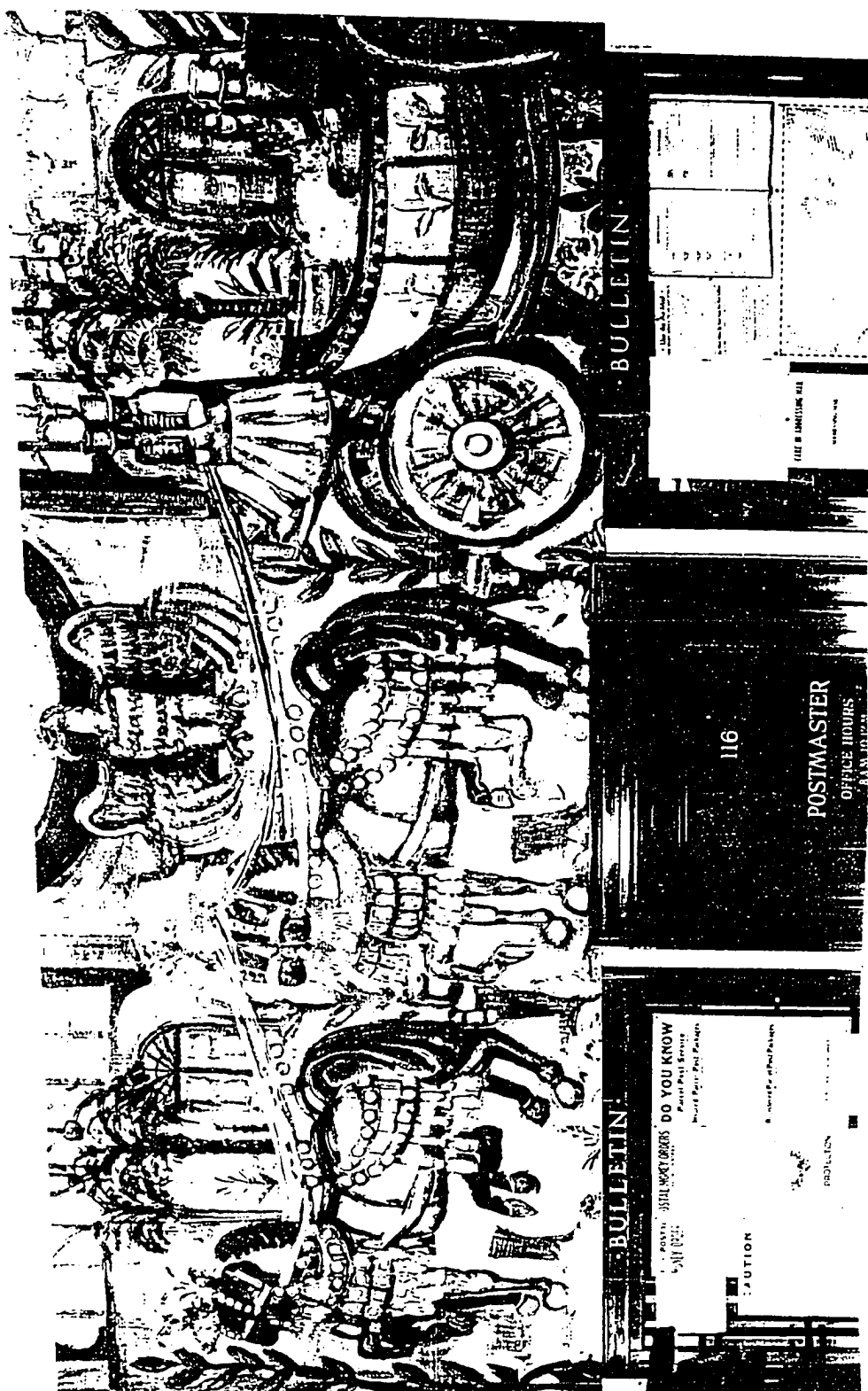


Figure 26 - "The Pageant" - Completed Mural - Installed

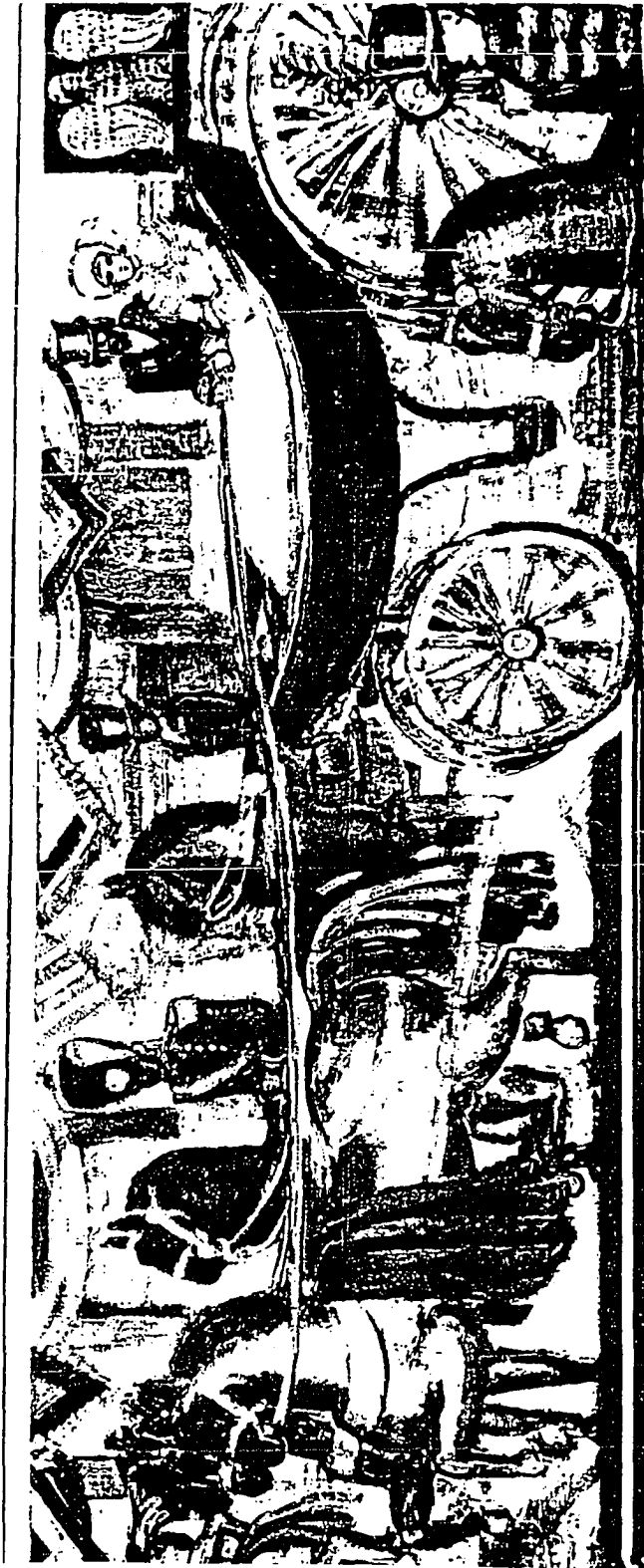


Figure 27 - "Tempora Mutuantur et Nos Mutamur in Illis"
Completed Mural - Installed

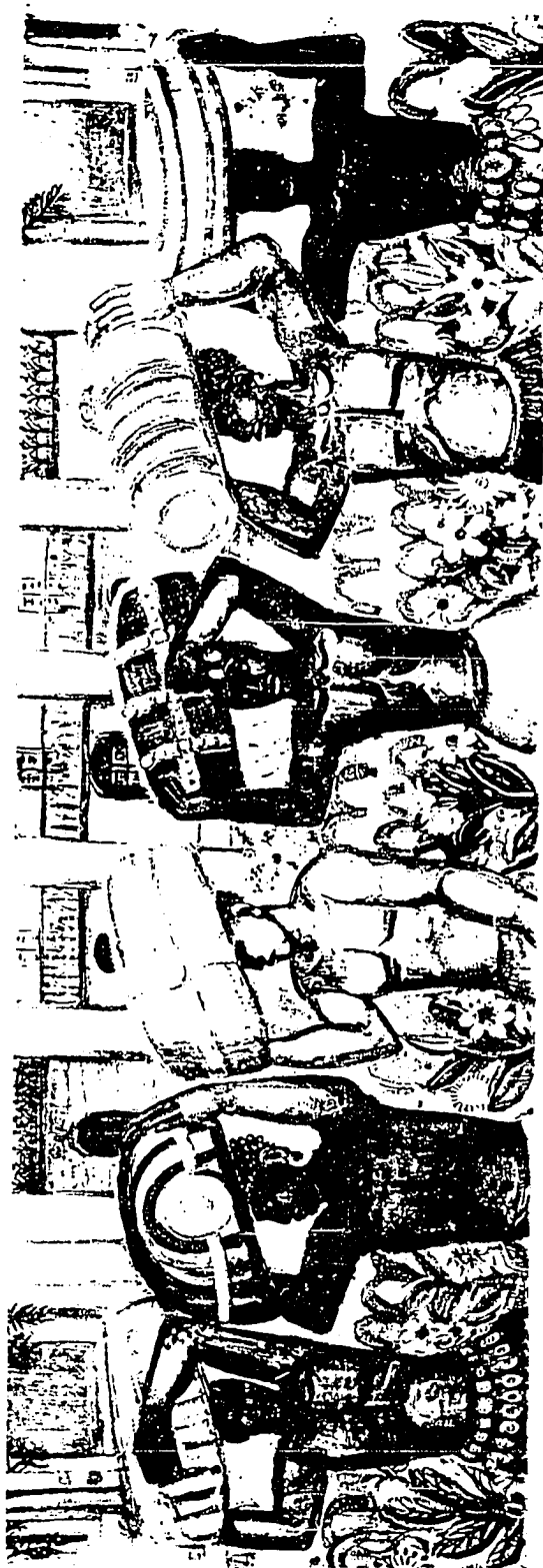


Figure 28 - "Plantation Scene" - Completed Mural

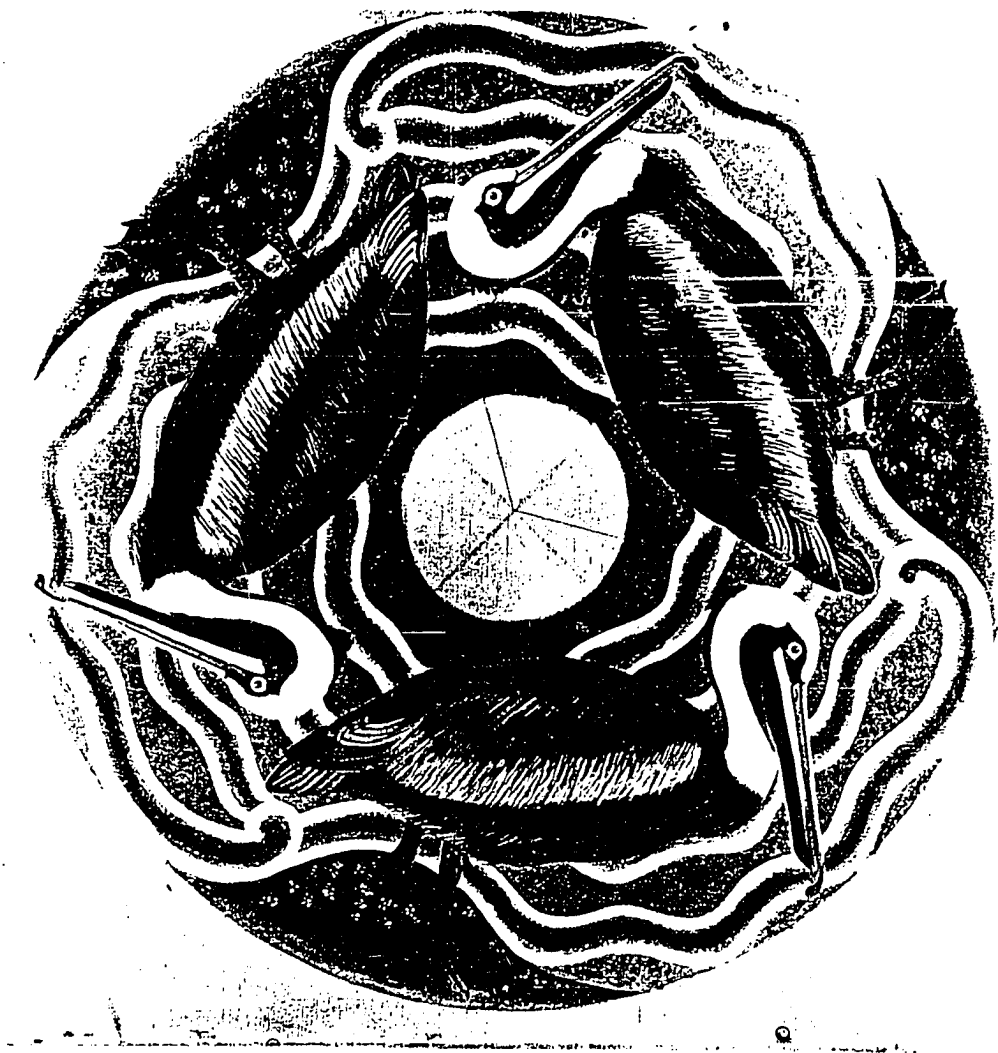


Figure 29 - Pelicans - Ceiling Panel

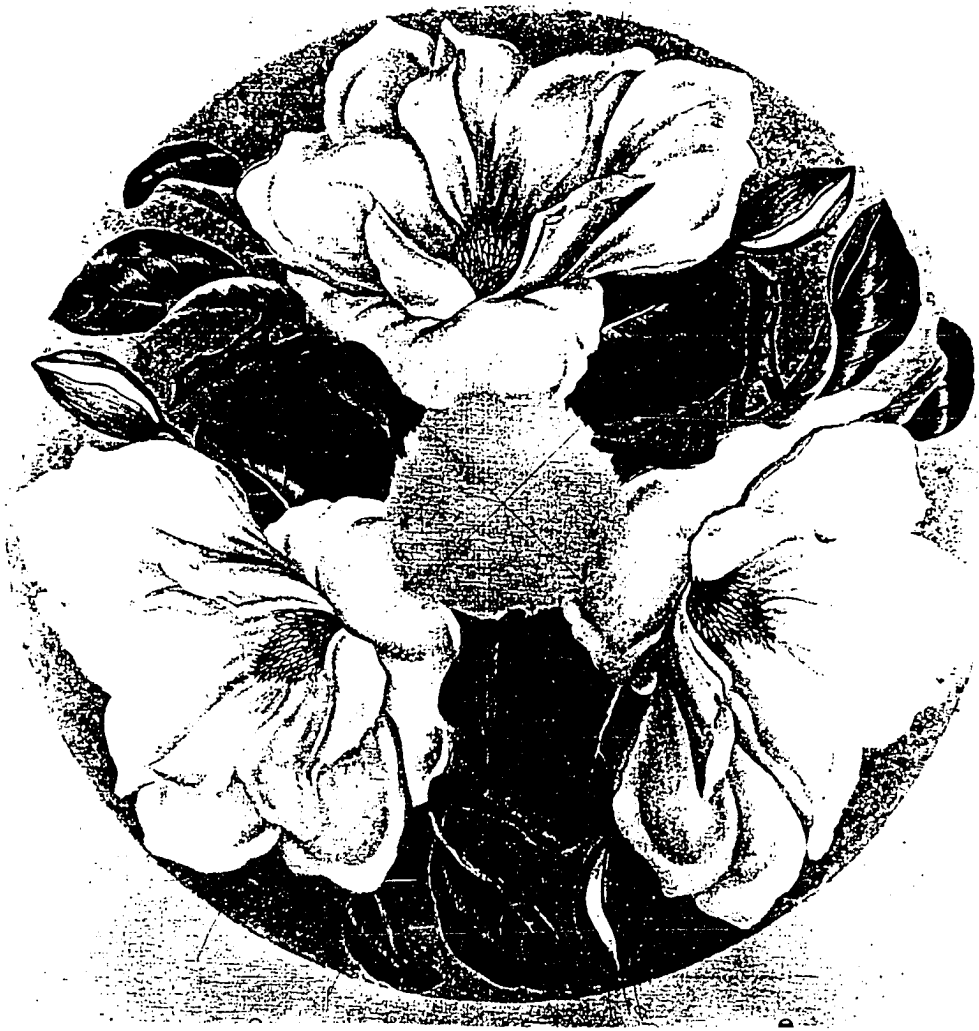


Figure 30 - Magnolias - Ceiling Panel

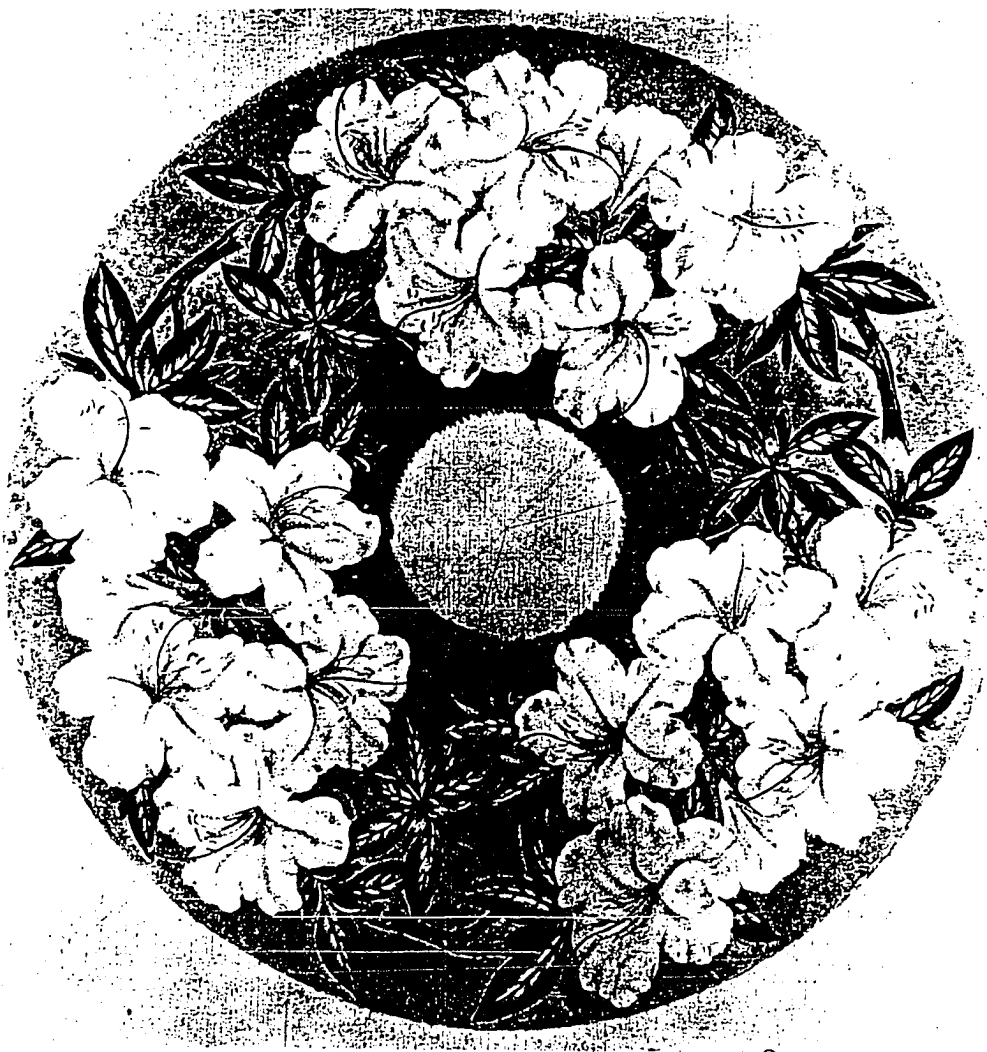


Figure 31 - Azaleas - Ceiling Panel

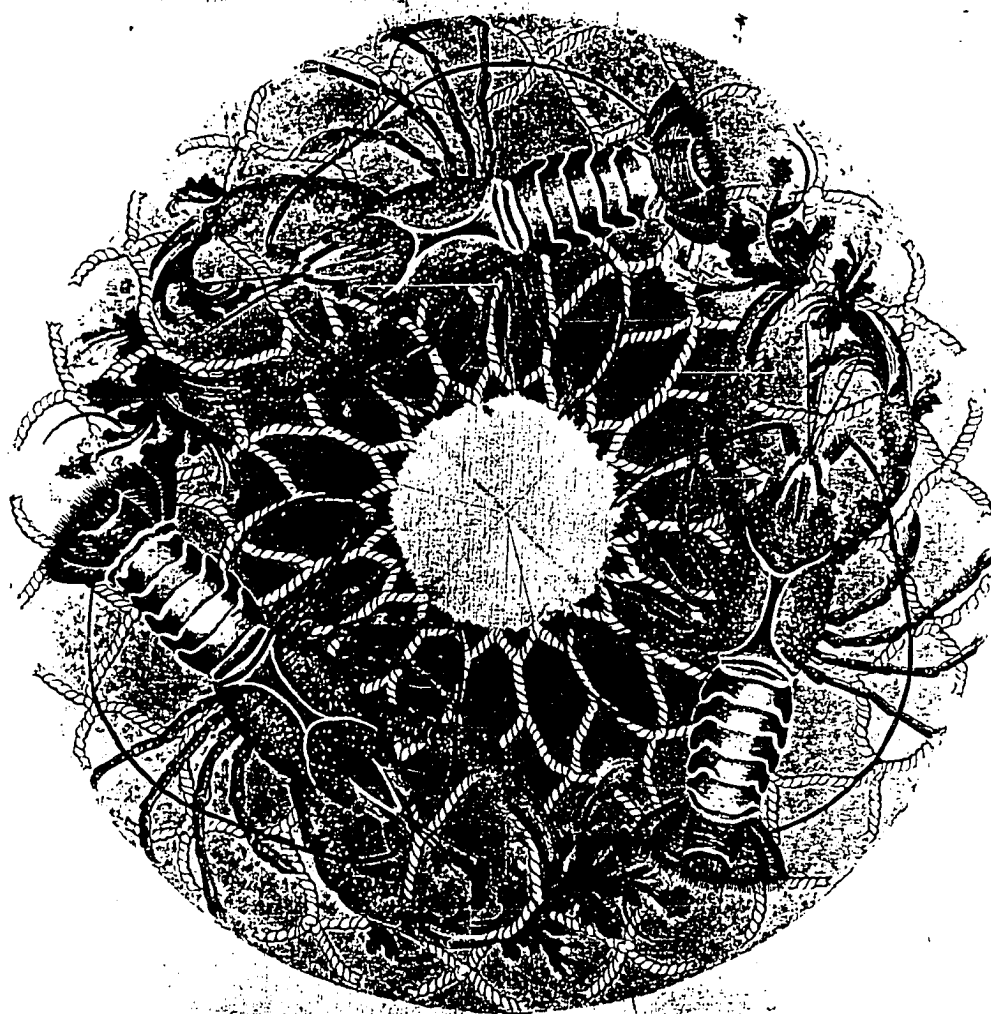


Figure 32 - Crawfish - Ceiling Panel



Figure 33 - "Evangeline" - Preliminary Sketch



Figure 34 - "Evangeline" - Completed Mural

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEW HORIZON IN AMERICAN ART: THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT: 1935-1943

1. "The Shooting of Huey Long"

Four years after the event it depicted, the editors of Life published John McCrady's painting, "The Shooting of Huey Long." McCrady, son of an Episcopal minister, had grown up in small towns along the Mississippi-Louisiana border, attended Ole Miss in the early thirties, and trained as an artist at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the Arts & Crafts Club in New Orleans, and the Art Students League in New York. His artistic stock had risen ever since. Like his teacher in New York, Thomas Hart Benton, McCrady was a Regionalist whose talent made him among the best known painters in the South. He settled in New Orleans, married Mary Basso, the sister of a local novelist, and produced work of sufficient merit to earn a Guggenheim Fellowship in the Spring of 1939. That October Life gave him nationwide exposure, reproducing his richly detailed version of the Long assassination. In the painting, bedlam engulfs the new State Capitol moments after the first shot rang out. Onlookers either stand aghast, faces frozen in astonishment, or dash down the hall for cover. Huey's bodyguards blaze away with pistol and tommy gun at the assassin, Carl Weiss, who slumps to the floor, clothes tattered, blood streaming from his riddled body, still clutching a small pistol. The Kingfish, as always, occupies center stage, the focus of attention. Reeling up the marbled hall, he probes his wound with bloodied and oversized hands,

suggesting the ruthless exercise of enormous power. To his left a stern bust of the Sieur d'Bienville, first Governor of Louisiana, glares at the stricken Senator across two centuries of state history. On the floor to Long's right, as though placed there to cushion the fall of his assassin, sprawls a copy of the American Progress, the weekly Longite sheet. Beneath the masthead a suggestive headline asks "WHAT OF THIS PROMISE TO SHARE OUR WEALTH?" while a cockroach, equally provocative, scurries from beneath the torn front page.¹

This most celebrated of John McCrady's paintings was also his most controversial. "The Shooting of Huey Long" commenced a weekly Life feature depicting critical moments in American history and provoked another round in the continuing quarrel over the Long legacy. Partisans of the Kingfish criticized the Christ-like overtones given the stricken assassin. McCrady's Weiss seemed passive, almost submissive to the gunfire of his killers. He had the same calm visage, the same slender build. Two bullets cut paths through his body in the sign of the cross. Another opens simultaneous wounds in his side and hand. Other satiric touches, the glowering statue, the bloody hands, the newspaper headline, and especially that cockroach brought grins to the faces of anti-Longites across the country. Such touches suggested a less than flattering portrait of the man some regarded as hero and saviour. But "The Shooting of Huey Long" is suggestive for a deeper, if more obscure, reason. John McCrady finished the painting in his spare time after

¹ "John McCrady," Artists' Files, Department of Curatorials, The Historic New Orleans Collection, (New Orleans, Louisiana), [hereinafter cited by "artist's name," Artists' Files, (THNOC)]; "910-B FAP," Division of Information, Primary Files, Record Group 69, Records of the Federal Works Agency, National Archives, (Washington, D.C.), Box 77. For a discussion of McCrady's mural painted for the post office in Amory, Mississippi, see Marling, Wall-to-Wall America, pp. 137-8.

joining the Federal Art Project (FAP) in 1936. By far the largest New Deal art program, the FAP was also the most controversial, especially in Long's own Louisiana, for reasons the Kingfish himself might well have appreciated.²

During his brief and turbulent career, Huey Long had accomplished the politically impossible in Louisiana. Like some latter day monarch subduing the quarrels of bickersome nobles, he had overcome the isolated centers of political power scattered across the state and united them in an alliance of enormous strength. The new organization challenged traditional cliques of political power and social prestige. It swept aside the Bourbon oligarchs, masters of Louisiana since Redemption, and established a massive and unprecedented program of state spending. The Longites built roads, bridged rivers, and brought the rudiments of health care and education to people long accustomed to doing without. It was done for the oldest of reasons through the newest of means. Long intended to redistribute wealth and political power in his native state. Later, the crusade developed national aspirations. But throughout, the Long appeal trumpeted a consistent message rich in republican overtones. He promised to dissolve dangerous concentrations of power, and to protect the liberties such powers usurped. He promised to strike the elusive balance between equality and freedom. He promised to "make every man a king but to let no one wear a crown," a traditional message broadcast through innovative means. Long helped pioneer the use of the new mass media for political ends. Sound trucks carried his message to distant stretches of the state and nation. A weekly newspaper

² "John McCrady," Artists Files, THNOC; Life, October 24, 1938, pp. 26-7.

proclaimed views echoed in popular songs of his own creation. Mass mailings solicited funds and electoral support. Carefully staged episodes, such as his encounter with a German naval officer in 1931, created a populist impression easily conveyed to illiterate voters through political cartoons understood by all at a single glance. Finally, to a greater extent than most of his contemporaries, Long understood and mastered those two essential vehicles of early twentieth century mass communication, the radio and the newsreel.³

Long's political savvy, his mass appeal gained through skillful manipulation of the media, his unflinching drive for power, and his contribution to the origins of the welfare state make him one of the most compelling figures of twentieth century American history, and among the most controversial. In life Long generated confrontation wherever he went; in dying he commenced a debate still raging among scholars and other observers, struggling to assess his legacy. Surely it is fitting, then, that "The Shooting of Huey Long," a controversial painting depicting the controversial end of a controversial figure, would have been painted by someone working for a federal agency in Louisiana equally controversial and for all the same reasons. Long's assassination gave the project life by creating the pretext for a rapprochement between his political heirs and the federal relief administrators. The connection ends there. Had he lived, he would have opposed the project for political reasons and ignored it out of personal indifference. But in dying Huey Long inadvertently brought to Louisiana a federal art agency cast in his own mold, one determined to establish

³ T. Harry Williams, Huey Long, (New York, 1969); Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression, (New York, 1982), pp. 15-35.

a powerful cultural alliance fashioned from the isolated art communities of the nation in order to redistribute artistic wealth and power, while advocating a modern vision of art with egalitarian emphasis and mass appeal. Styled after the Kingfish's own epigram, it was an agency determined to make every man an artist.⁴

In the Spring of 1935 the government came once more to the aid of American artists. It had been a year since the PWAP closed up shop, and in the interim conditions had steadily worsened. Once again painters and sculptors and printmakers were out of work, their prospects and their spirits dwindling. Some cried silently for relief. Others were less patient and more vocal. In New York City, artistic capital of the nation, unemployed artists mingled, exchanged ideas, organized and raised shouts of protests. In 1934 they formed the Artists' Union, 1300 strong by the following spring, and the Artists' Committee for Action, a pressure group specifically organized to agitate for creation of a federal art program. The administration responded. Out of the enormous relief budget of 1935, nearly five billion dollars, enough was set aside for not one but two new government experiments in the patronage of the arts. One was the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), a small organization similar in spirit and operation to the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture and not surprisingly so. It was designed by

⁴ The Long literature is as complex as the man himself. See for example, Ibid.; see also, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Politics of Upheaval, (New York, 1960), pp. 42-69; V.O. Key, Southern Politics in State and Nation, (New York, 1949), pp. 156-182; Hodding Carter, "Huey Long: American Dictator," in Isabel Leighton, ed., The Aspirin Age, 1919-1941, (New York, 1949), pp. 339-364; Huey Long, Every Man A King, (Baton Rouge, 1935); Forrest Davis, Huey Long: A Candid Biography, (New York, 1935).

Edward Bruce and administered by Bruce's protege, Olin Dows. The other was much more to Harry Hopkins' liking. Hopkins, now head of the new and massive relief agency, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), had been asked by the President "to do something for the artists." This impetus had resulted in TRAP, but Hopkins desired a much broader program, one that would touch a wider range of artists and one whose guiding philosophy would stress relief over talent. Hopkins turned the problem over to his Assistant Administrator, Jacob Baker, who, by the late summer, had organized "Federal One," a program whose patronage would touch not only painters and sculptors, but writers, actors, and musicians as well.⁵

Federal One represented the largest, most extraordinary, and easily the most controversial of all the forays made by the government into the business of art patronage during the Great Depression. None was larger, none broader in scope, nor greater in import. No other program contemplated more, none touched as many Americans, or sparked greater or more heated debate. There was first its enormous size, dwarfing the other art projects. Musicians, writers, and actors aside, the FAP alone created under Federal One had a budget almost fifteen times the size of PWAP, and would employ ten times the number of artists. There was also its durability, and a nagging suspicion among its critics that the arts projects might become permanent. Federal One was no six month stop-gap as PWAP had been. In one form or another, the program operated for eight years. Originally, Federal One established four nationwide arts projects, one each for artists, writers, actors,

⁵ William F. MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, pp. 306-10; Richard D. McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp. 75-7.

and musicians, with affiliated organizations in the several states. Though allied, each was distinct from the other three, with creative control and organizational production vested in a national director. This arrangement lasted four years. In the Spring of 1939 the growing anti-New Deal coalition in Congress forced a complete overhaul of the arts projects. The Emergency Relief Act of that year abolished Federal One and atomized its component parts. The Relief Act terminated the Federal Theater Project, long suspected of communist sympathies, and turned over the remaining projects to state WPA administrators for supervision and funding. Still, the head lopped off, the body would not die. The Relief Act ended the national period of Federal One, reducing the Washington staffs of each remaining project to an advisory role. Nevertheless, in various combinations and with varying degrees of success and failure the musicians, writers, and art projects established in the states continued to operate for several years, even after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Most were converted to war-related activities where they remained in organizational and philosophical limbo until their ultimate demise in 1942 and 1943.⁶

When they passed, the arts projects, singly and collectively, left behind a complex legacy little regarded and less understood. Scholarly debate over the meaning and implications of the thirties art experiment

⁶ The literature on the four arts projects is already large and growing. For studies of each of these projects see Jane DeHart Mathews, The Federal Theater, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief and Politics, (Princeton, 1967); Jerre Mangione, The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943, (Boston, 1972); Monty Noam Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts, (Urbana, 1977); McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists; Belisario Contreras, Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art, (Lewisburg, 1983); Janell Warren-Findley, "Of Tears and Need: The Federal Music Project, 1935-1943." (Ph.D. thesis, George Washington University, 1973).

has generally followed lines established during the decade itself. Most students of the projects write sympathetically about their topic, celebrating the achievements, mourning the termination, and more often than not, concluding with admonitions to present and future administrations that the noble precedent set by the New Dealers has been ignored long enough. There has also emerged from the literature a clearly identifiable set of heroes and villains, in a struggle pitting artists and far-sighted relief administrators against a reactionary coalition of art academicians and anti-New Dealers, chief among them, the Dies Committee, persistent stalkers of the arts projects. The Committee members have often been likened to a pack of wolves who saw in Federal One a lamb permitted by the Presidential shepherd to stray too far from the flock and who pounced ruthlessly on its defenseless victim. Reviews of the shepherd have been mixed. Some have condemned the negligence; others have applauded the difficult if necessary tactic of sacrificing the one for the good of the flock. Condemnation of the pack has been general. Viewed from the perspective of the post-McCarthyite hysteria, the Committee is often regarded as the precursor to the mass hysteria of the early fifties and the institutional link between the Red Scares. In this sense, the opposition of the Dies Committee to the continued operation of a federally sponsored art program is reduced to little more than paranoid red-baiting. Yet such an understanding of the thirties art experiment has done much to cloud an extremely complex and significant moment in the national past. Certainly, both sides have their point. The projects did employ any number of Communist Party members as well as sympathizers with the cause. True also, the Dies Committee exhibited a fair measure of paranoia, such as on the afternoon

it lambasted Federal Theater Project Director Hallie Flanagan about the widespread number of subversives employed by her project. Flanagan retorted with satire, suggesting that perhaps the Committee considered Thomas Carlyle subversive, but the joke was lost on the panel, whose members began wonder aloud about who this Carlyle fellow was anyway. Yet repeating the political debates inspired by the Project obscures the social and cultural implications they raised, ones fundamental to the meaning of the American experience.⁷

Conservative opposition to the arts projects was no red herring. Rather it typified the uneasiness of American society during the years of the Great Depression, exposing political and cultural fault lines beneath the surface of the national landscape. The federal projects threatened the traditional patronage privileges of the Congress, to be sure, but they carried an additional significance. The projects operated at a point when Americans were struggling for some understanding of themselves and their nation, making the Depression decade among the richest in all the national past in terms of the level of its cultural ferment. Artists, photographers, social scientists, writers, and musicians painted, sculpted, snapped, counted, named, classified, and described American life and the American people with a frenzied, almost desperate passion for self-awareness. The sheer level of activity, its phrenetic character, has fascinated and delighted scholars ever since, and rightly so. Few periods in the nation's cultural life have been so fecund. But equally dazzling and far more

⁷ McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp.149-190; MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.305-6, 829-40; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.219-40; McCoy, "Poverty, Politics, and Artists," pp.88-107; Beckh, "Government Art in the Roosevelt Era," pp.2-8.

compelling than the search itself are the results. The projects operated at a unique moment in American history, recording the passing of one age even as their existence symbolized the birth of another. New Deal murals and photographs and guide books, in their themes and subjects and focus all document the final eclipse of a rural, agrarian, individualized American self-image under siege for half a century. Throughout the thirties, working for the government programs or for themselves, artists and writers and intellectuals forged a new understanding of American life, one decidedly more urban, industrial, and more collective than its predecessor. Accompanying the transformation were new definitions of American life and society, a new conception of an American culture, and a crucial redefinition of art. Such an understanding deepens the debates of the 1930s, fleshes out the champions of either side, liberal or conservative, and gives their debate its proper focus. For in their arguments over what did or did not constitute art, Americans revealed how they felt about their society and what they conceived its nature and purpose to be, along with the deep tensions then extant within it, tensions reflected most clearly by the organization and operation and goals of the New Deal art program.⁸

⁸ Warren Susman, ed., Culture and Commitment, 1929-1945, (New York, 1973), pp.1-26; Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds, pp.378-406; William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, (New York, 1973).

2. Holger Cahill and the New Art

American culture has been deeply divided since the establishment of the Republic. It has been at once the land of Jaffery Pyncheon and Natty Bumppo, the White City and the Midway, and more recently the art projects operated by New Deal relief administrators. What began as Edward Bruce's attempt to foment an American art revolution from the top down became ultimately the reverse, an effort fundamentally to redirect art along a far more egalitarian path in keeping with the aesthetic and political values of the man Jacob Baker named to direct his newly organized Federal Art Project. His name was Holger Cahill, and he was neither Baker's first choice nor his second. The Assistant Administrator had hoped to woo Edward Bruce aboard to cash in on the organizational skills and formidable reputation of the most prominent figure in the government art program. Bruce demurred, unwilling to operate a program whose organizational priorities stressed relief over talent. Baker turned next to Audrey McMahon, wife of the prominent critic and herself a prominent figure in the government art experiment. She was already a veteran of longstanding in the various relief projects organized to employ needy artists in New York City. More recently, she had exercised considerable influence in giving the FAP its organizational shape and purpose. But she was unwilling to relocate to the Washington area, and in her stead she offered a substitute. A mutual friend had recently introduced her to Holger Cahill, then the supervisor of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Evidently he made a good impression, for McMahon passed his name along to Harry Hopkins. At the same time Ann Craton, who as an advisor to the

Federal Relief Administration (FERA) had helped to coordinate the closing of PWAP, appraised Jacob Baker of Cahill's credentials.⁹

Both Baker and Hopkins liked what they heard. Cahill was neither a professional artist nor an art critic, meaning he was not allied with any particular school of art. Within the art world he was neither conservative academician nor radical younger painter, two groups consistently at loggerheads with one another whose feuding paused only long enough for each to criticize the government program. Instead Cahill was an art educator and someone with public relations experience, and this was enough for the relief administrators, who summoned him to Washington for an interview. But he got himself into immediate trouble. It was his understanding that the federal bureaucrats had called him in to offer criticisms of the PWAP, something he was delighted to do. Without mincing words he dismissed Edward Bruce's project as "unimportant" before someone could pull him aside and advise him to use a more diplomatic tone. Word soon got out that Cahill had "stood up" to Harry Hopkins and made sound impressions on other New Dealers present. The job was his if he wanted it, only Cahill remained uncertain. Back in New York he discussed the prospect with several artist friends. One warned that the job was ideal for anyone anxious to have "a dead cat" thrown his way every five minutes or so. Cahill agreed, likening the job to a walk into a "serpent's nest." Other friends offered compelling reasons why there was no other choice but to accept the position. Doing so, one reasoned, would prevent the nomination of Baker's next choice, a notorious conservative. Besides, as his friend Henry F. Taylor

⁹ MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, p.129; McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p.77; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.142-3.

observed, the government summons was not so much a job offer as it was a draft notice. The advice proved crucial. By August 1935 Cahill had packed himself off to a Washington Hotel to begin the process of getting his project underway.¹⁰

By turning down Jacob Baker's offer to head the new Federal Art Project (FAP), Edward Bruce brought into the government art program his opposite number. Edward Bruce's American roots stretched far into the colonial past. Holger Cahill was the only son of Icelandic immigrants. Bruce was a football star at Columbia University. Cahill slung hash at nights to attend classes at the New School for Social Research. Bruce went to the Orient as a corporation lawyer. Cahill got there by stoking coal aboard a tramp steamer. Nor was Holger Cahill the sort of man to throw in a winning poker hand as an act of sporting camaraderie. When he played cards, he played to win. Yet despite these differences, Bruce and Cahill devoted their professional lives to the promise of American art, each hoping to make art an everyday experience for millions of Americans. Both struggled to give the American artist his proper role in society as an articulator of national values, yet each through opposing methods. Edward Bruce hoped to foment his revolution from the top down, preserving centuries-old standards of aesthetic appeal and craftsmanship, a philosophy reflecting Bruce's own social position and outlook. Cahill never shared it. Instead he fashioned an aesthetic philosophy based on a sweeping egalitarianism, one that rejected Bruce's Renaissance values and commitment to fine art, one that championed folk art, and one that reflected the signal experiences of Holger Cahill's

¹⁰ Mckinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p.78; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, p.143.

past.¹¹

Cahill was forty-two in the autumn of 1935, having arrived at art and in Washington from a circuitous route played out for the most part along the 49th parallel. His father was a musician who never found his niche. He moved his family to the North Dakota frontier at the turn of the century when Holger was a boy, and by the son's estimation failed at everything he ever attempted. In frustration the father lapsed into an eerie silence his son never forgot. The strain broke the family. Cahill's parents divorced when he was ten. His mother remarried. He never saw his father again. The boy spent the next several years among a succession of foster families needing an extra farmhand. He quit school when was thirteen, about the same time he quit believing in the Methodist creed. Shortly after he quit North Dakota altogether. Cahill drifted into Canada, beginning an impressive array of adolescent adventures and hardships. By the time he was twenty, he had already farmed his way across western Canada, stoked coal on the Empress of Shanghai out of Vancouver, jumped ship into the middle of a cholera epidemic, ferried ore fetched out of the Mesabi Range across the Lakes to Milwaukee, sold insurance in Cleveland, and sat for nine hours a day in a Northern Pacific Railroad office transcribing the numbers of boxcars until he felt his very life running out the end of his pen. Then he made New York, "the most fascinating sight in the world."¹²

The City fired Cahill's imagination and shaped the circumstances

¹¹ McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p.78; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, p.143.

¹² MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.377-9; McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p.78; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.142-6.

of his subsequent career. Having gone to New York hoping to become a journalist, Cahill immersed himself in the grit of urban life, covering its crimes and decay, the shattered facades and the shattered lives of the nation's largest city. There were also more formal aspects of this educational experience. Whenever possible, meaning when he had the money, the young man attended classes at Columbia and the New School for Social Research. Politics and economics drew his attention. He was an enthusiastic attendant of Professor Veblen's classroom, but social policy and economics were not the extent of Cahill's intellectual interests. He fell in among the artists and writers in the cafe society of Greenwich Village, especially the literary circle of Eugene O'Neill. Initially, the contact enriched Cahill's newspaper files; eventually it redirected his entire career. In the Village Cahill met such artists as John Sloan and George Bellows, about whom he wrote biographical articles for various art magazines. Later, he wrote publicity sheets for local galleries and exhibitions, and ultimately his proximity to the capital of the American art world drew him into a close study of the nation's artistic traditions.¹³

Art research and education formed the basis for Cahill's life work. He studied European folk art abroad for a year in the early twenties before returning home to become an advisor on the staff of John Cotton Dana, curator of the Newark Museum of Art. Dana exerted a seminal influence over Cahill's artistic philosophy, as he had many others for more than a generation. Named for his ancestor, the Puritan divine, John Cotton Dana had been, since the turn of the century, a

¹³ McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p.79; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, p.146.

driving force in American art. Like Ellsworth Woodward in New Orleans, Dana was an artistic nationalist, someone determined to end the cultural dominance of the Europeans. Unlike Woodward, however, Dana was much more committed to modern forms and artists, an enthusiasm he passed along to his young protege. Under Dana's tutelage, Cahill became an expert on American folk and contemporary art and the organizer of several influential exhibitions. He also became a prolific author whose published works, by 1935, included two novels, biographies of two contemporary American artists, George O. "Pop" Hart and Max Weber, and three surveys of the national art scene, American Painting and Sculpture (1933); American Folk Art (1934); and American Sources of Modern Art (1934). He had in the meantime left the Newark Museum for the Museum of Modern Art, and spent two years working for the Rockefellers, combing the South in search of the roots of American popular arts, and selecting pieces for the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Museum in Williamsburg, Virginia.¹⁴

The experience of Cahill's formative years, his contact with painters such as John Sloan and George Bellows, and the influence of John Cotton Dana all shaped the future Director's vision of American art. Cahill spent his youth in the hard-fisted stretches of the Northwest. He was an itinerant worker at home with the tramps and bindlestiffs, the machinists, harvesters, and dockhands who comprised the laboring backbone of the industrial order. A love of the sea and a solidarity with its sailors drew him to Conrad. His laboring background and the memory of his father's music silenced by the unforgiving North

¹⁴ McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p.80; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.146-8.

Dakota frontier made him fertile ground for the seed of Veblenian economics and the anti-industrial spirit of the Village. Small wonder then that when Holger Cahill turned to art he was drawn not to John Singer Sargent and the genteel school, but to Sloan and Bellows and other like-minded artists whose aesthetic philosophy eschewed the drawing room for the back alley.¹⁵

The years with Dana confirmed suspicions seeded in childhood and nurtured ever since. Under his mentor, Cahill began to shape and record his egalitarian vision of American art. He focused upon folk art, in his phrase, "the expression of the common people with little book learning in art techniques and no academic training." This, he asserted, was the true art tradition of the nation, one begun by the Puritans and Quakers and sustained into the mid-nineteenth century by a variety of professional and amateur craftsmen: "house painters, sign painters, portrait limners, carpenters, cabinet-makers, ship-wrights, wood carvers, stone-cutters, metal-workers, blacksmiths, sailors, farmers, weavers, businessmen, housewives, and girls in boarding school." Folk art, continued Cahill, did not provide the foundation for an American art profession; rather, the two traditions remained separate. Still, across two centuries and into a third, folk art remained the dominant form of American expression, especially during and beyond the years of the Jacksonian ascendancy. Between 1820 and 1870, speculated Cahill, American art was less dominated by European tastes, more parochial, and therefore more distinctly American than at any other time in the nation's history before or since. The rise of political democracy had fostered a parallel and closely associated cultural

¹⁵ Ibid.

democracy. Not only were the arts more readily available to the average American, chiefly through the means of widespread prints such as Currier and Ives', but the American artist reflected and was inspired by the predominant spirit of the day. "If their taste was not [always] the best," he wrote, "it was an honest, genuine reflection of community interests and of community experience."¹⁶

The coming of the industrial order destroyed the political and artistic harmony of the Jackson period. The separation of the artist from society and nature, Cahill asserted, was attributed to "a general pattern of dissolving loyalties and relationships brought on by the rapid advance of industrial civilization and by the break-up of romantic conceptions of nature under the impact of modern science." In the progressive tradition, Cahill depicted the American Civil War as a struggle between an incipient industrialism and a dying agrarian order, and rued its aesthetic legacy. The war brought the machine to its preeminent position in American life, he lamented, destroying in the process the social foundation and purpose of the folk art tradition. Landowners and merchants of antebellum America, the rich and powerful whose patronage had fostered a vibrant national portrait school, were shouldered aside by the new wealth of the industrial age, grubbing parvenu who began to patronize European art not for any aesthetic reasons but simply to satisfy their desire for ostentatious display. Worse, hand-crafted objects of everyday use were replaced by manufactured items, less handsome but more economical, made cheaply, sold cheaply, and broadcast easily by the railroad to distant points in

¹⁶ Holger Cahill, American Folk Art: The Age of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900, (New York, 1932); Cahill, New Horizons in American Art, (New York, 1936), pp.9-11.

the hinterland. There were far ranging effects, none of them beneficial. The machine and the rise of manufactures, wrote Cahill, ended the tradition of folk art and effectively closed off the artist from his public for a generation or more. Having rejected the inspiration and comfort their fathers and grandfathers had drawn from nature, the artists of the Gilded Age either worked according to the ideals and values of a European-centered culture or within their own artistic solitude. Some, such as James McNeill Whistler, fled the country for the Continent. The rest abandoned their Jacksonian role as articulators of the values and spirit of the age and retreated within their own "rarified" styles. The results were disastrous. "Without society and without nature as its proper foundations," asserted Cahill, "artists turned inward, and conjured all manner of convoluted aesthetics whose value lay principally in their own exoticism and incomprehensibility. The contemporary artist, having lost both nature and man, now seemed determined to lose art itself in the theoretical mass conjured up by his own ingenuity."¹⁷

This bleak summary of recent American art history was not without its glimmer of hope. While their contemporaries flocked to the continent or shut themselves up in their studios, a small coterie of American painters led by Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer had persisted in the old tradition, using American subjects to reflect upon the nature of American society. Nor had the efforts gone for naught. Eakins and Homer had inspired a generation of painters, a recognized school of like-minded artists such as John Sloan, George Bellows, George Luks, and fellow Ash Can stylists whose work announced a new chapter in American

¹⁷ Cahill, New Horizons, pp.11-4.

art annals when it debuted in 1913 at the celebrated Armory Show. "These artists," rejoiced Cahill, "rediscovered the American Scene and brought the gusty vitality of city streets into the staid salons of the genteel tradition," promising to revitalize American art, to make it as it once had been during the Jackson period, an expression of social meaning. Not even the Depression could deny this promise. Certainly, as Cahill conceded, times had gotten tougher for the nation's artists since the Stock Market Crash. There had been want and idleness and a resultant loss of skill and spirit. But the industrial calamity had also brought an opportunity, one recently taken up by the federal government in the form of an arts project designed to re-establish the vital link between artist and society severed since Appomattox. Here was a chance to fulfill the promise offered by the return of the artist to the American Scene.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.14-6.

3. Every Man an Artist

To fulfill the promise, Holger Cahill had to reconcile his aesthetic ambitions with the administrative structure of the federal relief apparatus. Unlike Edward Bruce, whose PWAP had carved the nation into sixteen regions of the Director's choosing, Cahill was forced to operate within the de-centralized organization of the WPA. The potential for controversy was enormous. Working within the WPA meant coordinating national and regional chains of authority capable of tying the national office to every state in the nation. This was no easy chore. Given the range of variables built into the operation--the Washington staff, its regional subordinates, forty-eight state WPA organizations, each headed by someone of varying commitment to the arts, forty-eight separate directors of the state art projects, people sometimes chosen because they were celebrated artists, usually meaning poor administrators, or capable administrators with little art background, or at least in one case, simply because they had the political clout to get themselves the job-- given all this, it is a wonder Cahill's project ever got off the ground. Once it did there was the additional question of its duration, prompting a good deal of circular logic. Through his program, the Director hoped to work permanent benefits not only for American artists but for American society as a whole; yet the project by definition was temporary. It depended for its existence upon the persistence of hard times while billing itself alternately as an emergency measure, something to tide the artist over until things got better, or as part of the cure itself, a program whose supreme virtue lay in its ability to initiate the return

of those good times that would put it out of business.¹⁹

Such obstacles notwithstanding, the Federal Art Project, before it ceased operations in 1943, completed a staggering array of art-related activities. At its peak the project employed more than five thousand artists, who worked prodigiously in all the media. WPA artists executed more than 1300 murals in a variety of forms including frescoes, mosaics, and photomurals. They allocated some forty-eight thousand oils and water colors to public agencies and buildings, made ninety thousand prints from four thousand original lithographs, etchings, and wood engravings, and carved upwards of thirty-five hundred sculpture pieces ranging in scale from small ceramic figurines to battlefield monuments. Nearly one million posters were printed from twenty-eight thousand original designs. Project photographers assembled a file of nearly one half million negatives, some documenting project works and operations, and others of a more artistic nature, such as the ones produced by Bernice Abbott's photographic project in New York City. Modellers fashioned nearly one thousand dioramas. Craftsmen of all description created fifty thousand such pieces. An inventory of American native crafts, *The Index of American Design*, recorded more than one thousand plates. Community art centers, gathering points for artistic creation, display, and education were established in more than one hundred towns and villages where they touched the lives of more than five million citizens. Here truly, as contemporary and subsequent critics have

¹⁹ McKinzie, *The New Deal For Artists*, pp.75-7; MacDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, pp.379-420.

asserted, was "art for the millions."²⁰

The activities fell into one of three general categories, education, exhibition, and the largest among these, production. Throughout the tenure of FAP, for both practical and aesthetic reasons, project officials placed a major emphasis on the productivity of its artists. A stream of paintings, sculpture, and works in other media, reasoned Cahill, would accomplish many purposes. They would not only foster good public relations, helping to deflect charges of boondoggling, but would also constitute a living record of the social art of the thirties. The hope reflected Cahill's fundamental view of art and revealed his basic difference with Edward Bruce. Bruce, the more traditional of the two, believed that if one masterpiece were to emerge from the artists under his employ, then the entire effort would be justified. Cahill disagreed. "Art is not a matter of rare, occasional masterpieces," he asserted. "The emphasis upon masterpieces is a nineteenth century phenomenon. It is primarily a collector's idea and has little relation to an art movement. When one goes through the galleries of Europe which preserve, in spite of war, fire, flood, and other destructive forces, an amazing quantity of works from the past, one is struck by the extraordinary amount of work which was produced in the great periods." Volume, a synonym for mediocrity in Bruce's aesthetic canon, was a code word for virtue in Cahill's.²¹

There were other reasons the director emphasized production.

²⁰ Federal Art Project, "Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment, 1935-1943," RG69, (NA); Francis V. O'Connor, Federal Support For the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now, (Greenwich, 1969); MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.422-62.

²¹ Cahill, New Horizons, p.18.

"Conservation of the nation's resources has in our time become a major function of government," observed Cahill, who believed that only by protecting the nation's art skills could American society avert the aesthetic equivalent of the Dust Bowl. The logic extended to all of the fine and practical arts. "It is a mistake to suppose that all of the large body of artists working on the Project were in normal times devoted to the fine arts," the Director explained. Instead, as many as half of the Project's employees were craftsmen or commercial artists, a vital, if less celebrated group, whose skills required conservation if the movement dedicated to preserving the social purpose of art in American society were to succeed. Finally, by emphasizing production, Cahill hoped to uncover new talent, especially among the nation's younger artists, on whose efforts would ride the fate of his aesthetic values. "The problem of the young artist of distinguished but still emergent gifts has been of major concern," he wrote, "If American art is to continue, the talents of the younger generation of artists must not only be encouraged but must be given an opportunity to develop."²²

The artistic production of the FAP extended to all media, to oils, watercolors, sculpture, and many others, but its greatest contributions were in the field of prints, and rightfully so. The print was the logical form for the conveyance of Holger Cahill's egalitarian art philosophy. The print had been at the center of the democratic arts flourishing during the Jackson years, but had fallen into disuse after the Industrial Revolution. Throughout the early years of the twentieth century it had been an object of contempt, dismissed as vulgar because of its easy repetition and pedestrian subject matter. But what such

²² Ibid., pp.19-21.

critics scorned and buyers ignored, Cahill adored. Prints began to recover their lost prestige in the mid-twenties with the advent of the American Scene, the Director observed, an occurrence of no mere coincidence. The form, he insisted, "is extremely sensitive to the contemporary environment, and is an art rich in social content. It would almost be possible to reconstruct a social history of our period from the prints produced on the Federal Art Project." There were other virtues. Because they so often depicted contemporary scenes and because they were so easily multiplied, Cahill, among others, considered the print to be the most democratic of forms. Its subject and message were easily understood by the broad mass of Americans, and its cheap price made them accessible to the average viewer. Using the print, Cahill could not only demonstrate the productivity of his project, he could reach the masses through the form best suited to break down the barriers between his artists and the society they served. As a result, FAP artists created thousands of monochrome and colored lithographs, wood block prints, lithotints, aquatints, linoleum cuts, and wood engravings. Some were inspired by the contemporary social scene. Others were informational posters, advertising WPA functions such as plays, gallery showings, or concerts. Still others fulfilled a valuable social purpose, broadcasting information on behalf of health agencies and other public organizations in the battle against venereal disease, malnutrition, illiteracy, and other societal ills. The FAP commitment to the print extended beyond mere production to technical innovation. The New York City project, easily the largest in the nation, featured a separate graphic arts division whose workers refined and pioneered such breakthroughs in the print process as color lithography and color wood-

blocks. But their greatest achievement and, given Cahill's populist idealism, their most fitting legacy was the popularization of the silk screen printing process. The process had first been used at the turn of the century, primarily in the creation of crude show cards and college pennants. Despite its easy use and many purposes commercial firms had ignored the process until its vitality was demonstrated by the graphic artists on the New York Project. Anthony Velonis first mastered the process, then refined it, conducting countless experiments before broadcasting his results in a WPA pamphlet. Within a year Velonis had demonstrated the viability of the silk screen process in reproducing fine art prints, revolutionizing the form within and without the FAP.²³

In the meantime, Cahill's artists were also busy completing one of the more ambitious research projects in American art annals. It began innocuously enough when Ruth Reeves brooded over the inability of a young muralist to research fully the native costume of American Indians depicted in his design. From this grew the massive Index of American Design, a record of American folk arts as they existed prior to the turn of the twentieth century. Here, too, the project reflected Holger Cahill's philosophy of art. The Index would preserve for future generations the folk art Cahill championed as the visual legacy of a period when culture and society complemented one another. The Index thus promised to preserve for future generations of artists a record of American arts and crafts as they existed before the advent of the machine, a record of unimagined value to practitioners of both the fine and the practical arts. "Certainly it is clear that the decorative arts

²³ Ibid., pp.38-40; MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.433-40.

which have developed on American soil are important for American designers, not only because they are American but also because they preserve fundamental human and cultural values," Cahill explained. "They are also important for the worker in the fine arts, since these forms represent their esthetic language popularly spoken through decades in many parts of the country." But the Index had value beyond its historical significance and usefulness as a research tool. It offered a niche for aspiring artists, usually younger people of proven but not great skill, that crucial generation whose cause Cahill consistently advocated. Enrolling these younger artists onto the Index project meant giving most their first exposure to the design heritage of the nation. It also permitted a beneficial tutorship, the chance to work with supervisors who were older and more experienced artists capable of offering constructive criticism.²⁴

Aside from its far-flung production activities, the FAP conducted an equally ambitious program of art education, once again in accordance with Cahill's artistic egalitarianism. If the production activities of the FAP were designed to reintroduce the artist to society, then the FAP art education program intended to redistribute art appreciation on a more equitable nationwide basis. Previously, wrote Cahill, art had been confined chiefly to the major metropolitan centers, leaving vast stretches of the hinterland culturally barren. Consequently, a major project ambition concerned itself with redressing this wrong by carrying the artistic torch into the darker stretches of the nation. This, too,

²⁴ Cahill, New Horizons, pp.24-28; MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.441-58; Cahill, "Old and New Paths in American Design," "Correspondence of Edward Bruce, 1934-43," RG 121, Entry 124, Box 15, (NA); Edwin O. Christensen, The Index of American Design, (New York, 1967).

had been the strategy of both Edward Bruce and Ellsworth Woodward, but Cahill and the FAP adopted different tactics. Woodward hoped to spread the good word chiefly through inspiring exhibitions and a diligent public relations campaign. Bruce resolved to promote art interests nationwide by much the same manner, sending his muralists into smalltown America to work before the public. Cahill, characteristically, took a more ambitious, grass roots approach. He adopted the suggestion of Daniel S. Defenbacher, art critic and head of the North Carolina FAP unit, who advocated the establishment of so-called "WPA Art Centers" in small communities across America. These were intended to serve the art needs of the sponsoring community, gathering under a single roof the manifold activities of the FAP. Here studios could be established where artists could further develop their skills. They would work in full public view, perhaps stimulating an interest in art the center was equipped to handle. Community art centers were also designed to conduct beginner and more advanced classes in art appreciation and in a range of fine and practical art classes tailored to the community's needs and interests. In addition, the centers featured an exhibition gallery for the display of local work and FAP exhibitions circulating throughout the nation.²⁵

The community art centers did not exhaust FAP educational activities. Most of the large projects and many of the small ones maintained art instruction programs for both adults and children. In New York, for example, project authorities estimated that its education program touched fifty thousand citizens weekly as aspirant painters, young and old, were turned out on the City's streets to record the

²⁵ MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.464-74.

myriad scenes of urban life. Advocates of the program extended its benefits in other directions as well. The Florida project conducted classes at the Raiford State Prison, providing the basis for a career in commercial art for seven inmates. At Bellvue Hospital in New York and in other mental hospitals, art activities sponsored by local projects became integral parts of patient care. Art had once again been given an egalitarian cant under the guidance of Holger Cahill. Edward Bruce at the Treasury had been alive to the rehabilitative and therapeutic potential of art, but prescribed a conservative dosage. He advocated the decoration of hospitals and sanitarium with the approved work of fine artists, where simple display would create a restorative atmosphere. Cahill put the brush in the patient's hand. Worse, from the conservative position, he called the results art and put it on display. In 1938 Bellvue and the Harlem Community Art Center jointly sponsored a showing of the inmates' work. Professional psychologists heralded the breakthrough. The national media broadcast the story. Critics hailed the work. Edward Bruce must have been appalled.²⁶

In addition to its other activities, once enough work accumulated, the FAP maintained a vigorous exhibition program. These commenced at the Museum of Modern Art in the Fall of 1936 with an enormous showing entitled "New Horizons in American Art." The Director himself wrote the exhibition catalogue, summarizing his aesthetic philosophy and announcing the ambitions and diverse activities of his Project. Exhibitions large and small continued for the duration of the Project's existence. Dozens of shows viewed by thousands of citizens crisscrossed

²⁶ Cahill, New Horizons, pp.21-4; MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.463-4.

the nation, playing the chain of community art centers. Others were grander in scope. The FAP played integral parts in decorating the World's Fairs in both San Francisco and New York, exhibiting its works before the enormous crowds each drew. Collectively, the exhibitions served at least three purposes. Each FAP exhibition was itself an exercise in public relations, a chance to demonstrate to the public the useful vitality of the project's efforts, reinforced by the standard WPA claim: "THIS WORK PAYS YOUR COMMUNITY." Exhibitions were also extensions of the Project's educational program. They introduced art to neophytes and strangers, and were carefully arranged with informational brochures and gallery talks. The shows no doubt advanced the FAP cause, but they also reflected sound business principles. Gallery talks and exhibitions made the public more art-conscious, helping to foster a more socially-conscious art and more receptive audience. They also boosted sales. Realizing the temporary character of his project, like Edward Bruce before him, Holger Cahill hoped to create a condition of economic stability for his artists by stimulating demand for their work. "It is true that the studios of many of our gifted, older artists are filled with unsold paintings," the director conceded, "but the crucial circumstance is not over-production in art; rather it is under-consumption."²⁷

Such thinking informed the spirit of National Art Week. In the Fall of 1940 and again in 1941, Project officials engineered what was, in one scholar's estimation, "the greatest mass display of art ever attempted in the United States." Virtually every resource in the American art and business communities cooperated. Private and public

²⁷ Ibid., MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.274-9.

galleries and museums cooperated. Department stores lent window space and promotional apparatus. Professional societies, art associations, and civic organizations all became involved, arranging and hanging exhibitions, coordinating classes and demonstrations, and advertising the event, a massive effort culminated by National Art Week, held at the end of November, 1940. The organizers trumpeted its success, estimating that five million people viewed over fifteen thousand objects of art in sixteen hundred exhibitions nationwide. These were staggering numbers, but the one that counted most was even better. From the outset the organizers of National Art Week had looked to the event as the biggest sales promotion in American art history, a chance to market art on an unprecedented scale. They realized their goal. The promotion generated one hundred thousand dollars in sales, enough to dazzle its organizers and stimulate enthusiasm for a similar effort the following year. In 1941 the organization was larger, the promotions more extensive, the exhibitions more numerous, and the profits even greater. Art, it seemed, had realized its potential for big business.²⁸

By the time it ceased operations, Holger Cahill's FAP had earned support and admiration among many of the most prominent leaders of American arts and letters. To Lewis Mumford, the New Deal arts projects represented one of FDR's three greatest accomplishments. Many prominent art critics echoed the enthusiasm with specific reference to the FAP. "The...Federal Art Project," gushed Edward Alden Jewell, "has served to revolutionize the whole attitude toward art in this country. One would

²⁸ "Art Week," RG 69, General Subjects Series 1935-44, Box 0455, (NA).

seem little in danger of overestimating either the good that has come of it or the potential good that promises to stand more and more securely revealed as the government's task continues." Such conclusions still carry a persuasive weight, and a lingering appeal. There was in the organization's experience, it seems, the proper balance of discipline and bohemianism, the right blend of patriotism and protest. Its innovation and creativity and youthful energy give the project an extraordinary character, invest it with a sense of motion and purpose. The FAP often fosters images of worker solidarity and an egalitarian ardor inflamed by its commitment not just to any cause, but to the cause: the people's cause. Such unalloyed idealism is often contagious. But the history of Cahill's organization is compelling for other reasons, too. It is compelling because it exposes so clearly so many of the cultural tensions of thirties America.²⁹

Project ideals and project activities often ran at loggerheads, revealing many of the larger social, cultural, and political tensions of its day. If the early emphasis on production accomplished its aim of restoring skills withered since the Crash, it also reinforced a sense of professionalism among the artists, preserving and not destroying the barricade between the artist and society. Prior to the Great Depression artists were an unorganized group in society, but under the stress of the emergency they welded themselves quickly into groups lobbying for relief. At a time when Holger Cahill hoped to loose his artists into

²⁹ Lewis Mumford, "An Open Letter to the President," The New Republic, (December 1936), pp.263-5; New York Times, September 20, 1936. For additional testimonials praising Cahill's unit from critics and artists such as John Maddox Brown and Archibald MacLeish, see Cahill, "Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment, vol. 1, Art," (Washington D.C.: 1943), pp. 48-50.

the streets to mix with the society they served, the movement within the profession was running in the opposite direction, a contradiction reflected by the relief nomenclature itself. The largest relief checks went to creative artists certified as "professional," who by their demonstrated skill were paid either to restore or refine their own technique within the confines of the studio. Less-skilled employees were offered lower paying positions on the Index of American Design or as art instructors. Rather than uniting artist and patron, this procedure ran in one of two unintended directions. The financial incentive frequently motivated aspirations away from the streets and into the studio, dividing the artists against one another as it did on both the Philadelphia and Chicago Projects. In other instances, such as in New York, the WPA wage scale unified the artists as a class who, in the estimation of its conservative critics, agitated for higher pay against the best interests of the society they claimed to serve.³⁰

Additional contradictions deepen the complexity of the Project's legacy. Cahill and other like-minded critics hailed the Index of American Design as a tribute to the richness and artistic diversity of the American nation. The Index, they asserted, revealed the mosaic quality of American art, a nation of tiny aesthetic communities, of Pennsylvania Dutch hexes, Puritan tombstones, Shaker quilts, and hand-painted pottery from New Mexico rich in Spanish and Indian influence. The Index did for American art what the Historical Records Survey and Writers' Project did for American history; it made a grassroots inventory not of the nation's memory but of its native crafts, reaffirming Holger Cahill's image of society by refuting a disconcerting

³⁰ MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.404-8.

and increasingly popular insistence that American culture had become standardized. Yet even as some of Cahill's artists compiled this record, others were pioneering the silk screen process, a signal breakthrough in mass-produced art. Silk-screen printing reproduced a single design by the thousands, making it a cheap and efficient vehicle of mass communication. Its messages were short and unmistakable to any viewer anywhere in America. Prints, silk-screens and others, were hailed as the most democratic of forms, in spirit and subject matter close to the heart of average Americans, and priced within their grasp. But, by design or accident, through repetition and incorporation into circulating exhibits viewed nationwide, prints were also a central form used by federal artists to convey to the American public a more standardized view of American life. The similarity of their thematic concerns, most well within the American Scene genre, belied the Director's assertion that now more than ever artists were concerned with local themes and subjects. Rather, localism was a national phenomenon. The Regionalist movement of the thirties seems misnamed, representing as it does a nationwide celebration of local things whose net result was a uniform depiction of American communities, each given splashes of local color, but all conforming to a basic set of values and practices. Each had its own industry and its own set of industrious people. Each shared the same democratic faiths, and most were created by artists already contributing mightily to the emergence of a more standardized "American Way of Life," one symbolized by the WPA posters they produced and distributed en masse, usually to advocate a proper form of social behavior.

The new standards were urban in outlook and industrial in

character. Landscapes abound throughout the list of FAP paintings, but the preponderance of its studies were of urban scenes. The very existence of the poster unit at all epitomized the urban perspective adopted by the project. So did its industrial form. Holger Cahill may have suspected industrialism, may have resented what it did to his father and to the long heritage of American folk art, but the structure and operation and production of his art project not only confirmed the existence of the industrial order in art, it abetted its growth. The FAP adopted the bureaucratic structure of corporate America and used it to establish a nationwide chain of art factories. Local concerns and situations were considered, to be sure, but the overall tone and outlook of the effort remained the same. The directors established the standards of an acceptable product, directed it to the needs of a clearly established consumer group, and even conducted, later in its operations, two substantial nationwide marketing campaigns. Not by accident did the efforts of the FAP appear in the display windows of the nation's department stores during the Art Weeks of 1940 and 1941. Indeed the harmony between display and production could not have been more absolute. The FAP effort depended on an available source of cheap labor, to whom raw materials and work space was supplied and from whom finished pieces meeting minimal standards of acceptability were anticipated. In most cases project employees punched the clock, working a stipulated number of hours per week in exchange for a fixed wage. The Project operated much like any manufacturing concern. Its agents hoped to stimulate nationwide consumption; its directors fielded grievances raised by its labor force; its advocates advertised its virtues according to the most fundamental concern of corporate America. The

benefits of the program, they asserted, justified the cost of production. Directors of the program even accepted the basic conditions of any assemblyline. They realized that so vast an operation was bound to produce some artwork of dubious quality, but they accepted the risk on the promise that the sheer volume of production would be its chief merit. In the meantime procedures were devised to oversee the disposal and destruction of inferior works. According to the best of industrial traditions, the Project supervised the creation of art from the cradle to the grave.³¹

The FAP reflected the values of the industrial society it served in additional ways. If the composition and operation of the project was essentially industrial, then so were its subjects, directly or indirectly. Like Treasury Section painters, FAP artists routinely chose local industry as the focus of their artistic creations, but the effort extended deeper still. In various communities, as Holger Cahill explained, FAP activities were designed expressly to harmonize with the surrounding industrial environment. "Important phases of the community interest have been taken into consideration," he explained, such as in Chattanooga and in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, where the pioneer arts and crafts "form a link between the past and the present," and in Greenville, South Carolina, where "plans are underway for the establishment of a textile museum, allied with the major industry of the district." Yet the attempt by the Project to harmonize its efforts according to the industrial environment it served was not always successful. Rather, in one sense at least, it helped focus unwanted attention on the more controversial aspects of the project. Some

³¹ Ibid., pp.387-9; 401-11.

artists got themselves and their projects into trouble through painterly indictments of industrial capitalism. Yet these were a small, if visible, minority. Their numbers paled in comparison to colleagues in all the arts whose efforts championed the industrial process and the workers it employed. A considerable portion of FAP canvas--not to mention FSA film, Treasury Section mural space, and FWP onion skin--glorified the American worker, making him a Hero of heroic dimensions. Muscles bulged, chests swelled, fists clenched, and legs strained in purposely inflated proportions oblivious to gender. The America created by artists, writers, and photographers during the Depression worked, and worked hard. It worked in factories and in fields, it bridged, dammed, harvested, manufactured, paved, surveyed, pioneered, and hauled its way across the thirties, even when one-third of the nation could not, while, according to the conventional wisdom, a goodly number of others leaned on brooms, shovels, axes, and numerous other implements used sparingly by the "wops, polacks, and aliens," busy boondoggling away the taxpayers' money on make-work projects operated by the federal government. This latter group included painters, and, despite the repeated testimonials of Project officials hailing the diligence of their workers, or even the standard disclaimer of the parent organization, the WPA, that "This Work Pays Your Community," the FAP never overcame the basic suspicion that somehow, by their very presence on the relief rolls, the artists themselves violated the work ethic celebrated in their art.³²

The unit also challenged other, more fundamental American

³² Cahill, New Horizons, pp.25-6; McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp.149-72.

assumptions. Just as New Deal economists struggled to achieve parity for the American farmer, the directors of New Deal art projects hoped to achieve a cultural parity among the American people. Both Edward Bruce and Holger Cahill wished to bring art to small towns and villages unaccustomed to aesthetic activities, but of the two, characteristically, Cahill was the more aggressive. "Heretofore certain regions have been barren of art and art interest," he explained, "because of the constant drift of talent toward the already overcrowded art centers in the east." Spreading art to the hinterland promised all manner of aesthetic benefits and social goods, but it also reflected Cahill's fundamental equalitarianism. Art, like wealth and power, had been unevenly distributed since the coming of the industrial age. All three had gravitated to the hands of the few jeopardizing the many, giving Cahill's projects a levelling tendency. They aimed explicitly at battering down the aesthetic barriers of the art museum and privileged gallery, and implicitly toward the ideal of social equality. WPA art centers were for "Everyman," the Director asserted. They were located downtown for easy access, observed evening hours for workers coming home from jobs, and above all maintained a self-conscious attitude of relaxed openness. "Friendliness and informality mark the programs," Cahill explained, "lectures or demonstration talks by artists or teachers on the Project... have revealed art as a form of enjoyment, not as a hard intellectual struggle for which expensive and specialized education is required." And if art was not the possession of the metropolitan center, then neither was it the special child of the wealthy, an expression of social superiority. Art was not properly a form of conspicuous consumption, he charged; instead, it fulfilled a vital

social role, ministering directly to the spiritual needs of the people regardless of social class or national origin, or even, as in the case of the Bellvue Show, mental stability. Art, properly created, exhibited, and taught, was the tether, unifying society and giving it continuity with the past, despite all the innovations, often bewildering, of modern America. It was the means through which contemporary society could achieve the social equality envisioned by the Revolutionary fathers when they organized the Republic.³³

This is what gave the Project its idealistic energy and what made it so controversial. One close student of the Project, Belisario Contreras, blames conservative criticism of the FAP on passage of the so-called "Soak the Rich Tax" of 1935. Wealthy citizens at whom the tax was directed, he reasons, reacted angrily to the supposition that they were now paying for wasteful projects. True enough, but the opposition had deeper roots. Establishment of a federal art project not only required higher tax revenues; the egalitarian spirit of the project threatened the social position of those most traditionally associated with art patronage and appreciation. Hoping to secure grassroots support for the PWAP, Edward Bruce had encouraged his regional directors to cultivate friendly relations with "the best people in the community," meaning the professional and social elite accustomed to sustaining the arts on the local level. Not so Holger Cahill, whose assault on the museum and the academy on behalf of a democratic art of the people, coordinated from a federal headquarters, threatened to disrupt the local political and cultural status quo. Federal relief jobs challenged local patronage privileges, the glue of the federal system. True, the de-

³³ Cahill, New Horizons, p. 26.

centralized structure of the WPA represented a tacit commitment to the politics of localism, but it did not represent total surrender. Most New Dealers opposed the bargain, but its existence did not mean that on certain occasions the federal administration was above using the state relief appropriation as a political crowbar. The challenge to localism and to local elites also transcended the traditional quibbling between the states and the national administration, and, in the case of the art project, threatened to disrupt the political and cultural status quo within the states. Cahill's idealism, his devotion to cultural parity, threatened the hegemony of state and regional art centers. Locating art centers across the hinterland promised to disrupt the flow of students to the art institutes of the metropolitan centers, just as it fueled the rivalries between cities such as Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. So, too, were the rivalries extended nationwide by a project whose goal was equality, but whose operative program had been organized on a frank assertion that in American art there were vast stretches of disadvantaged territory requiring immediate attention. There can be no discounting the altruistic impulse, but in setting the agenda the directors made a fundamental miscalculation. When they identified the cultural deserts and offered themselves as oases, they failed to realize that local tribes might not be thirsty or that the local chieftans would agree that conditions were all that bad.³⁴

³⁴ Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, p.224.

4. Mr. Stanton's Attitude

In 1935, the problem child of American democracy, the segregated South, was also, in the estimation of FAP organizers, the problem child of American art. Holger Cahill and his associates shared with Edward Bruce a gloomy assessment of southern art, and included the region among its principal targets in the campaign to achieve the aesthetic equivalent of the AAA, a national cultural parity. Strategy dictated the tactics. When he arrived in Washington in August, 1935, Cahill enlisted a southerner to attack the southern front. He was Thomas C. Parker, former director of the art institute at Richmond, Virginia, and an ideal choice. Parker was native to the region, someone who spoke both with a pronounced drawl and a keen understanding of the problems of southern art. He was also a man with whom Cahill was already familiar, having worked with him in 1931 on the project to restore colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. Four years later, as director of the Federal Art Project, through a combination of professional respect and organizational desire, Cahill made Parker his assistant director and never regretted the choice. Parker was a scrupulous administrator and at heart an educator, whose aggressive promotion of the federal art idea won real gains for the movement across the South. Before the close of the federal period in 1939, FAP units were established in all but three states of the former Confederacy, Arkansas, Texas, and Georgia. A southerner pioneered the idea of the community art center, institutional heart of the FAP program, and the first of these were established in the South. Some enjoyed an astonishing success, especially in Florida where a chain of community art centers stretched the length of the peninsula

all the way from Pensacola to the Keys. Others dotted the southern interior. In the Mississippi Delta and the North Carolina Piedmont, among the Smoky Mountains, even in the tidewater societies of Richmond and Charleston, Parker and his staff found fertile ground for the federal art seed. Each center opened, each exhibition unveiled, every art class organized, confirmed the success of the effort and quickened the movement's pace. Yet for all the hope and promise, and all the success elsewhere across the South, there was one crucial place where the federal art program met not cooperation but contempt, a cultural citadel whose sustained resistance threatened to wreck the whole campaign.³⁵

When they organized their project and began its operations, the national staff of the FAP found New Orleans art in much the same state it had occupied in December, 1933. When the PWAP closed the following May, Ellsworth Woodward had gone back to his house on Pine Street to resume his myriad other responsibilities as promoter and practitioner of art. Many former employees returned to their garrets in the Quarter to support themselves as best they could. Others organized the New Orleans Art Guild to promote the sale of their works. Little else happened until the fall of 1935, when Holger Cahill wrote to Woodward outlining the organizational structure and aesthetic ambitions of the new Federal Art Project. Word quickly spread among the artists, many of whom not only cheered the prospect of relief but also the project's popular spirit. "I am very anxious to learn more about this very valuable

³⁵ Parker is characterized in McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp.80-1; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.161-2.

cultural movement," wrote Conrad Albrizio, a local fresco painter, "[it] offers such promises not only to the individual artist, but for the South as a whole." Among others, the news stirred even greater rejoicing. Privately and publicly, one New Orleans critic trumpeted the arrival of a new era in American art. "The old art is...no tape by which we should measure the power, consistency, and life of our own vitality," announced A.J. Angman. "The tempo of our modern life is full of color inside and out...[and] the new...patterns are gathering us up in its meshes, weaving a new sky and a new earth. Individuals, groups, and whole nations will change and the new art will epitomize the events in quick strokes and dashing colors..." Privately, to Holger Cahill, Angman surmised local conditions and posed the fundamental question. "We need new leaders with courage, new ideas and vision," he wrote the National Director, "In Louisiana...anybody can become an art critic...He must have only some money or else pull and society connections. Is that going to be changed?"³⁶

Cahill intended to answer in the affirmative. Every tenet of his aesthetic philosophy and social outlook conspired to wring art from the hands of the privileged few and return it to the people. Having set out to bash down the museum walls and to spread art along the city streets

³⁶ For Woodward's assessment of conditions faced by his former PWAP employees see, Ellsworth Woodward to Edward Bruce, October 9, 1934; Woodward to Olin Dows, August, 17, 1935, August 26, 1935, November 8, 1935; Woodward to Cecil Jones, May 1, 1936, RG 121, Entry 119, Box 12, (NA). See also Holger Cahill to Woodward, September 6, 1935, RG 69, WPA "General Subjects" Series, Art Program, 1935-February 1942, Box 0442, (NA); Conrad Albrizio to Thomas Parker, October 24, 1935; A.J. Angman to Cahill, October 26, 1935, November 3, 1935; Cahill to Angman, September 26, 1935, Selected Documents Relating to the Federal Art Project in Louisiana, 1935-1942, (National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C., 1970), Louisiana State Archives, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), Reel 1, [hereinafter cited as Selected Documents, LSA-BR].

and country lanes, he recruited like-minded individuals across the country to direct the efforts of the statewide projects. Generally he was successful, a capable administrator, whose easy affability masked his determination to remain master of his project. By tact and flattery, sometimes with humor and sometimes more bluntly, Cahill assembled a team of state directors more or less sympathetic to the underlying values of his project. Most were solid choices, a handful never worked out, and one in particular, certainly the one he most regretted, was the man Holger Cahill selected to direct the FAP effort in Louisiana. Grandson of Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton and namesake of his Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, Gideon Stanton seemed to combine the finer qualities of neither man and the worst of both. Like his grandfather, the younger Stanton could be vain, petty and over-bearing. With Welles he shared a measure of vindictiveness and the capacity for a poison pen. But unlike the former, Gideon Stanton was not an industrious administrator devoted to his task, and unlike the latter he was unwilling to subdue his private interests in the service of a larger effort. His correspondence conveys a self-righteous tone and an inflated formality smacking of the pompous. As a subordinate he was often petulant, as an authority frequently imperious, and, as director of the Louisiana section of the Federal Art Project, a man whose career is endlessly revealing.³⁷

He came to the post through a circuitous route. Gideon Stanton was born in Morris, Minnesota, sixteen years after his grandfather's death, was graduated from the Rugby Academy, studied art in New York and

³⁷ Holger Cahill to Gideon Stanton, September 26, 1935, Selected Documents, LSA-BR, Reel 1; "Gideon Stanton," Artists' Files, (THNOC).

Baltimore, then joined his father's brokerage firm in New Orleans. He prospered as a businessman, although evidently at some cost to his personal happiness. In mid-life Stanton changed professions, quitting the bond market for the art studio, and devoted himself full time to his painting. He preferred oils to other media, employed a conservative representational style, worked diligently, and exhibited regularly. In the meantime, with his friend, Ellsworth Woodward, Stanton assumed several organizational responsibilities on the local art scene. In 1912 he joined the Board of Directors of the Art Association of New Orleans, became its Secretary in 1921 and its President six years later. He was also, in 1927, a founding member of the New Orleans Art League. Then the hard times came. Together with other unemployed artists of the New Orleans area, Stanton joined the PWAP where he executed a series of local architectural studies. After the Project closed, Ann Craton, a travelling representative from the FERA, arrived in New Orleans, urging the artists to organize themselves in order to promote their works locally and plead their cause nationally. They did, forming the New Orleans Art Guild under the leadership of Gideon Stanton, then forty-nine years old, a bespectacled man with a balding head. His efforts on behalf of the Guild were minimal, confined chiefly to lobbying for a renewal of the art project, yet visible. In the fall of 1935, probably on the recommendation of Ellsworth Woodward and surely because of his PWAP experience and Guild work, Stanton's name came under consideration for the state directorship of the Louisiana project. There seemed no other choice. Parker interviewed him in New Orleans, considered him the

best man for the job, and named him to the post in mid-November.³⁸

The Assistant Director regretted the choice almost immediately. Stanton's appointment commenced a three-year brawl between himself and project officials in Washington over every critical issue of the entire effort. The two sides bickered over the nature of the project, its intent and purpose, the extent of Stanton's local authority, the limits of the project's federal structure, the scope and purpose of local projects devised by Stanton, the people he hired and how he supervised them, the work they performed, even the nature of art itself. Three years of this and Stanton finally threw up his hands, a great relief to the national office, but a pyrrhic victory at best. For three critical years Gideon Stanton consistently deflected the efforts of FAP directors to open New Orleans to the federal art idea. At every turn he resisted the egalitarian impulses of the project and frustrated the ambitions of local artists, enthused with the popular spirit, to organize and to spread "the people's art" along the avenues of the Crescent City. Such stubbornness doomed the federal effort in New Orleans. Despite its prolonged siege the FAP never captured the cultural citadel of the South, never made it part of its federal network of community art centers. The efforts did not cease with Stanton's resignation, nor even after the demise of Federal One itself, but they were equally unsuccessful. In retrospect, Project officials always counted New Orleans among their most disappointing defeats, a long and costly battle whose opening skirmishes erupted even before the Project's first

³⁸ "Stanton," Artists' Files, THNOC; States-Item, (New Orleans), November 23, 1964; Holger Cahill to Thomas Parker, October 15, 1935; Jacob Baker to Frank Peterman, November 16, 1935; Stanton to Baker, November 21, 1935; Peterman to Baker, November 14, 1935; J.D. Lockwood to Cahill, December 4, 1935, Selected Documents, (LSA-BR), Reel 1.

Christmas.³⁹

The confrontation began when Stanton appeared to dawdle in hiring artists and deepened when he established the direction their efforts would take. National officials worried that Stanton, who had classified virtually no artists as "professional" in his first three months in office, was sitting on a pool of qualified applicants. He had scanned the relief rolls, he explained in December 1935, but "ha[d] not run across any outstanding material." Throughout Stanton's tenure some of those so judged took exception, and so did the national officers, who continued to receive appeals from qualified New Orleans artists demanding work. One of these came from Elioil Bordelon, together with the suspicion that Stanton had little use for modern art. Bordelon had visited Stanton in his office, showed his portfolio of abstractionist work, and been summarily told that although the Director could not "understand" the paintings, he considered them close to forgery, and that "there was no room on the project." Worse, Cahill and Parker suspected that the energies of what few artists Stanton did hire were being misspent on a task contradicting the spirit of the national program. Stanton, they learned, had put his people to work not as creative artists on a production unit, or as less skilled trainees on an Index of American Design project, or even as teachers of art or art appreciation. They had instead been put to work as janitors and librarians, cleaning, cataloguing, arranging, and classifying the collection at the Delgado Museum of Art, and indexing the museum's library holdings. They were, in other words, doing exactly what

³⁹ Douglas L. Smith, The New Deal in the Urban South, (Baton Rouge, 1988), pp.207-31.

Ellsworth Woodward had wanted his PWAP unit to do, and this was no coincidence.⁴⁰

Gideon Stanton's temperament prevented his ever serving as Ellsworth Woodward's front man. He was no figurehead for a project the other directed behind the scenes. Yet, there is no discounting the patriarch's wide influence. Stanton and Woodward were friends and associates of long-standing. Each admired the other's art and respected his efforts to promote art throughout the region. Both were established pillars of the New Orleans art community, who shared not only similar artistic preferences but common social convictions. Stanton had been among the first artists Woodward hired when he established his PWAP office in December, 1933. Stanton returned the favor two years later, as newly-appointed FAP State Director. Instructed to organize a state advisory board affiliated with the local FAP effort, Stanton's first invitation went to Ellsworth Woodward. Like Woodward, Stanton refused to let relief considerations overshadow an artist's skill, adopting Woodward's position that bad artists were bad investments for the taxpayer's money. He, too, showed an early contempt for modern forms, and given the opportunity Stanton set his unit to work on a project dear to Woodward's heart.⁴¹

The Delgado Art Museum Project also revealed a parochialism

⁴⁰ Eloil L. Bordelon to Thomas Parker, n.d.; Gideon Stanton to Holger Cahill, December 10, 1935, December 12, 1935; Stanton to Jacob Baker, February 14, 1936, Selected Documents, (LSA-BR), Reel 1. For additional criticisms by local artists of Stanton's hiring policies see, Robert V. Fuchs to Thomas Parker, January 20, 1936, January 30, 1936; Parker to Fuchs, December 6, 1935, January 16, 1936, in Ibid. "Louisiana: Narrative Report on Accomplishment to May 1, 1939," RG 69, Professional and Service Division, Narrative Reports, Box 8, (NA).

⁴¹ Stanton to Cahill, December 12, 1935, Selected Documents, LSA-BR, Reel 1.

similar to Woodward's and alarming to national FAP organizers. In the effort to stimulate art interests in what they considered to be a culturally disadvantaged region, Holger Cahill and Tom Parker developed a standard program they sought to implement at the local level. Their solution contained an implicit judgement that local institutions had either failed to promote the art idea or had done so improperly, adhering to the old values of the privileged academy and exclusive gallery. Not everyone at the local levels agreed, particularly in New Orleans where Ellsworth Woodward and Gideon Stanton had devoted their lives to building the institutions FAP directors now sought to destroy or bypass. A cycle of misunderstanding deepened, revealing the fundamental conflicts of the federal project. Cahill, Parker, Stanton, and Ellsworth all claimed a common interest in art, a dedication to its preservation in the darkest moments of the national emergency, and a commitment to the value of art in a democratic society. All four hoped to make art an everyday American experience and to make the artist a valued part of the democratic society. But the means were never so mutually agreed upon as the ends, and no means proved more controversial than the federal structure of the FAP. While national directors hoped to fit the program to local needs, they never intended to make it subservient to the local will. Local authorities shared the ambitions of their national administrators and certainly welcomed federal support in the struggle to establish art in the life of the community. But only the finest of lines separated support from interference. Even under ideal conditions, this traditional pitfall of the federal system left small room for compromise, and in New Orleans neither local director nor national supervisor ever found the common ground. What one side

stressed the other side ignored, permitting a mutual suspicion to develop and fester.

It took only a short while before tempers flared. National authorities were ready to intervene within months of the project's establishment. "I am very much disappointed in the progress made on the project in Louisiana," Tom Parker wrote to Gideon Stanton in February, 1936. Parker complained specifically that his State Director had shown insufficient energy recruiting employees. If, as Stanton had advised, there really were not enough artists on the relief rolls to fill his project quota, Parker replied dryly, then perhaps there was no need for someone to direct them. The Assistant Administrator was even more specific with the administrators of the state WPA apparatus. "I am very disappointed in the work of Mr. Stanton," he wrote to Edna Brennan, Director of the Louisiana Division of Women's and Professional Projects, "I wanted someone to take over the work to see if we could not have a worthwhile program in Louisiana. Mr. Stanton has not been very active or rather he hasn't the initiative to develop a program. Under the circumstances, I think it best that after due notice you release Mr. Stanton from the payroll." Parker may have confused initiative with interest, but the tone was clear, if not the action. Stanton stayed fired for less than twenty-four hours, in a change of heart Parker neglected to explain. Instead, Parker rehired his State Director, or rather, requested a stay of dismissal. Then, in a final effort to save the Louisiana Project, he decided to take matters into his own hands. Parker arrived in New Orleans in mid-February, met with Stanton, supervised the filling of the Louisiana quota, and hammered out a

temporary ceasefire with his State Director.⁴²

There had been a fair trade-off. Stanton kept his job in return for a project functioning more or less according to Parker's directives. It still took several months before Stanton finally turned the Delgado Project over to regular WPA workers, freeing his artists for more productive work, but when he did it was to undertake a project that absorbed the State Director's interest and won his wholehearted approval. During his visit, Parker discussed with Stanton the Index of American Design Project and found a zealous supporter. Indeed, no single aspect of Stanton's Project experience attracted greater enthusiasm, and none made him prouder. In his one major article explaining FAP operations to the local press, the State Director devoted three full pages to his Index Project and dispatched the rest with a single paragraph. The attraction was both personal and professional. Stanton was the absolute master of this unit, judge and jury, whose approval every plate required before being sent to Washington. It was an ideal role for someone of his temperament, but the Index, more than any other FAP undertaking, also matched the Director's view of art and his understanding of the proper role of the relief artist on his project. In content, execution, and underlying social and aesthetic philosophy, the Index project matched the conservatism of the New Orleans art establishment. The Index represented the most conventional aspect of Holger Cahill's entire art program. Its subject matter celebrated the craft traditions of the American past, while the methods used to create Index plates harkened to an even earlier age. While

⁴² Parker to Stanton, February 4, 1936; Parker to Edna Brennan, February 10, 1936; Parker to Brennan, February 11, 1936; Parker to Stanton, February 12, 1936, Ibid.

other units of the FAP program pioneered revolutions in mass-produced art, the Index utilized a guild system already centuries old. Across the country, New Orleans included, older, more experienced artists supervised the Index projects, offering advice and counsel to younger charges. The Index was thus part record and part classroom, a training ground for younger talent, and the FAP project resembling most closely the sort of art activities Ellsworth Woodward himself had organized as a PWAP Regional Director. The Index conformed to Woodward's artistic environmentalism, prompting local artists to study local subjects. New Orleans Index workers were not some faceless unit churning out oils and watercolors similar in theme and content to dozens of other groups within the federal effort. Rather, as Gideon Stanton observed, they recorded "the social progress of the American nation, together with [the] local color of a time and place." Here, as in no other aspect of Stanton's FAP service, the balance had been struck between federal supervision and local autonomy.⁴³

It was a balance easily disturbed. In the Spring of 1936 Holger Cahill arrived in New Orleans to direct the establishment of an easel unit within the Louisiana operation, something national officials had urged for months to no avail. Stanton clung to the Woodwardian position that relief artists were, by definition, inferior craftsmen whose works should not be permitted to decorate public institutions. This was the attraction of the Index project, since it demanded skill and craftsmanship in the service of a worthwhile research project whose

⁴³ "Index of American Design, Supplement No.1 to the FAP Manual, Instructions For Index of American Design," RG 69, State Series, Box 0459, (NA); Gideon Stanton, "Art in the WPA," Arts and Antiques, 1(November 1938), p.9.

merits benefitted artist and patron alike. The easel project promised none of this. Instead, the spectre of relief recipients with little artistic skill and less supervision haunted Gideon Stanton and seemed, to him, a colossal waste of time, energy, and supplies. He found no sense in a project whose technical competence, so limited from the start, promised to create such a good deal of bad art. None would benefit save the relief worker himself and only temporarily by extending for another month or two the sad delusion that he was an artist worthy of patronage. Cahill relented and a bargain was struck. He got his production unit, six easelists, who commenced operation in May, 1936, and Stanton determined the personnel, six non-relief painters chosen because of skill and not need. The State Director also retained dominion over this group. When they started he handed each one a pint of turpentine, a pint of linseed oil, a set of ten colors, seven brushes, stretchers, other supplies, and a memorandum ordering each artist to be at his easel from nine until four every Monday through Thursday, to complete daily time sheets, and to report to the Director's office for review at the end of every second week. Standard sizes of canvases were issued, small, medium, and large, each with its own corresponding time limit for completion and explicit instructions concerning content. "The subject matter is to include no nudes, no religious subjects, [and] no propaganda," charged Stanton, and "the subject matter is to be native to or typical of the state." The instructions were terse and overbearing, much in Stanton's character, and never softened despite Tom Parker's repeated entreaties. Nevertheless, after six months, two visits, and a fair number of heated exchanges, the Assistant Director now had an operational art project in

New Orleans.⁴⁴

The ensuing calm did not last long. Eighteen months later, at the end of 1937, Gideon Stanton submitted his annual summary of project activities. His easel unit, the Director observed, had maintained a steady level of production, completing an average of thirteen paintings per month. The overall quality of the work had remained, in his judgement, "fairly stable," permitting a number of local allocations and the collection of an exhibition due to open in New Orleans shortly after New Year's. Work also continued apace on the Director's pet project, the Index of American Design, where the yield was even richer. Early Index activities had confined themselves almost exclusively to recording the extensive iron work that latticed New Orleans, especially in the French Quarter. But during 1937 local researches had been widened to include such areas as textiles, furniture, ceramics, and native costumes. The five artists assigned to the Index had worked feverishly and skillfully. Despite personnel changes, including the loss of a supervisor who took a job in the private sector, Stanton's artists finished better than two plates per month with no harm to the quality of their output. "It is a source of gratification," the Director observed, "to note that there has been a steady and consistent advance in the technical accomplishment of the artists."⁴⁵

A single cloud hovered over this otherwise rosy horizon. Stanton's glowing summary of Project activities coincided with the

⁴⁴ Thomas Parker to Gideon Stanton, April 26, 1936; Stanton to Parker, May 7, 1936; Parker to Stanton, May 11, 1936; Stanton to Cahill, May 8, 1936; Cahill to Stanton, May 15, 1936; Stanton to Cahill, May 13, 1936; Parker to Stanton, May 16, 1936, Selected Documents, (LSA-BR).

⁴⁵ "Report Concerning the Federal Art Project in Louisiana For the Year 1937," RG 69, State Series, Box 49, (NA).

opening of an exhibition by the local chapter of the American Artists' Congress, featuring works by more than twenty-five artists, some of them FAP employees. Arranged at the New Orleans Public Library, the show included a number of modern styles and themes, and its own minor scandal. Outraged library officials banned two nudes, one by an Index researcher and another by Eloil Bordelon, the young abstractionist whom Stanton had denied employment. One of the pieces, commented local critic Edith Ballard, "is certainly not the type of thing one might expect to find on a library wall, or for that matter outside a pathological manual. Merely tacking on a title is not enough to 'elevate' such a 'study' to the rank of 'art.'" Nor had she much use for the other piece, Bordelon's "somewhat abstract conception of the essentials of creation," something "good for those who like that sort of thing...." Small pruderies aside, the showing no doubt galled Gideon Stanton. It had been organized, according to Myron Lechay, chairman of the committee supervising the exhibition, for reasons dear to national FAP ideals. "These exhibits," he explained, "are part of the campaign begun recently by the group to educate the public in the appreciation of art, and to stimulate public interest toward passage of the pending federal arts bill. This bill, if passed... would provide for the establishment of a permanent Federal Bureau of Fine Arts [,and] would make the art work now being done under WPA grants a more steady and sure project...." Artists' Congress, permanence, federal, and modern art, were all dirty words in Gideon Stanton's lexicon, terms he associated with a movement he deeply suspected and, when possible, actively thwarted. Worse, they had been uttered by Myron Lechay, a young painter with whom Stanton had recently exchanged sharp words in a bitter

confrontation revealing the complex and controversial nature of the Federal Art Project in New Orleans.⁴⁶

By the time of the Congress showing, these two men had been feuding for almost a year. Little is known about Myron Lechay except that he was a Russian immigrant, had studied under Robert Henri and George Bellows, and that he believed deeply in the promise of the new art movement of the 1930s. He was a modernist in aesthetic practice and social outlook, befriended a local black poet, Marcus Christian, and became a critic of Jim Crow. Ultimately, he left the closed society of New Orleans for the skyscrapers of New York, lingering just long enough to become the major cause celebre of the Louisiana project. In December, 1936, Myron Lechay, President and organizer of the local chapter of the American Artists' Congress, visited the office of Gideon Stanton, State Director of the Federal Art Project in Louisiana, requesting on behalf of his organization a full report by the Director revealing any future plans to reduce the number of artists enrolled on the project. Stanton would not stand for it. He showed Lechay to the door, reported his actions to the national office, and filed the incident in his memory. Six months later, in response to a nationwide WPA quota reduction, the Washington staff ordered Stanton to trim two artists from his rolls. The first choice was easy, a non-certified painter, who did not need the support. Then Gideon Stanton, Director of the Project, summoned Myron Lechay, FAP easel painter, to his office and fired him, citing a number of reasons. Lechay had been a charter member of the easel unit, had enjoyed its benefits long enough, and had no dependents, explained the Director, making him a logical choice.

⁴⁶ Item, December 14, 1937.

Moreover, said Stanton, Lechay had become a liability to the Project, devoting too much time to his "very pronounced activities on behalf of the Artists' Congress" and not enough to his own easel work. Finally, the Director questioned Lechay's artistic skill. Since the national office in Washington had recently returned several of Lechay's paintings, having failed to find an interested recipient for the work, Stanton reasoned, little choice remained. As Director, he continued, duty required him to consider other, more skilled artists first. Closing the issue Stanton gave the knife a twist, suggesting to Lechay that if he truly needed relief work, then perhaps he should contact one of the labor projects in the area.⁴⁷

Within days of the incident an angry letter from Myron Lechay to Holger Cahill landed on the desk of the National Director. Lechay minced no words. "In singling me out for dismissal," wrote the artist, "Mr. Stanton... expressed his disapproval of my connection with the Artists' Congress. He frequently voiced his resentment to me. He did not like 'his artists' to get mixed up in this." There were also hints that the Director doted on a coterie of favored artists. Several of them, explained Lechay, had no need for a relief check. Some owned expensive cars and properties. Many held second jobs. One was not even an American citizen, and others "fresh out of art school" stroked the Director's vanity. "I never accepted the suggestions Mr. Stanton made when I brought my paintings into the office," Lechay reported, when "other artists took back their pictures to modify them accordingly; but

⁴⁷ Caroline Durieux to Edward Rowan, October 18, 1940, RG 121, Entry 140, Box 49/158, (NA); Stanton to Cahill, December 17, 1936, July 6, 1937; Cahill to Stanton, July 13, 1937; Myron Lechay to Cahill, August 20, 1937, Selected Documents, (LSA-BR), Reel 1.

my failure to do so displeased him." Cahill attempted to minimize the incident by plying a middle course. He advised Lechay to take his case before the local Labor Relations Board, and renewed warnings made to Stanton since the original incident, urging the State Director to refrain from any disparaging remarks directed toward the Artists' Union, the Artist' Congress, or any similar organization.⁴⁸

Months elapsed before a resolution satisfactory to almost no one emerged. Lechay took Cahill's advice, appealed his case, and lost it. Then he confronted Stanton on the streets of the Quarter, became "rather insulting" in the Director's estimation, and followed up this incident with another personal appeal at Stanton's office. The Director refused all pleadings. Rather, Stanton warned Cahill that Lechay's return would jeopardize local efforts and was more blunt with the artist himself. "I regret to have to advise you," he informed Lechay, "that I see no prospect of your again being placed on the Federal Art Project here." This closed the matter in Stanton's view, but the tide had already begun to shift in Lechay's direction. He had done more than simply yell at or plead with Gideon Stanton since his dismissal in June. Throughout the late summer and early autumn of 1937, Myron Lechay spent much of his enforced leisure writing to national WPA officials concerning his case, the operations of the FAP in New Orleans, and the efforts of the local chapter of the American Artists' Congress to spread the federal art idea in a hostile environment. His organization, he informed Ellen Woodward, National Director of the Women's and Professional Projects Division, WPA, not only promoted art locally but advocated the sort of cultural

⁴⁸ Lechay to Cahill, August 20, 1937, October 5, 1937; Lechay to Ellen Woodward, August 31, 1937, Ibid.

pluralism at the heart of New Deal idealism. "We openly declared that Negro artists and art students should be given equal opportunities," he wrote, but "at present a Negro in New Orleans may not attend an art exhibition without a special note or permit... difficult to attain." The local Artists' Congress, he asserted, had also championed the need for a municipal art gallery and for public displays of the Project's easel unit. Yet the State Director stonewalled every suggestion. "At no time during the entire year was an exhibition of this sort arranged," the artist lamented. "[W]e discovered new painters of distinct promise and since they were poor we urged their enrollment on the project. Mr. Stanton preferred to take on a few of his personal friends who were not in need at all.... We tried to expand the project to make it part of the whole life of the community," but succeeded only in angering the State Director, who in private conversation repeatedly admonished his rebellious modernist "to mind his own business."⁴⁹

Lechay's pleadings found sympathetic ears in Washington, and with good reason. Tom Parker and Holger Cahill were certainly no champions of Gideon Stanton, with whom they had already been at frequent loggerheads. When Lechay's reports arrived in Washington describing the Director's overbearing nature, his favoritism, his sustained indifference to the federal art idea, and abuses and violations in his hiring practices, they reached minds already predisposed to believe them. Besides, reinstating Myron Lechay afforded Cahill and Parker the perfect opportunity to impress upon their reluctant state director the authority of the national office, and in this case what made good organizational policy also made sound political sense. Lechay was the

⁴⁹ Ibid., W.F.Oakes to Lechay, August 6, 1937, Ibid.

member of a national organization of artists whose support Parker and Cahill could not jeopardize. The American Artists' Congress consistently defended the federal art idea, and, at the same time, comprised the largest organized pressure group advocating federal support for the plastic arts. To be sure, the organization could be the FAP's sharpest critic, usually applauding WPA efforts while insisting they be extended. But the support far outweighed the criticism, and the National Director knew it. What is more, he also knew that the national office of the Artists' Congress was well aware of the difficulties their local chairman had encountered in New Orleans at the hands of someone they considered to be an outdated reactionary defending the values of the old art. Cahill and Parker had reached similar conclusions long before. Organizational needs and political expedience aside, there were always the facts of the matter. In the Fall of 1937 Myron Lechay was an artist whose work, if difficult to allocate, bore the unmistakable stamp of professional skill. He was certified on the relief rolls, and a vacancy existed on the Project. "Myron Lechay is an artist who has good training, has received considerable recognition for his ability and work, and, regardless of what you or I think of his present work," wrote Tom Parker to Gideon Stanton, "he is still widely recognized as an artist whose training, experience, and ability would qualify him to be employed on the FAP." Under Parker's order Lechay returned to work for the FAP in November, just one month before the Artists' Congress exhibited. Stanton made no response, nor a single mention of the episode in his annual summary of operations, perhaps as clear an indication as any of the State Director's anger. Stanton's immediate bosses, the state supervisors of the Louisiana WPA, shared the anger if

not the silence. James Crutcher, the state WPA director, Maud Barret, his Director of the Louisiana Employment Division, and even Leo Spofford, matronly and usually unflappable State Director of the Women's and Professional units, all voiced their dissatisfaction. "Since being released from the project," wrote Blanche Ralston, Regional Director of the Women's and Professional Division to her superior, Ellen Woodward, "Myron Lechay has repeatedly embarrassed the state administration with the pressure he has attempted to organize in promotion of his reassignment to the project." The entire state staff had reviewed the case, she reported, and voted unanimously not to reinstate, but their advice had been ignored. The national officials of the FAP had intervened directly over the state heads "creating a situation deeply deplore[d] in Louisiana." "Such occurrences as these are not appreciated by the State Administrators," warned Ralston, as they "provoke unpleasant situations with reference to the Federal Projects within the states." The protests, duly noted, made their way into the Project files in time for a Christmas truce between all parties. Lechay returned to his easel and unveiled the Artists' Congress show. Stanton assembled the facts and figures of the annual report. State supervisors and national administrators focused on more pressing details, and the uneasy alliance between the FAP and its Louisiana Project, delicate even under ideal circumstances, held for another two weeks. Then another one of Gideon Stanton's easel painters took an unscheduled Christmas holiday, and the fat went in the fire once again.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Stanton to Parker, October 19, 1937; Lechay to Parker, October 21, 1937; Parker to Stanton, October 22, 1937; Hal J. Wright to David K. Niles, November 23, 1937; Blanche M. Ralston to Ellen Woodward, n.d.; Lawrence Morris to Parker, November 13, 1937; Cahill to Morris, November 16, 1937, Ibid.

When he was a young man growing up in Michigan, Douglas Brown wanted to be an engineer. He took his B.S. at Harvard and a graduate degree in chemical engineering across town at M.I.T., then went to work as a lighting expert in the Edison labs in New York. In 1927 the company sent him to New Orleans where he was to supervise the opening of a new facility. Nature decreed otherwise. Brown arrived in New Orleans just days ahead of the great flood, where the rains swept away the plant he was to have opened and redirected his life. Doubtless a professional curiosity drew him to the spot below New Orleans where engineers dynamited the levee to relieve pressure on the City, but the trip had unforeseen consequences. When the levee burst it loosed a flood of passion in Douglas Brown's heart. The rush of water, the roiling colors of tide and earth, what seemed to be the boundless powers of nature overwhelmed him. He resolved on the spot to become a painter, and chased the ambition with an engineer's persistence. He spent the next three years under the tutelage of an established local artist, often painting a picture a day, presumably in the hope that energy expended equalled skill accumulated. Meanwhile, Brown immersed himself in the artistic ferment of the Quarter. He mingled with other artists, seeking advice and criticism. He helped to organize the "Provincial Group," a short-lived collection of artists and writers who operated their own gallery and published their own journal, The Quarter. Brown left New Orleans in 1930, returned to New York for two years, then travelled the Caribbean, drawn as always to the power of nature. In Haiti, stricken with dysentery, he watched a hurricane drive hundreds of frightened natives before its fury, an experience so galvanizing that he rose from his sickbed, seized his brush, and worked at his easel without

interruption for days. In Guatemala, he painted an erupting volcano, and in Mexico, he succumbed easily to the human tumult of the Revolution. There he met the three luminaries of the Mexican art movement, Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueros, absorbed their aesthetic fervor, and earned their attention and praise. Rivera broke a long-standing habit and bought one of Brown's paintings. Commissions from the government followed. Later, the former engineer became the first American invited to give an exhibition at the Mexican Government Art Gallery in six years. But a brief stint with the Mexican Department of Education ended abruptly when Brown was fired in retaliation for the dismissal of several Mexican nationals from the New Mexico FAP unit.⁵¹

With no immediate prospects, the artist drifted back across the border. In November, 1936, almost destitute, Brown returned to New Orleans looking for work and using as references Stefan Hirsch, Diego Rivera, and his former French Quarter teacher, Myron Lechay. Master and pupil visited Gideon Stanton, who liked Brown's work and appointed the painter to the FAP easel unit in the Spring of 1937. He may have been the only thing Myron Lechay and Gideon Stanton ever agreed upon, but in aesthetic preference and social outlook Douglas Brown was much closer to the former than the latter. Brown, like Lechay, advocated the popular tenets of the new art and had the pedigree to show for it. By the time Stanton handed him his colors, brushes, and admonitions against nudes and propaganda, Douglas Brown was already a member of the Mexican Association of Artists, The League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers, and, of course, the American Artists' Congress. Titles of his FAP works

⁵¹ "Douglas Brown," Artists' Files, (THNOC); Brown to Cahill, July 6, 1936, Selected Documents, (LSA-BR), Reel 1.

such as "American Orphanage," "Boom in Steel," and "The Four Stations of the Day," reflect his commitment to pedestrian scenes and subjects. But another project responsibility Brown assumed in the Fall of 1937 indicated his dedication to carrying art directly to the people. While the squabble widened between Stanton and Lechay, a three-cornered correspondence developed between the embattled Director, project officials in Washington, and William Stuart Nelson, President of Dillard University, a black college in New Orleans. Nelson wanted art classes and an exhibition gallery established at the school under project supervision but lacked funding for the entire endeavor. Tom Parker, who had the eye for it, spotted an opportunity for a catch-all compromise. He approved organization of the art class, then advised Stanton to have Myron Lechay teach it. Nelson would get his class, Lechay could work at something worthwhile according to his own aesthetic and social creed but he could do so at a place far removed from Stanton's sight. It might have worked had not Lechay and Stanton bumped into each other on Royal Street and gotten into a shouting match. Instead, the compromise dissolved, the controversy grew more acrimonious, and Douglas Brown, not Myron Lechay, wound up teaching the class at Dillard.⁵²

Brown could not have been more pleased, either with the work or the results. The combined responsibility of his easel work and teaching load required his keeping hours well beyond the maximum permitted on the project, but at the Director's request Brown refused to claim any overtime. Instead, he continued to make the trek to Dillard, and so did his students. Many, lacking bus or streetcar fare, walked all the way

⁵² "Brown," Artists' Files, (THNOC); William Stuart Nelson to Holger Cahill, n.d., Selected Documents, (LSA-BR), Reel 1.

from Louisiana Avenue, a distance measured not in blocks but miles. Their desire also surfaced in their work, and, perhaps a little too much, Brown wished to share this with the public. On Christmas Day, 1937, he boarded a bus for Washington, hoping to secure an exhibition of his students' work at Howard University. During the visit, Brown met with Tom Parker twice in two weeks, interviews granted on Brown's "urgent request." But sometime in between chats he ran out of money, and there the trouble began. Brown wrote to Stanton requesting the Director to forward his check, the first notice Stanton had that Brown was out of town. Worse, before leaving, Brown had neglected to fill out his time sheet and had left a note for a fellow employee asking her to complete the chore, crediting him with the time spent in Washington. Stanton responded with predictable rage. He refused to forward the check, invalidated the time sheet, and sent Brown's file to the regional WPA office for investigation.⁵³

In the meantime, no doubt sensing Stanton's ire, Brown took steps to cover his tracks. He wrote Stanton once more, stating that Parker himself had permitted him to use the overtime hours accumulated on the Dillard project to cover hours lost on the trip to Washington. Then he grew bolder, stating, allegedly under Parker's advice, that easel painters were entitled to vacations of up to two weeks provided they made up the time, and that the Dillard hours were applicable. This did nothing to soothe the temper of the State Director. Instead, in an angry letter, Stanton advised Leo Spofford that this second instance of federal meddling, right on the heels of the Lechay fracas, established

⁵³ Stanton to Parker, September 30, 1937; Stanton to Parker, November 26, 1937; Leo Spofford to J.H. Crutcher, January 10, 1938, Ibid.

a clear and intolerable pattern of national indifference to local sensibilities. Spofford and the other supervisors of the state WPA operation agreed. Other projects were administered through her office, she complained to State Supervisor James Crutcher, but not the Art Project, whose national administrators not only intervened over her head, but did not even bother to direct correspondence through her office. For her part, and for Stanton's too, she had had enough and recommended terminating the project in Louisiana. Crutcher, who agreed, warned Ellen Woodward in Washington that unless future actions and correspondence were routed through proper channels, or that the project was administered exclusively from Washington, his people were prepared to scrap the entire program. Once again, only eleventh hour intervention saved the project. Tom Parker disavowed most of what Douglas Brown had said and left the affair completely in local hands. With the approval of the Louisiana WPA office, Stanton invalidated the time sheets, docked Brown's hours from the date of his last completed painting, sometime before Thanksgiving, and fired the painter. This action, if not Lechay's reinstatement, received space in Stanton's Annual Report, and when it did no one in Washington raised a whisper of protest. By then, another temporary peace had been established, more fragile than the others and shorter in duration, for it had come at greater expense. Years of quibbling and months of quarrelling had worked to the advantage of neither and the dissatisfaction of both. Tempers and time were growing short.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Spofford to Crutcher, January 10, 1938; Stanton to Spofford, January 10, 1938; Stanton to Brown, January 10, 1938; Brown to Stanton, n.d.; Crutcher to Ellen Woodward, January 10, 1938; Brown to Stanton, n.d.; Stanton to Brown, January 14, 1938; Crutcher to Woodward, January 14, 1938; Woodward to Roger Bounds, January 25, 1938; Parker to

By the Spring of 1938 national project directors had promoted the idea of establishing a community art center in New Orleans for more than two years. Gideon Stanton rebuffed every entreaty. Instead, the activities of the Louisiana project, for the first two years of its existence, represented a tacit compromise struck between mutually suspicious parties. Project directors in Washington, anxious to establish themselves in the cultural capital of the South, had bankrolled a limited version of the national plan. In New Orleans they had established a production unit similar to those operating throughout an expanding federal art network and a research project, the Index of American Design, one close to the aesthetic and social ideals of the local art establishment. The compromise favored the locals. Despite the existence of the easel unit, evidence suggested that it was not being used according to national intentions, and additional efforts to establish federal art instruction in the City also met frustration. By 1938, then, Project officials in Washington might rightly have begun to question the worth of their efforts. Indeed, some account must have been taken, for within a year of the Lechay and Brown affairs, federal supervisors resumed their aggressive promotion of the community art center. This time, however, they appeared ready to force the issue, touching off one last confrontation with Gideon Stanton.

Local opposition to the center had not been universal. Certainly it enjoyed the support of Myron Lechay and his fellow members of the American Artists' Congress, as well as numerous other artists in New Orleans. Then, too, articles on the community art center published in the local press excited local interest among the general public.

Woodward, January 26, 1938, Ibid.

National administrators, led by Robert Armstrong Andrews, a Regional FAP Director, resolved to tap what they considered to be a gathering swell of underground support. When Stanton forwarded an article he had released for local publication describing the nature and purpose of FAP efforts in New Orleans, Andrews took the State Director to task for a missed opportunity. The article had not so much as mentioned "the broad national program of the community art centers," an inexcusable lapse, lamented Andrews, who suggested that any future writings the Director intended to publish be cleared through the national office. Next day the Regional Director wrote to Leo Spofford with a public relations ploy calculated to build popular support for the center. Andrews enclosed a Reader's Digest synopsis of an article published in Time, suggested that the condensation was of ideal newspaper length, and requested that Spofford secure its publication beneath a headline questioning why New Orleans had not joined the federal network. He then resumed pressure on the State Director, offering general guidelines for organizing community support for the center, various fund-raising strategies, tips for securing the cooperation of the business community, and a warning of unmistakable clarity: "You have a good opportunity in New Orleans and I don't want you to overlook it. It is essential that the development of the community art center begin now and it is your responsibility as State Director to do so. For more than two years you have been receiving from this office information and instructions regarding the Community Art Centers and nothing whatever has been done in New Orleans to cooperate with the National Program in this respect..."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Stanton, "Art in the WPA," pp.7-9; Parker to William J. McHugh, Jr., September 15, 1938; Robert Armstrong Andrews to Stanton, November 16, 1938; Andrews to Spofford, November 17, 1938, Ibid.

Stanton rose to the challenge with a characteristic response. "I am duly in receipt of your rather tart and uncalled for letter," he replied, "impl[ying] remissness on my part for not having taken action in the past two years towards establishing here a Community Art Center." His wounded pride demanded justice. Stanton insisted that he had acted with complete fidelity to national directives at every turn, and that his only sin, if any, lay in his failure to carry out an order never issued. Although he was aware of the national effort to establish community art centers throughout the country, he explained, "at no time have I received direct instructions from Washington to proceed in the matter." Rather, any offense had been directed the other way. "Not once has my opinion as to the necessity for a Community Art Center in New Orleans been asked for," complained the Director, "in spite of the fact that for the past thirty years I have been in close contact with the Art interests of the community." He then questioned both the purpose a center might serve in New Orleans as well as the ultimate ambitions of the national administrators. "In following through any set [FAP] course," Stanton observed, "...you may find that art activities are already adequately provided for amongst the pupils, some of whom are doubtless underprivileged, of the city public schools. I suggest to you that you have a survey made fully to ascertain to what extent, in face of existing facilities, a Community Art Center is necessary and vital to New Orleans, unless, of course, the permanency of the Federal Art Project in the community is the only issue and is to be forwarded regardless of existing art facilities, or anything else."⁵⁶

The issue could not have been made clearer. The viability of any

⁵⁶ Stanton to Andrews, November 28, 1938, Ibid.

of the arts projects, especially the FAP, depended ultimately upon local good will, something non-existent in the New Orleans situation by the Fall of 1938. By then national administrators were both exasperated and determined while Gideon Stanton considered himself under attack from all sides. While national supervisors had pressed the Community Art Center issue, Stanton had received several critical reviews of his Index plates. He took it personally and responded resentfully. The tones grew increasingly bitter once national authorities began, in addition, to question the quality of the easel efforts. Finally, in November, Stanton requested a vacation. Project officials, perhaps suspecting the response, turned him down. There was no going on. The Director's resignation became effective shortly after the first of the year.⁵⁷

"Mr. Stanton's attitude is somewhat provincial," commented Douglas Bear to Holger Cahill during the final quarrel between the State Director and the national administrators in the Fall of 1938. Bear was another in the long string of Regional FAP supervisors, and the remark came in specific response to one of Stanton's wounded, self-righteous, and vaguely threatening letters. Few summaries of the letter, the author, or the Director's tenure could be more succinct, and none more accurate. Nearly two centuries after generating and sustaining the republican impulse, the provincial spirit still beat strong in the heart of the New Orleans art establishment. For three years its defender and representative, Gideon Stanton, resisted New Deal administrators eager to incorporate isolated communities into a national network dedicated to the egalitarian values of the new art. Their pressure had been

⁵⁷ Stanton to Adolf Glassgold, September 27, 1938; Cahill to Stanton, October 20, 1938; Douglas J. Bear to Stanton, August 29, 1938; Stanton to Bear, September 6, 1938, Ibid.

formidable, an amalgam of diplomatic entreaty, patriotic appeal, and fiscal blackmail, but Stanton had withstood it. Nor would he bow to greater resources. Instead, with all his grandfather's tenacity, Gideon Stanton held his ground in a squabble long forgotten yet central to the American experience of the 1930s. For all his pride and vanity, despite the self-righteous pomposity of his prose style, this determined man helped delineate the central fault lines running through a society in critical transition. Stanton's legacy helps to focus the issues at stake: the political uneasiness between the states and the federal administration, the cultural tensions between tradition and modernity, and the challenge posed to the long tradition of localism by federally-administered factories of culture whose newer, less rigid, and more cosmopolitan view of American life created art through the industrial process and broadcast its message via systems of mass communication.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Bear to Parker, September 9, 1939, Ibid.

5. Mrs. Durieux's Enthusiasm

Less than twelve months after Gideon Stanton's departure the New Orleans art world had been turned upside down. By then Stanton's successor had begun to implement a sweeping program of art production, education, and exhibition across Louisiana, bringing the state into the federal art network. A new spirit and a new energy now directed the efforts in Louisiana, one squarely behind the federal art idea. For Holger Cahill and Tom Parker, three years of threats, controversies, and petty bickerings had finally paid off. Plans were even underway to establish the long-sought Community Art Center in New Orleans, but for Holger Cahill and Tom Parker this must have been small consolation. In the Spring of 1939, as the local project aligned itself with federal guidelines, Congress dismantled Federal One, broke up the various art projects, and returned them to local authorities. For their duration, another four years, the former units of Federal One occupied an organizational limbo similar to the political state of the nation. Cahill, Parker, and the national administrators retained their offices in Washington but were powerless before local authorities free to ignore or accept their advice. They could plead, they could suggest, they could counsel, but they could not coerce. Yet the localists claimed no victory. Gideon Stanton never recorded his reaction to the demise of Federal One. Perhaps he relished the sudden reversal of roles; perhaps he regretted not holding his post just a few months longer. But in either case, given the new directions of his former project, he must have known that his federal adversaries had lost their hold over the Louisiana project precisely when they no longer needed it. Perhaps

neither revenge nor remorse occupied Stanton's thoughts; perhaps he mused instead on the death of Ellsworth Woodward, the old defender of the *genus loci*, who passed from the scene as the federal art idea caught hold in New Orleans.⁵⁹

Woodward had been no friend of the Federal Art Project. Though he accepted Stanton's invitation to serve on the statewide board of advisors, in thought and action Woodward opposed at every turn the egalitarian ideals of the project, its experiments in the mass production of art, and the insistence of its directors that relief considerations took precedence over the quality of the artwork produced. Like Gideon Stanton, Woodward applauded the efforts of the Delgado Museum Project and wrote in support of its extension. Like Stanton, too, he cheered the Index of American Design. "I realized from the first announcement the practical value of such a compilation of historic examples of design," he commented to Holger Cahill, "but now that you have a glimpse to show of how impressive the work is and will be in completion, one is doubly impressed." Beyond these, the most localized and conservative of the FAP activities, Woodward remained either aloof or openly hostile. He passed no judgement on the skills and production of Stanton's easel unit or the Community Art Center idea, although his devotion to artistic craftsmanship as PWAP director and his lifelong commitment to local art institutions suggests his opposition. He did, however, take sides in the debate over establishing permanent federal support for the arts. Permanency had been Edward Bruce's intention all along, a cause advanced as early as 1933 and not surrendered until his

⁵⁹ McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp.149-72; Karl, The Uneasy State, pp.131-204; Times-Picayune, March 1, 1939.

death ten years later. His efforts, ultimately in vain, reached high water mark in the Spring of 1938, when Congress debated and denied the legislative expression of Bruce's ambition, the Coffee-Pepper Bill. Woodward opposed it down the line, echoing conservative criticisms that permanent federal supervision would sponsor the creation of bad art through patronage of a select group of favored stylists, and sap the initiative of the nation's artists through a dole system rewarding indolence. As President of the Delgado Museum writing on behalf of the Southern States Art League, Woodward made his views public in a letter opposing the bill, a ringing defense of local institutions and local ideals. It was among the patriarch's last public pronouncements. He turned seventy-seven in 1938, and lived for another seven months. Toward the end of February, 1939, he contracted a cold he never shook. Pneumonia set in. Six days later he was dead.⁶⁰

Three weeks after Gideon Stanton resigned, Robert Andrews picked his successor, a bright and witty art teacher at Newcomb College named Caroline Wogan Durieux. One month short of her forty-third birthday, Durieux was a small slender woman with dark hair drawn straight back and wound into a tight bun. Andrews liked her from the start. She is "splendidly equipped to serve the Project as State Director," he reported, a skilled craftsman and experienced teacher, who had travelled widely, developed a cosmopolitan character, and had all the right ideas, meaning she shared an interest in the federal art initiative, especially

⁶⁰ Woodward Papers, Box 4, (TU); Woodward to Cahill, July 19, 1938, RG 69, "General Subjects" Series, Art Program, 1935-February 1942, Box 0449, (NA); Woodward to Cecil Jones, May 1, 1936; Woodward to Olin Dows, August 17, 1935; Woodward to Dows, August 26, 1935, RG 121, Central Office Correspondence 1935-1939, Box 12, (NA); Times-Picayune, March 1, 1939.

the Community Art Center. Her work possessed "vitality and humor." She showed promise as an administrator, and best of all, perhaps, she was no Gideon Stanton. "Her personality is cooperative and she is well-liked by many different groups in the city and state," wrote Andrews. "Most important, I feel she has the imagination and initiative to carry through a strong program and that she can secure support from the general public." Durieux was also a native Orleanian. She had been born into a Creole family and grew up, as she later recalled, in "the old Wogan house on Prieur Street where multiple cousins and aunts and various 'kinners'...would gather. And the chatter of French would only be silenced when grown-ups and children collected in an Aunt's room who led them in prayers as she knelt in her long-flanneled nightgown with her hair braided in long 'pigtails' for bedtime."⁶¹

Such formative experiences shaped her career. She always credited her Creole upbringing for instilling within her a sense of satire, an ability to see through artifice and pretense. Even the sturdiest facades crumbled before her pen and brush. Her art mocked the self-important, deflated the smug and arrogant. It levelled, in the political and social sense, although Durieux never invoked the stridency of the Social Realists. Durieux was only four when she resolved to become an artist. Her training commenced formally in Ellsworth Woodward's classroom at Newcomb where she was graduated in 1917. She won the New Orleans Art Association scholarship that year and used it to continue her studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In Philadelphia, under the tutelage of Henry McArthur, Durieux received her

⁶¹ Andrews to Parker, December 22, 1938; Spofford to Kerr, February 2, 1939; Parker to Durieux, February 7, 1939, Selected Documents, (LSA-BR), Reel 2; "Caroline Durieux," Artists' Files, (THNOC).

first exposure to the modern art movement. In 1920 she married Pierre Durieux, a Creole export merchant, and moved with him to Atlanta where her son, Peter, was born. Over the next fifteen years Pierre's business interests drew the family to a variety of Caribbean posts. There were stops in Cuba and South America, and another lasting seven years in Mexico, where Caroline met Diego Rivera. Her art reached maturity in Mexico. Still, at Newcomb the Ash Can artists and the spirit of progressive reform had stirred her social consciousness, and in Mexico, her outlook established, she defined her form and refined her style. She became a lithographer, softening the points of her satirical barbs, and establishing her own vision. Critical acclaim followed. Rivera painted her portrait and wrote lavish tributes of her work. Others echoed the master. "Her work is her own, original, personal, without outside influence," wrote the critic Carl Zigrosser, "She belongs to the groups of social commentators, satiric, witty, keen, and amusing in her observation of the foibles of humanity. She creates types and endows them with the truth of life and the enduring memorability of art." This quality of her work and outlook also attracted the attention of the writer Carleton Beales. "So capable is the technique, the color and composition of the work...so satisfying and unobtrusive her aesthetic," he wrote, "that the observer is drawn at once to the subject matter: a whimsical yet realistic portrayal of very definitive types." Durieux brought all of this with her when Pierre fell ill in Mexico, and the family returned to New Orleans in 1936. They took a flat in the Quarter on Chartres, where Carrie went looking for work with her characteristic directness. "I need a job," she wrote her friend, Lyle Saxon, "Pierre is broke and I must help. At the end of the month I will be home and

fall on you like a ton of bricks." It worked. Saxon found Durieux a spot in the office of his Louisiana Writers' Project, making illustrations for the New Orleans Guide, then nearing completion. From there she had taken a position on the Newcomb faculty where Robert Andrews found her just before Christmas, 1938.⁶²

Durieux started on the first of February and spent her spring unfolding an ambitious program to spread the federal art idea across Louisiana. She arranged for exhibitions of Project work at the Newcomb art school, in the gallery of the Louisiana State Art Commission at the Old State Capitol in Baton Rouge, in small towns in between such as Reserve and Edgard and Covington, even in the Jim Crow branch of the New Orleans Public Library on Dryades Street. When she established art classes for children and adults in Baton Rouge more than seventy people applied the first day. Nor was she through. Additional classes were organized in Boothville, a tiny town near the mouth of the Gulf, and at the People's Community Center, a black church in New Orleans. Sculptors went to work, designing decorations for the Audubon Zoo and more practical objects such as benches, drinking fountains, and wading pools for the Magnolia Street Housing Project. Durieux submitted proposals to reestablish a ceramics unit on the Newcomb campus, and to give her project a genuine statewide character by using project vacancies to hire needy artists from across Louisiana and not just, as had been the

⁶² Richard Cox, Caroline Durieux: Lithographs of the Thirties and Forties, (Baton Rouge, 1977), pp.2-9; "Durieux," Artists' Files, THNOC; Arts and Crafts Club Notebooks, Department of Curatorials, Historic New Orleans Collection, (New Orleans, Louisiana), [hereinafter cited as "Notebooks," THNOC]. For estimations of Durieux's work including comments from Beales, Zigrosser, and Rivera, see Caroline Durieux Papers, Archives of American Art, (Washington, D.C.), Reel 1, [hereinafter cited as Durieux Papers, AA].

practice, in New Orleans. She lobbied the Mayor for his support of the project and came away with a monthly commitment of fifteen hundred dollars. In the meantime, the requests of potential sponsors piled the Director's desk. The city of Shreveport solicited art classes similar to those established in Baton Rouge. Dean Hard at Dillard still hoped for an FAP allocation gallery. Among others, representatives of the Canal Street Branch of the New Orleans Public Library, the Lafayette City Hall, and the Iberia Parish Courthouse all requested murals of various sizes and themes.⁶³

Each exhibition, each class, each parish or state art organization brought into the network represented one more coup scored by the new Director. Her national supervisors delighted in the efforts and the enthusiasm, especially Robert Andrews, who visited the Louisiana project in May, 1939. "One result of [the trip]," he later recalled, "was the conclusion that we [had] a State Director who [could] carry through the program... [with] the support of both the progressive and reactionary groups in the City...." But Andrews was hopeful for other reasons. While in Louisiana he had taken the opportunity to tighten the organization's structure and give its administrators a crash course in public relations. In addition, Andrews met with several of the local powers in New Orleans and in Baton Rouge, wooing their support. He also hired an administrative assistant to Durieux, creating a situation similar to the one on the local Writers' Project, enabling the State Director to spread the art idea across the state while someone else did

⁶³ Durieux to Andrews, February 5, 1939; Andrews to Durieux, February 8, 1939; Durieux to Parker, March 17, 1939; "Report of the Federal Art Project of Louisiana as of May 1, 1939," RG69, State Correspondence: Louisiana, Box 49, (NA).

the paperwork. He was Arthur MacArthur, an aspiring novelist, whom Andrews hoped to make the Project publicist. Since its inception, Andrews instructed MacArthur, the local project had suffered from a bad press. "In Louisiana," he asserted, "the public has not learned to respect the Project as a technical and cultural agency. About six months ago, I recall very well the prevailing attitude which was that any paintings allocated were a 'taking-off-our-hands' of material for which no one had any use." This, wrote Andrews, inverted the situation. Care must be taken, he continued, to present the Project as a contributing member of the community deserving respect and support.⁶⁴

The visit and the instructions also anticipated the culmination of hopes long deferred. While in New Orleans, Andrews and Durieux thrashed out the idea of establishing a Community Art Center in the City, and within weeks the new State Director submitted a formal proposal for the projected Orleans Parish Art Center Association, a non-profit public corporation, whose FAP assistance depended on the adherence of the center to federal guidelines. The center would maintain a continuously changing exhibition gallery, featuring two shows running concurrently. One series would be provided by the national office, representing nationwide art. The other series, chosen by the Art Center Director, would represent local art interests. Both could include industrial, commercial, and home arts, as well as the traditional fine arts, painting and sculpture. The Community Art Center would also furnish gallery talks and other educational opportunities for the general

⁶⁴ Andrews to Spofford, May 26, 1939; Andrews to Duncan Ferguson, May 26, 1939; Andrews to Brook Duncan, May 26, 1939; Andrews to Fritz Joachim, May 26, 1939; Andrews to Durieux, May 29, 1939; Andres to MacArthur, June 12, 1939, Selected Documents, (LSA-BR), Reel 2.

public, including studio instruction in as many fields of art as possible. Finally, the Center would house the production units of the local Project, whose efforts the Center would display and promote among the public patrons of the community.⁶⁵

Art on the federal plan had finally arrived in New Orleans, or so it seemed. Then the roof fell in. The Orleans Parish Art Center Association never advanced beyond the drawing board. Instead, two decisions, one national and one local, combined once again to frustrate all efforts to establish the federal art idea in Louisiana. The first, made by Congress, ended the federal organization of the arts projects, limiting them to the states. The second, a technical ruling by Alma Hammond, in effect proscribed the local unit to the limits of Orleans parish. The Congressional stipulations were harsh. Federal One was broken up, the Federal Theater Project demolished outright, and the other arts projects left to scrounge for state and local sponsorship in order to continue operations. Although the Washington office continued to function, the Congressional decision effectively severed it from the local projects it formerly administered. Cahill's office became part of the newly organized Federal Works Agency (FWA), run by administrators unfamiliar with the arts, and significantly, the new direction of the programs stressed production as their raison d'etre. Worse, from an organizational perspective, an "eighteen-month ruling," written into the Emergency Relief Act, prohibited any WPA worker from receiving more than eighteen consecutive monthly relief checks. The rider triggered massive layoffs among the veterans of all the arts projects, precisely those

⁶⁵ Durieux to Andrews, June 16, 1939; Andrews to Durieux, June 21, 1939, *Ibid.*; Durieux to Andrews, June 14, 1939, RG 69, State Correspondence: Louisiana, Box 49, (NA).

least expendable in the transition from federal to local sponsorship. Employment quotas dropped in some areas. The number of Community Art Centers plummeted everywhere. And new channels of communications, even more arcane and less flexible than their predecessors, reflected the national shakeup. At the state and local level, too, people lacking technical expertise in the arts made vital decisions affecting the operations of the art projects.⁶⁶

In New Orleans, the Project reeled under a combination of new burdens shared by all of the projects as well as its own unique series of crises. While Congress demolished the federal structure of the FAP, Alma Hammond, Regional Supervisor of the Women's and Professional Projects, now the State Service Projects, forbade the Louisiana project, sponsored by the City of New Orleans, to operate beyond the city limits. In effect, said Hammond, no statewide program existed since, technically, the New Orleans based project had no state sponsor. The effect dashed most of Durieux's hopes. Until sponsorship could be found, months later, the Baton Rouge art classes ceased along with every other plan to expand art activities throughout Louisiana. Even after the Louisiana Art Commission assumed the responsibility of state sponsorship, circumstances frustrated the long-awaited expansion. Just as the Art Commission arrived on the scene, Robert Andrews, who had been in ill health for several months, left it, taking with him a solid reputation and ending the fine working relationship he and Carrie Durieux had established. Worse news followed quickly. It came in a ruling handed down from the FWA hierarchy, effectively ending any

⁶⁶ MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.228-40; McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, 249-72; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, pp.219-40.

further attempt to create a statewide art program in Louisiana. Since assuming the State Directorship Carrie Durieux and Robert Andrews had labored toward this end and had begun to make real strides before the organizational reconstruction of 1939. Durieux persevered in Andrews' absence, huddling with the state WPA directors to establish an interlocking system of state and local sponsorship capable of sustaining a grass roots art movement throughout the state. The plan called for the Louisiana Art Commission to act as the state sponsor and coordinator of local efforts to establish whatever art activities each community desired. Ultimately, the Director hoped, six Community Art Centers could be assembled into a statewide art chain. The New Orleans project, administrative and technical headquarters of the network, would provide the manpower, sending artists as needed to points in the hinterland for the same wages their colleagues made in the City. Therein lay the rub. The WPA wage scale differed according to region and community, and national Director of the Community Services Projects, C.E. Triggs, refused to bend the rules.⁶⁷

The ruling dashed any hope of a statewide program. Through some artifice the Baton Rouge art classes resumed in September, 1940, but that was the extent of it. No Community Art Centers were established in Louisiana. Neither Lafayette nor Iberia Parish got their federal muralists, and a ceramics unit, though much discussed, never returned to

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the nature and purpose of sponsorship, see MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, pp.267-83; Parker to Cahill, February 16, 1939, RG 69, Central Files, Box 0440, (NA); Alma Hammond to Col. Lawrence Westbrook, February 8, 1940, RG 69, State Series, Box 1430, (NA); Andrews to Spofford, July 25, 1939; Andrews to Durieux, August 3, 1939; Spofford to Kerr, August 4, 1939; Durieux to Andrews, August 8, 1939; Parker to Durieux, August 25, 1939, Selected Documents, (LSA-BR), Reel 2.

the Newcomb Art School. Dean Hard never got his allocation gallery, though Myron Lechay and two of his confederates continued to offer lessons at Dillard. Instead, the federal structure of the FAP destroyed, the Louisiana project confined to New Orleans, a city hostile from the start to any white collar WPA project and especially this one, the former national supervisors and the present State Director contented themselves in the Fall of 1940 with a victory more symbolic than real. In September, they dedicated an exhibition center in a building on Toulouse Street in the Quarter donated by a wealthy local art patron. The federal incubus had not only been tamed but quarantined.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ States-Item, (Baton Rouge), August 14, 1940; Durieux to Andrews, June 12, 1939; Andrews to Durieux, June 15, 1939; Arthur MacArthur to Andrews, June 12, 1939; Hammond to Cahill, October 24, 1939, Selected Documents, LSA-BR, Reel 2; Item-Tribune, October 29, 1939; RG 69, WPA Division of Information Clippings File, (NA).

6. "American Art for EVERY American Home"

The demise of Federal One and the failure of statewide expansion coincided with the formation of "A New Southern Group," an ad hoc and short-lived association of Louisiana artists who briefly bore the federal art torch. With one rule-proving exception, a seventy-year old physician and self-taught amateur, they were a remarkably homogenous collection, sixteen painters, sculptors, and printmakers with a common artistic background and outlook. As young, university-trained professional artists, they were modernists committed to the aesthetic principles of Regionalism and the social values of the new art. Of the five living at the turn of the century, one was thirty and four were toddlers. The rest shared an average age of thirty-one. Two were Newcomb alums trained under Woodward's eye, who had pursued additional studies, respectively, in Philadelphia and Paris. Five had attended the Art Institute in Chicago. Another had studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, and two more in New York at the Arts Students' League. Most were also university affiliated. Three taught at Newcomb, two ran one-man departments at small private colleges in Louisiana, and two others, including its Director, Paul Ninas, ran classes in New Orleans at the Arts & Crafts Club. Four more belonged to the Art Department at LSU, sponsoring agent of the Group's second and final travelling exhibition. Finally, a collective resume covered all of the federal art bases. Three were FAP artists, including Caroline Durieux and her eventual successor as State Director, the former PWAP sculptor, Angela Gregory. Six others had earned Treasury Section commissions, among them Xavier Gonzales, the prolific muralist and veteran of the diminutive

Treasury Relief Art Project.⁶⁹

The New Southern Group towed the federal line, sharing the Regionalist principles of American Scene painting and the egalitarian social ideals of the government programs. Some, it seemed, had little choice. Among these sixteen artists, one had studied with John Sloan and another with George Luks. Two, including John McCrady, were pupils of the master himself, Thomas Hart Benton. "The aim of the society," the Group announced at its inception, "is to exhibit our work and by thus acquainting the people of our region with what we are doing, to become recognized as an integral part of the cultural structure of the New South." They hoped, in short, to become the artistic voice of the region, communicating southern values through a distinctly southern visual language. "Louisiana's cultural and natural advantages," proclaimed Conrad Albrizio, a transplanted New Yorker and Group member, "should enable the state to play a leading role in the evolution of a distinct and interpretive southern art." Yet neither Albrizio nor his colleagues were advocating the art of the *genius loci*. Their styles and social ideals marked them as modernists. The Group rejected the ethereal themes and classical allusions of the genteel school. They painted the common and ordinary stuff of American life in the tradition of the American Scene genre, sometimes exploring irrational themes abhorrent to the tastes of their genteel predecessors. They painted with an emotionalism frequently expressed through studies of black

⁶⁹ During its brief existence the New Southern Group included Conrad Albrizio, Douglas Brown, Caroline Durieux, Duncan Ferguson, Boyer Gonzales, Xavier Gonzales, Angela Gregory, John McCrady, Lois Mehier, Paul Ninas, Stuart Purser, Dr. Marion Souchon, Rudolph Staeffel, Julius Struppeck, Ralph Wickiser, and Julius Woeltz. For biographical information on each see, Artists' Files, (THNOC).

culture.⁷⁰

Black life fascinated these artists for a variety of reasons. So called "nigger tales," traditional sub-genre of southern art and fiction, was during the thirties a minor growth industry in Louisiana cashed in on by numerous artists and writers. Yet the painters and sculptors of the New Southern Group transcended the stereotypical treatments of irresponsible darkies and faithful step'n'fetchits reproduced ad nauseum for popular consumption. Instead, among members of the Group, blacks became symbols of the modernist revolt against the manners and morals of the genteel tradition. Through black portraiture and especially through studies of black religion, these artists explored the fundamentally irrational dimensions of human emotion. "Art is not the copying of nature," asserted Angela Gregory, president of the Group in 1939, using tones that would have mortified her former teacher, Ellsworth Woodward, "it is, rather, the artists' job to translate what he sees and feels. Consciously or unconsciously he translates the life about him and becomes truly the greatest historian of his environment and civilization." Gregory's commitment to an emotional interpretation of her environment made her sensitive to the role of southern blacks. "I appreciate more each day the rich, artistic back-ground of the South, and the important part the Negro has had in its history," she reflected in 1938, "I spent a good portion of my summer...sketching negro characters." She was not alone. At one time or another, McCrady,

⁷⁰ Times-Picayune, April 2, 1939; Item-Tribune, April 9, 1939; States-Item, February 19, 1939, March 2, 1939, April 9, 1939, November 9, 1939; "Conrad Albrizio," Artists' Files, (THNOC); Kathleen Orillion, Conrad Albrizio, 1894-1973, (Baton Rouge, 1986); Conrad Albrizio, "Plastic Arts and the Community," Louisiana State University Bulletin, xxiii, no. 18 (October 1936), p.41.

Durieux, Albrizio, and most of her colleagues in the Group made intensive studies of black life and culture.⁷¹

They did so for additional reasons as well. If studies of southern blacks offered a means of confronting the values of the genteel order, they also reflected a commitment to the principles of the new art. The painters and sculptors in this group were among the first generations born, reared, and come to maturity in industrial America, and their art tastes and social values reflected this condition. As children of the industrial order Gregory and her colleagues developed a certain cost/benefit dimension to their aesthetic speculations. They yearned for a utilitarian art, something of use and application whose value justified energies expended in its creation. The artists conceived of art as a service rendered on behalf of the community and the nation, a positive force enriching the lives of all Americans. The art of the New Southern Group served a purpose, the members asserted, and because it served a purpose it was good. It ministered to the needs of an industrial society conceived of in industrial terms. Members of the Group, together with hundreds of their colleagues in the thirties, a group not limited to the plastic arts, conceived of American society as a machine composed of many different yet interdependent groups or parts, all of them of approximate value since the absence of one necessarily disturbed the operation of the rest. Such a relativist conception levelled society by diminishing the room between the classes and the races. In the South black people, the stage props of the white

⁷¹ "Artist in Stone," The New Orleanian, 4(March 1934), pp.14-6; "Angela Gregory," Arts and Antiques, 1(November 1938), pp.3-6; Orillion, Conrad Albrizio, p.2; Virginia Museum, Paintings in the South, (Richmond, 1983), p.120; "Angela Gregory," "Conrad Albrizio," "John McCrady," "Caroline Durieux," Artists' Files, (THNOC).

social world in popular art, letters, and films, now became a valuable tool of social analysis. Since they were a part of Angela Gregory's social world, and since her self-proclaimed role as artist in society required a critical interpretation of her environment, black people could no longer be trivialized as apes, buffoons, and barbarians. Instead, they were part of the puzzle, a cog in the machine, and the study of black life now became a necessary and useful means of achieving social self-awareness.

There were additional dimensions to the industrial perspective. The utilitarian conception of art deepened the egalitarian spirit of its champions. Like so many of their colleagues throughout the country, the members of the Group considered themselves participants in a broad democratic movement, heirs to their Revolutionary Fathers, who had battered down walls of aristocratic pretension to establish a nation on the principle of social equality. Now it was the artists' turn to batter, as Julius Struppeck, a young Louisiana sculptor, asserted after touring the East Coast in the Fall of 1940. "I visited practically all the museums in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston," he reflected, "but I found more inspiration in Times Square and Rockefeller Center. Museums are so dead and stuffy...." Bringing art to the masses by breaching the walls of dead and stuffy museums constituted a revolutionary act. In the eyes of its supporters the new art preserved and extended the democratic tradition, stirring patriotic emotions among everyone involved directly or indirectly with the government program. Edward Bruce, to whom Struppeck addressed his remarks, spoke for them all in one of the many Bulletins drafted by the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture. "Speaking as a painter, I cannot help repeating

that as the achievements of the artists working... become more widely known, the painters and sculptors will feel more and more that what we need is the Crusader spirit," wrote Bruce. "We shall become aware increasingly that as artists we are working not only as individuals, but as indispensable parts of a great nation-wide cooperative plan.... We artists shall realize that, while one group is creating works of art for one city or town, other groups equally intent, are working for other parts of the country," and therein lay the crux of the issue.⁷²

The New Southern Group was precisely one of those artistic units Edward Bruce had in mind, and as such it sowed the seeds of its own destruction. Having debuted with high hopes in the exhibition of season of 1939, the Group remained active for two years, then vanished with little trace of its ever having existed. The New Southern Group had impressed its critics, and enjoyed the applause of a small, if dedicated, following. Carrie Durieux credited the group, together with the FAP, for establishing an artistic renaissance in Louisiana, hyperbole echoed by her friend, Weeks Hall. Robert Andrews also expressed his support for the Group, recognizing a valuable and much needed local ally. Indeed, the two shared much in common. The Group yearned to achieve a modern, critical interpretation of society articulated in a distinctly regional visual language understood by all. This was impossible. Having adopted the values of the new art, industrial in tone and intended for mass audiences, the Group helped to diminish its own regional existence. They worked now, not as a distinctly southern group but merely as a unit in the "broad nation-wide

⁷² Julius Struppeck to Edward Rowan, September 22, 1940, RG 121, Correspondence With Artists, 1939-42, Box 3, (NA); RG 121, Bulletins of the Section of Painting and Sculpture, Box 1, (NA).

movement" which happened to operate in the south, but employed the same forms, the same techniques, and espoused the same ideals as affiliated units across the country. It was a fate similar to the FAP effort in Louisiana during its final months of operation.⁷³

With war raging in Europe and across the Pacific, the FAP focused its attention on national defense. Art now became the shield of the Republic as national advisors to the program organized a series of cultural exchanges, among them several between the United States and the Latin American countries. Exhibitions of "democratic art" toured South America in an effort to dissuade sympathy for the international aggressors. Caroline Durieux, whose extensive knowledge of the area and fluency in the language made her a prime candidate for the job, agreed to conduct a tour through the continent, surveying contemporary artists on behalf of the New York Museum of Modern Art. She left New Orleans in June, 1941, giving way to the last of the Louisiana State Directors, Angela Gregory. Gregory was thirty-eight when she took her post, a diminutive woman, barely five feet tall, and an impressive sculptor. She was the daughter of a distinguished Professor of engineering at Tulane, and as a young girl she frequently accompanied her mother, a Newcomb alumna and pupil of Ellsworth Woodward, on sketching trips to Audubon Park. Her mother's influence found its mark. Angela, too, attended Newcomb under the tutelage of Woodward, studied sculpture abroad, and made extensive tours throughout Europe. She exhibited her

⁷³ Robert Andrews to Duncan Ferguson, May 26, 1939; Ferguson to Andrews, August 29, 1939; Weeks Hall to Holger Cahill, July 18, 1940, Selected Documents, (LSA-BR), Reel 3; Duncan Ferguson to Ed Rowan, November 8, 1940, RG 121, "National Art Week, 1940-1," Box 8, (NA).

work widely during the twenties, and was among the first artists Woodward hired when he opened his PWAP office in December, 1933. Gregory remained a close supporter of the government art movement for the remainder of its duration, especially after Durieux came to the directorship of the FAP. The two were close friends and professional colleagues. Gregory became a trusted lieutenant and later an heir apparent, the logical choice to succeed Durieux in the Summer of 1941. Her tenure marked the emergence of mass art in Louisiana. In its final phase of operations, the new Director oversaw the project's conversion to defense work and presided over local efforts organized in conjunction with two massive national art promotions, the "Art Weeks" of 1940 and 1941.⁷⁴

Two weeks after Gregory's appointment, when the Times-Picayune published a feature story on the activities of the New Orleans art unit, its reporter, Arthur Haliburton, found many changes from the efforts first established under Gideon Stanton's supervision. By then the Delgado Museum Project was a distant memory. The New Orleans artists no longer cleaned, catalogued, or organized exhibitions of local works for the local institution. The easel unit had also ceased operations, having completed the last of its several hundred views of the American Scene. Instead local and regional perspectives had given way to a national defense effort communicating patriotic ideals and values to a mass audience. "At 716 Dauphine Street," the project's work studio, reported Haliburton, "artists are preparing posters to promote Army and Navy recruiting, to stir interest in air raid precautions, and other civilian defense activities, to combat disease, and to accomplish other

⁷⁴ Item, June 19, 1941; "Angela Gregory," Artists' Files, (THNOC).

objectives. They design and execute these posters and reproduce them in quantity by the silk screen process." Less than one year later, in the estimation of Alma Hammond, the project had become "truly a war production center." The conversion had been rapid. Fewer than twelve months after commencing its defense-related activities, the New Orleans project had created ten thousand posters, twenty times the artistic output of the previous six years. It increased this figure ten-fold in its final year of existence, producing a total of more than one hundred thousand silk screen posters, advocating conformity to a variety of acceptable forms of behavior--everything from good nutrition, proper dental hygiene, and precautions against venereal disease to the purchase of war bonds, the use of black-out curtains, and maintaining silence concerning one's work in defense plants. New Orleans artists, in messages easily understood and quickly repeated, now spoke to the masses.⁷⁵

The creation of the poster unit coincided with two efforts intended to promote art on an unprecedented scale. Dubbed "Art Week" by its originators, the promotion, first organized in 1940, hoped to place as many pieces of art in as many American homes as possible. "Our country today is turning towards the arts as at no time in the history of the Republic," proclaimed the movement's publicists, "There are strong currents toward an art of native character and native meaning, which shall express with clarity and power the interests, the ideals, and the experience of the American people." Never before, continued the appeal, had so much art reached so many people. "Popular magazines,

⁷⁵ Times-Picayune, July 27, 1941; Alma Hammond to Florence Kerr, March 4, 1942, RG 69, State Series, Box 1426, (NA).

reaching millions of persons every week[,] feature reproductions of works of art in color. In 1939, 250 books devoted to the arts were published and many of these made their way into the best seller class." Then there was the work of the government art projects, reaching more than two million people alone in exhibitions opened at the New York World's Fair. FAP art centers boasted an aggregate monthly attendance of more than three hundred thousand citizens, and there could be no counting the numbers who came into daily contact with federally created art in post offices, court houses, or playgrounds. In all forms, in all media, in all places, art now hung in the public view. Yet, "very few of our artists, craftsmen, and designers are able to support themselves by the sale of their work, and very few dealers in art are able to show a profit at the end of the year."⁷⁶

Here was a dramatic reversal. Federal art administrators had often predicted that the productivity of their units would stimulate a nationwide interest in art capable of sustaining artists above the subsistence level. Art Week implicitly acknowledged their failure. "A broad foundation for a potential public art market has been laid during the past few years," lamented the promotion's organizers, "but so far no coordinated effort has been made on a national scale to put into motion the forces that will bring the work of our artists and craftsmen directly to the American home, the church, the business office, [and] the club, thus opening up [the] broad potentialities of the American art market." The problem of American art, then, was no longer the estrangement of the artist from society, or the cultural isolation of

⁷⁶ "Objectives and Plans For Art Week," RG 69, General Subject Series, 1935-44, Box 0454, (NA).

regions such as the South and West, or the concentration of artists in the urban centers of the Northeast. Rather, like the rest of industrial America, the problem of American art in the Depression thirties was underconsumption, and the organizers of Art Week posed a solution. By coordinating a nationwide sales promotion, uniting the productive skills of the American artist with the business savvy of the national corporate community, the organizers hoped to accomplish in one week what federal art administrators had failed to do in five years.⁷⁷

The plan was simple. A National Art Week Committee supervised subordinate state and local committees responsible for collecting works from any artist using any media, arranging the pieces into so-called "Sales-Exhibitions," promoting the event in the local media, and fulfilling the most critical ambition of the entire effort. "The primary purpose of ART WEEK is to stimulate the sale of American Arts and American Crafts," asserted the organizers. "The real success of each Sales-Exhibition will be measured by its actual sales results. The development of an aggressive, comprehensive sales program for every Sales-Exhibition is a task of major importance...." To emphasize the point, the National Art Week Committee drafted a special series of "Service Help Bulletins" offering all manner of marketing tips. Local committees were encouraged to secure the cooperation of the business community, "people experienced in sales, merchandising and sales promotion work[,] ... managers of large retail establishment[s] or manufacturing concerns, real estate, insurance or automobile agency managers, [or] promotion managers of hotels and newspapers...." The Bulletins encouraged aggressive tactics with all the trimmings. "Sales-

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Exhibitions should be set up in a manner which will clearly portray that their primary purpose is to promote the sale of art and craft items," the instructions advised. "Sales slogans, price tickets, [and] appealing merchandising displays are silent sales devices that should be utilized generously."⁷⁸

Preparations continued through the Fall of 1940 and climaxed at the end of November with the first "National Art Week." They had been extensive. When it commenced on November 25, 1940, Art Week was precisely what its organizers had envisioned, the most massive art promotion in American history. Nearly six thousand organizations participated in the preparation of fourteen hundred "sales-exhibitions" whose total of nearly one hundred and twenty five thousand pieces represented the work of twenty-eight thousand artists. State and local committees established in each of the forty-eight states, in the District of Columbia, and the Territory of Hawaii, advanced the cause in any way possible. Sound trucks patrolled urban areas, proclaiming the festivities. Radio stations broadcast the times and location sites of exhibition centers. Art projects working overtime papered the countryside with promotional posters. Other efforts were more innovative. In some states touring exhibitions loaded onto trucks roved across rural areas isolated from the center of activities. A dairy company in Nebraska distributed Art Week notices with its daily milk deliveries. In Connecticut Art Week flyers accompanied the monthly billing statements of local department stores.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ "Service Help Bulletins, 5, 7, 8, 9," RG 69, General Subjects Series 1935-44, Box 0454, (NA).

⁷⁹ "Service Help Bulletin, 6A," *ibid.*

Efforts invested yielded large returns. In a seven day span, reported Francis Henry Taylor, Director of the Museum of Modern Art and National Chairman of National Art Week, Americans bought more than fifteen thousand original works of art, a gross profit exceeding one hundred thousand dollars. The figure delighted the Art Week organizers and encouraged plans for a second annual promotion, scheduled like its predecessor for the beginning of the Christmas rush. Taylor gave way as chairman to Thomas J. Watson, President of IBM, and this was no coincidence. "Although Mr. Watson has long been known as an art patron and friend of the artist," explained the release announcing his appointment, "it is rather as a business man that he was chosen by the President to give constructive leadership to this nation-wide program." Under Watson's supervision, not surprisingly, Art Week assumed a more tightly-organized, corporate character. He began by pledging nearly fifty thousand dollars of personal income for the purchase of works from every state, then marshalled the resources of the corporation he managed. Each office in the IBM system donated time, organizational skills, and promotional space, encouraging other corporate sponsors to follow its lead. Most did, and once again, seven days of selling netted more than one hundred thousand dollars for the nation's artists. True to their word, the promoters of the two Art Weeks had demonstrated the viability of art as a product for mass national consumption.⁸⁰

The National Art Weeks of 1940 and 1941 also provided federal art administrators and the New Orleans art establishment a common cause they

⁸⁰ "Report to Members of National Council For Art Week," "Second Report to Members of National Council For Art Week," *ibid.*; "Federal Works Agency Release," *ibid.*, Box 0455; "Objectives and Plans for Art Week," *ibid.*, Box 0454.

had not found in five years. Angela Gregory supervised the state committee for Louisiana in 1940, and although activities were confined primarily to New Orleans and Baton Rouge, the future State Director saw room for optimism. "We have at least planted a seed," she wrote optimistically to Francis Henry Taylor, "for I am delighted to say that already there has come the splendid request for a permanent organization of the combined interests of business men and artists to meet immediately upon completion of Art Week and actually coordinate for the years to come the principles for which Art Week stands." Her sentiments did not go unfulfilled. State relief officials had originally greeted the promotion with suspicion, but the first Art Week preparations had unified the disparate elements of the New Orleans art scene and organized them into a cohesive movement. Every local art organization, radical and conservative alike, had backed the event, and although sales had been modest they promised brighter things to come.⁸¹

Louisiana's second Art Week was larger, broader, and more tightly organized than its predecessor. Ethel Crumb Brett, a local clubwoman educated at Newcomb and well-connected in the community, headed the state committee. Art Director of Le Petit Theater in the Vieux Carre, Brett was also an energetic promoter and organizer under whose supervision preparations for Art Week, 1941, expanded throughout the state. She organized local committees in each of the major cities in Louisiana and in many small towns, drafted the speakers of service clubs and civic organizations to publicize her plans, arranged for press and radio coverage, and coordinated the efforts of university and college

⁸¹ Alma Hammond to Florence Kerr, August 17, 1940; Kerr to James H. Crutcher, September 11, 1940, *ibid.*, Box 0453; Times-Picayune, November 22, 1940.

art department eager to lend assistance. The effort produced the largest and most extensive series of art exhibitions, classes, and informational programs in Louisiana history. Nearly two dozen events were staged throughout the state, uniting private and public art organizations of every size and sort. Sales-exhibitions dotted the map, in Shreveport, Alexandria, Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Lake Charles, Monroe, Natchitoches, New Iberia, Ruston, even in such tiny towns as Thibodeaux, down near the Gulf, and Houma, where the local Art Week chairman sold three of her own water colors for a total of twenty-one dollars. Preparations were more grandiose, of course, in New Orleans. Mrs. Brett secured the ballroom on the twelfth floor of the Roosevelt Hotel for her central exhibition hall and supervised its conversion into small sections, "much in the manner of a Paris Salon des Tuileries." Local firms donated decorative materials, the NYA loaned a battery of typists, and Angela Gregory's unit fulfilled other clerical duties, printed 2,000 posters advertising the event, helped to hang the central exhibition, and supervised its dismantling after Art Week.⁸²

Art Week of 1941, the largest art promotion in Louisiana history, was also the last event of its kind sponsored by the New Dealers. When hostilities erupted with the Japanese less than two weeks later, the relief apparatus was converted to war work and what remained of the art projects were dismantled. Yet, though lost in the sensation that followed Pearl Harbor, the Art Weeks are still a cogent reflection,

⁸² A thick file documents the activities of Brett and other organizers of the second Art Week in Louisiana, including reports submitted from local committee chairmen, and newspaper clippings reporting various events and preparations. See, RG 69, General Subject Series 1935-44, Box 0455, (NA).

perhaps the logical fulfillment, of the course American art and society followed during the early decades of the twentieth century. They illustrated the growing organization of American life, and the emergence of a more standardized and homogenized industrial society, something paralleled as well by the direction of the FAP since 1935. Begun as a temporary relief unit intended to last no more than six months, Holger Cahill's organization evolved into the largest art factory in American history, disrupting long-standing traditions of political and cultural localism. The industrial character of the Project and the egalitarian idealism of its national directors undermined Regionalism, both as a management strategy and aesthetic style. The two phenomena were not unrelated. The FAP production units, regardless of form, were easily interchanged. Easel units in Maine or Montana painted with the same perspective under similar guidelines as the one in Louisiana. Local color may have been the vogue, but, like Treasury Section artwork, it was a national vogue. Project directors conceived of their patrons according to a similar model. In their struggle to achieve cultural parity throughout the nation, the artistic idealism of Holger Cahill and his colleagues regarded the American people in whatever locale or region as fundamentally equal and, therefore, interchangeable. Assuming this basic equality, the FAP directors concocted a federal art plan, organized around an institutional hub, the Community Art Center, whose standardized three-part function of education, exhibition, and production could be applied to any part of the nation. Some concessions were made to local circumstances, of course, but never to the extent of obliterating the basic federal plan, so that the concessions themselves assumed a standardized character, the obligatory codicil in the national

contract. When local demands such as those lodged by Gideon Stanton contradicted the federal art plan, Project administrators defined them as provincial and dismissed them as an unfortunate and unnecessary brake on the national movement.

The collision between the national movement and pockets of parochial resistance was especially acute in Louisiana. Three years after organizing the art project in New Orleans, national FAP officials were still engaged in a smoldering feud with their State Director, a stubborn localist determined to blunt every federal intrusion into his own artistic backyard. Neither side emerged victorious in a struggle that typified the anxieties of the day. The effort to establish the federal art idea in New Orleans pitted strong personalities against one another, but the confrontation that ensued transcended the men involved. Instead it represented the collision of two worlds, two systems of political and cultural values, at loggerheads throughout the decade. One was rooted in the Genteel past, Euro-centered in cultural aspiration, elitist in political practice, and devoted to locale in both. The other, more modern view, reflected a half-century of American social development. It championed a more cosmopolitan, relativistic view of American society, national in scope, mass in appeal, and industrial in form that must have seemed to thoughtful observers as the cultural counterpart to Huey Long's political appeal. The FAP hoped, as had Huey Long, to establish a national movement with mass appeal built on the traditional tenets of the democratic faith. Both the man and the movement sought to level, one culturally, the other politically. Neither enjoyed complete success; both stirred enormous controversy; and each contributed mightily to a new vision of modern America. Long

dragged his state out of the nineteenth century, often against its will, and established in Louisiana the rudiments of the modern state, solicitous of industry and attentive to the needs of the disadvantaged. Neither his political heirs nor his political enemies refuted the program. Similarly, the FAP reflected the inexorable, if anxious, movement of the American people toward a new day in art and society, one whose politics and culture reflected the mass appeal of industrial values.

The Uneasiest State:
Art, Culture, and Society in New Deal Louisiana, 1933-1943

Volume II

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE ROMANTIC ORLEANIAN: LYLE SAXON AND THE FEDERAL WRITERS PROJECT, 1935-1943

1. "To Chart America and Possess It"

Throughout the Depression decade American writers joined their artistic colleagues in a search for and definition of the American nation. Few failed to enlist in a crusade pursued along many fronts, that ultimately assumed the proportions of an epic quest with its own measure of success and failure. Through poetry and prose, in history and biography and travelogue, writers of all stripes named, classified, and described the American landscape with a passion unmatched since. The host included newspapermen, novelists, essayists, short story writers, even college professors, representing every point on the ideological compass. Their reactions were equally diverse and similarly directed. Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, Josephine Herbst, Nathan Asch, Robert Cantwell, and James Agee, among others, burned with a common desire to discover the essence of the nation and its people, to arrive at some elemental understanding of America. The enormity of the effort, gauged by the size of the corpus and the depth of its emotional intensity, provides some measure of the intellectual ferment stirred by the Great Depression--the literary record of a society in critical transition.¹

¹ Kazin, On Native Grounds, pp.378-406; Nathan Asch, The Road, (New York, 1937); James Rorty, Where Life is Better, (New York, 1936); Robert Cantwell, Land of Plenty, (New York, 1934); Josephine Herbst, Rope of Gold, (New York, 1939); Edmund Wilson, The American Earthquake: A Documentary of the Jazz Age, the Great Depression, and the New Deal, (New York, 1964ed); James Agee, Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous

Contemporary observers and subsequent critics have sought to characterize this vast effort. Most have agreed, then and since, that the literary artists of the thirties rediscovered America, that years of exile, real or imagined, ended after 1929, when writers returned to their stricken homeland and began to search for its roots. Alienation and affirmation are hard things to quantify, and both surfaced in the American cultural efforts of the twenties; what may be asserted with certainty is that the effort of the thirties "to chart America and possess it" invoked familiar forms and traditional models characteristic of the American people. From Parisian cafes or Greenwich Village tenements or other ivory towers, the American writers of the Great Depression fanned out across the landscape in a frenzy of activity. They counted, conversed, interviewed, and observed their way across the nation, chatting with anyone who was willing to take the time and many who were not. Typically, the search began with a local gas station mechanic and ended with a reaffirmation of the American people. Most writers made themselves active participants in something summarized in traditional American terms, emphasizing youth, mobility, and virtue as the guiding faiths of the nation. Many of the writers were young themselves, people whose lives had included a good deal of travel, and whose literary imaginations equated simplicity with worth, honesty, and integrity. Their methodology, too, was typically American. Confronted with something of such magnitude, most writers forsook reflection for reportage. They treated the Depression not as an event but rather as an experience, something to be felt and lived in order to be understood. Together with such like-minded artists as Social Realists and Men, (Boston, 1939).

documentary photographers, the writers adopted literalism as a guiding aesthetic, relying with varying degrees of success on simple narration, descriptions of things as they were, for the emotive impact of their material. This, too, was in keeping with the American written tradition, one that usually responded to crisis with more activism than contemplation.²

Yet there were innovative dimensions to this literature, principally its visual emphasis and collaborative methods. The thirties was a decade of sight and sound, when American writers such as John Dos Passos adopted a camera-like omniscience and a commitment "to the speech of the people." The association between literature and photography in thirties America, a phenomenon rooted in the convergence of modern literary aesthetics and a characteristic response to crisis, cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, the equation of factual reality and visual truth comprised the central aesthetic ideal of the decade, the essence of the documentary impulse. One need think only of Walker Evans' devotion to the literature of James Joyce, or of the influence of Dorothea Lange's photography over John Steinbeck, or of John Dos Passos' kaleidoscopic trilogy, U.S.A.. Thirties literature, to a far greater extent than that of the preceding period, was also frequently a collaborative venture. Writers organized during the thirties, usually into groups with varying degrees of sympathy for communism, which was

² "To chart America and possess it," is Alfred Kazin's oft-quoted phrase. See On Native Grounds, p.380. Richard H. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years, (New York, 1973), pp.195-201; William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, (New York, 1973), pp.141-258, especially p. 241. For a consideration of the traditional response of American writers to crisis see Daniel Aaron, The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War, (London, 1973).

itself viewed as the greatest collaborative venture in existence. Writers also collaborated among themselves and with craftsmen in the other arts, usually photographers, to produce some of the best and worst considerations of thirties America.³

The solidarity reflected a literary commitment to the American people, and often, to the future of American democracy. As a group, the writers of the thirties identified themselves consistently with Walt Whitman. He became something of a patron saint and patriarch, whose very name has come to characterize the "Whitmanesque" efforts of thirties writers to depict America in print. Some of the efforts were equally grand, some even as faithful, and many wrote with a similar conviction that they were writing about something bigger than themselves, something transcendent, recording in the welter of the Depression the distant echoes of democratic chants, "the speech of the people," and defending the old values either through epic biographies such as Sandburg's Lincoln, or in short declarative assertions such as "The People, Yes!." Malcolm Cowley could thus make John Dos Passos the voice of his generation, quoting him in the waning days of Dos Passos' Communist commitment as "an old-fashioned believer in liberty, equality, and fraternity." In more extreme conversions, persistent critics of small town America such as Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis reaffirmed their belief in the people in works such as Hometown U.S.A

³ Susman, Culture As History, pp.160-1; Stott, Documentary Expression, pp.75-91; Agee and Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men; Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, You Have Seen Their Faces, (New York, 1937); Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, An American Exodus, (New York, 1939).

and It Can't Happen Here.⁴

Such affirmations and assurances provide an inverse index to the anxiety of the period. A nervous tone creeps into the rhetoric, giving repeated chants of "the people, yes" the ring of a ritualistic warding off of evil. Part of the anxiety, certainly, resulted from the magnitude of the Depression and the pervasiveness of the suffering it caused. But in a sense, the uneasiness derived from the literary struggle to understand a newly emergent national culture. "Among all but the irretrievably foundered," writes Harvey Swados, "there was an upsurge of national self-awareness--not a patriotic fervor like that triggered off by war or invasion, but rather a reawakening that America was a unified land, that its problems were national problems, that its misery was national, that solutions and resolutions would have to be national." It was a perception, Swados asserts, registered in the very titles the writers chose for their work: My America, Puzzled America, Tragic America, Some American People, America Was Promises, America Now, America: A Reappraisal, An American Exodus, The American Earthquake, The Road: In Search of America, Where Life is Better: An Unsentimental American Journey, Five Cities (America Comes of Age), Behold America!, and USA. "For better or worse," added the critic, Alfred Kazin, "this new nationalism was a pervasive force, a new historic consciousness that gave new meaning to contemporary experience and thought.... Here, in this body of writing, is evidence of how deeply felt was the urge born

⁴ Murray Kempton, Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties, (New York, 1955), p.144; John Dos Passos, U.S.A., (New York, 1939); Carl Sandburg, The People, Yes, (New York, 1936); Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's, (New York, 1934), pp.295-6. For the change in Anderson compare his Puzzled America, (New York, 1935) with Home Town, (New York, 1940); Sinclair Lewis, It Can't Happen Here, (New York, 1935).

of the crisis to recover America as an idea--and perhaps only thus to build a better society in the shell of the old." The American writer, then, participated fully in the redefinition of American society that occurred throughout the 1930s, and among the best forms illustrating the transformation are the travel books assembled by the Federal Writers Project(FWP), known collectively as the American Guide Series.⁵

Few episodes throughout the decade better illuminate the central desires and anxieties of the period, few reflect more cogently its principal themes. The Series represents the most substantial self-inventory in American history, a grassroots survey of American life, leaving few stones unturned and none uncounted. Between 1935 when it began and 1943 when it closed, the Project published nearly 300 guidebooks, folklore collections, and other works, ultimately digested by its first National Director and guiding spirit, Henry Alsberg, into single volume published in 1949. By then FWP publications stretched for more than eighty feet on the library shelf. Like so much of thirties literature, these too were collaborative efforts, the result of a decision by New Deal relief administrators to put pencils in the hands of out of work writers and turn them loose in their own cities, towns, and states. Assisted by National Youth Administration (NYA) workers and other affiliates in the work relief coalition, the federal scribes ransacked county courthouses and public libraries, designed tours, ran to earth the origins of placenames, researched folk tales, collected life histories, and wrote essays on the social, political, and economic

⁵ Harvey Swados, ed., The American Writer and the Great Depression, (Indianapolis, 1966), pp.xv-xvii; Kazin, On Native Grounds, p.384.

behavior of the American people past and present.⁶

Because of their content and their form, the FWP guidebooks are central to any understanding of thirties America. The Guides reflect the preoccupation of other writers with the sort of nationalism that Kazin and Swados found so pervasive. This was a national study. But it was one searching for a balance between village, state, region, and nation that would permit the harmonious existence of each within an overarching democratic community. There were inherent tensions in the desire. As originally designed, the series was to be composed of five regional volumes, a plan quickly scrapped in favor of 48 state guides. Yet each was to conform to a single method of organization in an attempt to create a uniform literary portrait of the American nation. The content of the guides themselves also reflected this tension. With a Whitmanesque tang, the guides celebrated local villages, towns, back roads, and out of the way places, even as they incorporated them into a national saga of unprecedented dimensions. They venerate small-town life and rugged individualism, often expressed inversely through humorous tales of failed speculations and get-rich-quick schemes turned sour, yet such stories are told with an urbane tone. The duality suggests the creeping standardization of American culture, and Americans' discomfort with the idea, a duality mostly clearly discerned

⁶ Major studies of the FWP include Jerre Mangione, The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers Project, 1935-1943, (Boston, 1972); Monty Noam Penkower, The Federal Writers Project: A Study of Government Patronage of the Arts, (Urbana, 1977); and Jerold M. Hirsch, "Portrait of America: The Federal Writers Project in an Intellectual Context," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1984). Henry Alsberg, ed., The American Guide: A Source Book and Complete Travel Guide For the United States, (New York, 1949). Estimates of the extent of the FWP canon come from Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, p.352. For a valuable checklist of these publications compiled by Arthur Schimpf, see Ibid., pp.375-96.

between what was produced and how it was produced. Certainly the guidebooks are filled with the spirit of locale, a microscopic, grassroots survey of the American landscape, physical and intellectual. The Series represents an intimate tour down American roads, highways, and country lanes, and an exhaustive review of American aspirations, desires, and dreams revealed in its folklore heritage. Yet the portrait was produced according to a standardized formula. What gives the quirks and out-of-the-way places, the railroad that went bust and the village crackpot, their distinctive tang is the degree to which they deviate from the norm. But they are there because they were called for in the plan, and called for early on. As such the guidebooks are a recognizable predecessor to the standard image of the American combat unit promulgated by Hollywood during World War II, when American rifle platoons and bomber crews symbolized a freedom-loving, pluralistic society locked in mortal conflict with brainwashed automatons marching in lockstep. The Germans and the Japanese, it appears, embodied what the nation feared most in itself.⁷

The guides thus chart the tremendous impact of industrialism on the American character, providing in their content, spirit, and method of production a succinct metaphor for American society in the early

⁷ For an account of how the guide plan evolved see Penkower, The Federal Writers Project, pp.20-9. For an anthology of FWP literature providing a representative sense of the project's literary tone as expressed in selected life histories see Ann Banks, First Person America, (New York, 1980); Robert Cantwell, "America and the Writers' Project," New Republic, 87(April 21, 1939), pp.323-5. For specific instructions from national supervisors to state projects encouraging the collection and dissemination of the sort of amusing anecdotes focused upon by Cantwell and other observers, see Henry Alsberg to Lyle Saxon, January 9, 1936, Alsberg Correspondence, WPA Collection, Louisiana State Library, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), [hereinafter cited as WPA Collection, LSL-BR].

twentieth century. What began as an innovative artistic experiment evolved ultimately into a far-flung literary production unit distinctly a product of an industrial perspective. The FWP developed an industrial method of operation, the assembly line, and justified its purpose with the standard industrial assertion that the finished product offset the costs of labor and raw materials. Likewise, the image of American society crafted by the Federal writers conformed to this method of production, and here, too, a provocative duality exists. FWP writers, like other artists and intellectuals of the period, conceived of the nation as a community of divergent interests and an amalgam of different cultures. As recently as the previous decade, Americans had conceived of the nation as essentially homogenous and individualistic, but the America of the guidebooks is neither. There American society is perceived as a mosaic of many hues and tiles, none superior to the others, a nation of various races, cultures, and native tongues whose diversity comprises its greatest strength. Diversity, what had once been the deathknell of the republican community and more recently the source of nativist anxieties, became a rallying cry among artists and intellectuals troubled over the continuing homogenization of American life. Yet the image also has mechanistic overtones, making another analogy possible. If artists could conceive of a national mosaic, it was also easy, once the defense effort required it, to depict the nation as a vast stockpile of spare parts collected and assembled into a complex machine called America and sent off to oppose the Axis robots.⁸

⁸ The guides as expressions of American cultural diversity are not only major themes advanced by both Penkower and Hirsch, but the principal focus of contemporary observers who acclaimed them. See for instance, Cantwell, "America and the Writers' Project," pp.323-5; Lewis Gannett, "Reading About America," Publisher's Weekly, 139(May 3, 1941),

The transition was not achieved without a long backward glance, and an attempt to graft past virtues onto present conditions. If the guides represented something new, a milestone reached in the nation's understanding of itself, it was not one passed without commemorating the image of what had gone before. Much in the fashion of Treasury Section murals, FWP guidebooks muted conflicts in the American past in the interest of preserving some consensual link to the present. Similarly, the guides invested the new cosmopolitanism with all the virtues it ascribed to the national past--a commitment to the democratic community, faith in the people, and the ability of the American nation to reconcile the divergent and often conflicting impulses of personal liberty and social conformity. History, as in other artistic expressions of the period, was assigned a precise ideological role in industrialized society.⁹

What connected the two, what permitted the easy transfer of past value into present circumstance, was the traditional American faith in movement. Tocqueville and a host of other writers have observed the frenzied character of American mobility, and the Americans of a century later remained equally committed to the ideal. Motion has always been a vital necessity to the myth of American might and youth, a guiding star of westward empire and a regenerative agent of American democracy. Because there was motion there was progress and vitality, sustaining favorable comparisons between the nation and its European rivals,

pp.1818-9; and Lewis Mumford, "A Letter to the President," The New Republic, 83(December 30, 1936), pp.263-5.

⁹ The transition from myth to ideology is the subject of Warren I. Susman, "History and the Intellectual: The Uses of a Usable Past," in Susman, Culture As History, pp.7-26.

depicted typically as places devoid of all movement, social or geographical, and invariably characterized with such terms as ossified, decayed, and dottering, each suggesting age and infirmity. Motion also promised renewal, a westering movement capable of sustaining democratic vigor and preserving the Enlightenment association between nature and innocence. But all of this had vanished with the passing of the frontier and an uneasiness hovered over the void, one expressed by the ambiguous perception of movement in thirties America. Mobility continued to dazzle the imaginations of such Turnerian environmentalists as Constance Rourke and Edward Bruce. The idea of movement even captivated Alfred Kazin, whose summation of the literary exertions of the period derives its emotional energy from the image of American writers turned loose on the face of the land to chart and possess it. The idea of discovery had lost little of its appeal between 1492 and 1942. Yet such was the pervasiveness of the Great Depression, that it could question this age-old faith, threatening to invert the image of democratic movement. Motion, traditionally associated with expansion and progress, was not the movement of thirties America. Instead, the idea of movement became associated with frustration, failure and dislocation. Westering pioneers were replaced by bums on the rails and the long procession of Okies and Arkies strewn along the length of Route 66.¹⁰

The Guide series offered a solution that would renew movement and

¹⁰ Alexis De Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Richard Heffner, ed., (New York, 1956), pp.49-55. Kazin, On Native Grounds, pp.378-406. Bruce's commitment to environmentalism is discussed in the first two chapters of this work, and Constance Rourke's Turnerian idealism is touched upon in Arthur Wertheim, "Constance Rourke and the Discovery of American Culture in the 1930s," in Luedtke, ed., The Study of American Culture, pp.49-62.

restore its earlier connotations, as well as reflect the transformation of American values in the early twentieth century. If the federal writers conducted an intimate survey of the American landscape, they also presented it to the American reader as something to be travelled across and toured through. In an industrial culture where the major temporal divisions separated work from leisure, America past and present was offered to Americans as a source of recreation, a vacationland, and also as an opportunity for consumption. Tourism, as vital a thing to the fibre of industrial America as long columns of covered wagons were to its agricultural predecessor, was also big business. The relief administrators knew this as well as anyone else, and they acknowledged the favorable influence the guides were bound to have on the American tourist trade. "The American Guide should stimulate the movement to see America first," announced early FWP press releases. "It should develop tourist traffic. Business men financially interested in other cities, [and] automobilists planning vacation trips...will find in the Guide an America which today is almost undiscovered." To this end, by design, the guides commenced with a survey of transportation possibilities, railroads, highways, air terminals, and waterways, and travel accommodations, hotels, motels, boarding houses, and trailer parks. For this reason, too, fully one-third of each volume, usually the largest third, provided a series of suggested motor tours through a state or city or region.¹¹

¹¹ The size of the American tourist industry in the early 1930s is discussed in Penkower, The Federal Writers Project, p. 25. By 1938 American expenditures for travel and tourism exceeded five billion dollars. According to a Harvard Business Review estimate, 60% of this figure represented motor travel, easily the most popular form of American travel. Thomas D. Green to Henry G. Alsberg, May 19, 1939, Lyle Saxon Papers, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Tulane

FWP literature, the guides included, was thus popular in both senses of the word. FWP scribes shared the commitment of other writers and intellectuals to the idea of the people as a source of democratic strength, representing in composition and approach and focus the literary parallel to Holger Cahill's democratic art. But there was another dimension to the work, reflecting the unique circumstances of its creation. If the guides were something like the written equivalent of American Scene painting, then they were also part of a marketing strategy adopted by American publishers anxious to cash in on the idea of American history and Americana as a commercial venture. Here, as in the case of the FAP, the FWP efforts reveals the central tension of the period, a conflict between new and old values, and a desire to reconcile the two. The guides were marketed amidst and helped to sustain a buying frenzy on the part of middle class America who, when confronted with the anxieties of the Depression, turned to the simplicity--and therefore virtue--of an imagined past. Yet in doing so, by seeking comfort in the past, by assigning it an ideological purpose, the Americans by this very act were breaking with the past they depended on for so much so often. Moreover, they were participating in the growing standardization of America life. As the guides appealed to a distinctive consumer market, an urban middle-class capable of travel, they adopted an all-embracing formula to bring America to their doorstep, one that collected the quirks and explored the crannies arrayed along an interlocking system of US highways. There were quirks in Maine and crannies in Maryland and out-of-the-way spots in Montana, and all one needed to see them was a

University, (New Orleans, Louisiana), Box 4, [hereinafter cited as Saxon Papers (TU); "Mimeographed Sheet to: News Editors, From the WPA in Louisiana, October 15, 1935," in *ibid.*, Box 2.

car and a set of guides, for such was the system of tours created by the FWP that the writers of each state project shepherded the prospective tourist from border to border along national highways such as US 1, depositing him securely in the hands of neighboring writers waiting at the state line. Small wonder, then, that as the FAP had its "Art Week," the federal scribes had "American Guide Week," when the books appeared in the windows of the nation's department stores in carefully arranged displays demonstrating the successful transformation of motion from frontier pioneer to middle class consumer.¹²

By incorporating the local into a national portrait, by making America something to be consumed, the guide series suggested the anxieties of a society in transformation. This was doubly true in Louisiana. Here a system of mass politics and a powerful state government responsible for an increasingly broad social agenda had recently replaced the oligarchic rule of the Old Regulars. Here, too, successive attempts to incorporate the state into a nationwide art community had challenged and deposed the artistic world of Ellsworth Woodward. The new art, popular in tone, appeal, and focus, demolished Woodward's devotion to beauty as truth and as pillar of the Union. Local resistance had been fierce, to be sure, and the federal promoters had scored nothing like a total victory. But stand-off, if not entirely satisfactory to the champions of the new art, was not complete repulse,

¹² A good summary of the guide program, detailing its purpose and likening the results to American Scene painting appears in "American Story," WPA Division of Information, "Primary Files," RG 69, Box 84, (NA). In addition to the guide tours, the FWP also facilitated the completion of a series of pamphlets devoted to interstate highway travel. Henry Alsberg to Lyle Saxon, October 28, 1936, WPA Collection, (LSL-BR). Recommendations and instructions governing the execution of "American Guide Week" appear in "Service Bulletin no.1," Central Files, General Subject Series, RG 69, Box 0474, (NA).

and though control of the project remained local, its perspective was national. A similar situation occurred in the literary incorporation of Louisiana into the national portrait of American life created by the FWP. For here would occur one of the more illuminating episodes in project history, a succinct metaphor for thirties America, commenced when FWP officials induced a regionalist writer named Lyle Saxon to head its Louisiana operations.

2. The Width of a Mardi Gras Mask

Early one morning in April 1946 Robert Tallant sat waiting in a room on the second floor of the Baptist Hospital in New Orleans. In the bed nearby, stretched beneath crisp hospital linen, Lyle Saxon lay dying. The two had grown close during the past four years. Tallant, an aspiring writer unsure of himself, had turned to Saxon for support and encouragement. He had received this and more. The relationship grew and intensified. Saxon, once an idol, became a father figure. The two collaborated on a collection of Louisiana folk tales and legends, and from there, under Saxon's persistent vigilance, Tallant had launched his own career. In the meantime the mentor's health had broken. There had been a stomach operation and a long hospital convalescence in the spring of 1939. Close friends recalled that he never regained his earlier hardiness. Instead, the stresses of a job he often found frustrating, and the anxiety over an uncertain future, combined with frequent alcoholic binges, continued to ravage a body already worn out. Saxon spent the Christmas of 1943 hospitalized. He returned for good in March, 1946. Surgeons performed a second operation. There were complications set in. Towards the end of the week pneumonia settled in. Saxon's breathing grew labored. To Tallant at bedside he whispered hopes that there were no regrets, for he had had "a wonderful time." On the eighth the patient lapsed into unconsciousness. Next day the breathing grew more difficult, harsh and struggling. Only in the last few hours did it become softer, fainter. Finally it stopped

altogether.¹³

When he died in the Spring of 1946, Lyle Saxon had two funerals. Bultman's on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans prepared the body, dressed it, brushed the coat, folded the hands, and powdered the face. Friends and admirers and mere acquaintances attended a service held at the funeral home. Later the closest mourners accompanied the body to Baton Rouge, Saxon's boyhood home. A second service convened at St. James Episcopal Church, the Reverend Phillip Werlein presiding. Two blocks away, in Magnolia Cemetery, six men muscled the casket to the grave. The Reverend intoned a final prayer. The gathering dissolved. Once the last mourners had drifted away, black men wearing overalls shovelled dirt clods onto the lowered coffin.¹⁴

Friends and editors were already busy recounting the life of Louisiana's most celebrated contemporary author. Most recalled a man of imposing physical frame and national renown. He was fully six feet tall and weighed over two hundred pounds. Heads turned every time he loped along Canal Street. At Antoine's knowing patrons nodded toward his table. Tourists sought him out for autographs; the bolder among them requested private tours or his company for cocktails or both. Louisianians in general, Orleanians in particular, hailed him as the chronicler of their world. Since the late twenties, they reflected, a

¹³ Robert Tallant to Cammie Henry, April 14, 1946, FWP Collection, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Northwest Louisiana State University, (Natchitoches, Louisiana), Folder 148, [hereinafter cited as FWP Collection, CGHRC].

¹⁴ Saxon was fifty-four. For accounts of his death and burial see Robert Tallant Papers, New Orleans Public Library, (New Orleans, Louisiana), [hereinafter cited as Tallant Papers, NOPL], Folder 22; State Times, April 11, 1946; Times-Picayune, April 11, 1946.

series of short stories and travel writings had earned him a national literary reputation. His only novel, Children of Strangers, enjoyed brief popular and critical acclaim. More recently, Saxon had served eight years as the State Director of the Louisiana Writers' Program, the white-collar relief unit funded out of the sprawling WPA. Saxon's group had been a model of bureaucratic efficiency, perhaps the most successful of its kind, completing three full-length volumes while serving as an editorial clearing house for affiliated projects throughout the Southeast. Yet the effort, wrote many, had left a divided legacy. The work had reaffirmed the Director's reputation as Chief Guide to New Orleans and to Louisiana, but only at prohibitive cost. Long years on the federal treadmill had sapped the author's creative vitality. Then his health had broken under the pressure of deadlines. Gradually, they asserted, a red-taped serpent had coiled around Saxon's neck and applied inexorable pressure, choking Louisiana's clearest voice.¹⁵

Most observers supplemented the resume of Saxon's literary career with reflections on a kind and gentle man. Despite his size, despite his celebrity, wrote his friend Judith Hyams Douglas, Lyle Saxon loved all Louisianians great and small. His heart, she assured, matched his frame, and others echoed the point. Some remembered how the author's genteel poverty never kept him from being among the softest touches

¹⁵ Shreveport Journal, April 11, 1946; New Orleans Item, April 11, 1946; Times-Picayune, April 10, 11, 1946; Morning Advocate, April 12, 1946; Louisiana Weekly, (New Orleans), April 20, 1946. For assertions that his WPA work destroyed Saxon's creative talents see especially the Shreveport Journal article cited above. See also, Irene Wagner to Cammie Henry, April 30, 1946, Melrose Collection, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Northwestern Louisiana State University, (Natchitoches, Louisiana), Folder 447, [hereinafter cited as Melrose Collection, CGHRC]; undated manuscript in Judith Hyams Douglas Papers, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Louisiana State University, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), Folder 4, [hereinafter cited as Douglas Papers, (LSU-BR)].

around. Another recalled the tenderness of his handshake. "He had a rare, leaping sympathy which enabled him at will to see with the eyes of another," wrote one interviewer, "[he was] a sensitive, large-souled, and intensely human being." The black community of New Orleans hailed him as a tireless opponent of Jim Crow and counted him among its truest friends. So did men such as Robert Tallant, one among a covey of aspiring young writers who had flocked to Saxon for support and encouragement and gathered under his protective wing. Those nestled closest called him "Papa." Most meant it. Others remembered Saxon's wit and conviviality. They celebrated the author's air of cultured urbanity, his cosmopolitan eclat. He was, they boasted, the archetypical Orleanian, easy with a laugh and quick with a drink, someone who knew the value of good food and fine conversation. Raconteur whose bar-to-bar tours of the Quarter were legendary, keeper of New Orleans' most bohemian salon, "artist with a jigger of absinthe," relic of the past harried into an uncomfortable present, lazy man and spirited Carnival reveller, he was no mere guide to New Orleans, he was the physical embodiment of all those values the City cherished in itself, as much a part of the New Orleans cultural landscape, insisted one admirer, "as Audubon Park,...or Congo Square, or the Napoleon House."¹⁶

¹⁶ Among the numerous character sketches of Lyle Saxon the best include Marshall Morgan, "The Voice of Louisiana: Lyle Saxon, Bachelor of Royal Street," a typewritten transcript of an undated radio broadcast in the Saxon Papers (TU)]; numerous unpublished manuscripts in the "Historical Source Materials" and "Diaries" of the Marcus D. Christian Papers, Department of Archives, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana [hereinafter cited as Christian Papers-UNO; George Tucker, "Lyle Saxon," an undated newspaper clipping in the Saxon Papers-TU; Two Herald-Tribune (New York) columns by Lucius Beebe in *ibid.*, and Caroline Dorman, "Southern Personalities: Lyle Saxon," Holland's: The Magazine of the South, (January, 1931): 26, 65. Other valuable insights into Saxon's

While some proclaimed him the representative of the City, others made him a symbol of the state. Saxon, they believed, personified the land about which he wrote. Like Louisiana, they said, he was a man of aristocratic temperament, born to a fine old family on a plantation just north of Baton Rouge. Like his native state, they asserted, Saxon appreciated the finer things. He was charming and graceful and genteel. He cherished Louisiana's rich heritage, especially its golden age of steamboat days prior to the War. By his own protest, he "liked beautiful things," this gentleman of the old school with Victorian tastes and romantic sensibilities, who had given to Louisianians a self-image most southerners cherish in themselves and resent in their neighbors. This as much as anything else secured his reputation and wide popularity. "In 10,000 libraries his name is linked with the glory that was Louisiana," gushed one hyperbolic admirer. "In his native state he has become a figure almost legendary." Even Lucius Beebe, usually a less charitable if more polished observer, was equally enthusiastic. He dubbed Saxon "the official historian of Louisiana and New Orleans' most hospitable showpiece... a recognized authority on local antiquities and institutions,... [whose] progress through the streets and saloons is accompanied to such saluting and adulation as hasn't been seen since the late Huey Long." "He was himself something of the spirit of the town," Beebe later observed in a memorial tribute, "a survivor of the Creole legends of yesterday, an institution... [f]or Saxon was a part of the New Orleans and Louisiana of which he wrote so warmly, a conscious holdover of southern chivalry, a courtly and

character are available in the author's diaries in the Saxon Papers (TU) and Catherine Chance Harvey, "Lyle Saxon: A Portrait in Letters, 1917-1945," (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1980).

articulate representative of the aspects of the old Louisiana civilization which has not quite disappeared. He was born in dancing pumps and he wore them all his life while being an historian...whose books...were handbooks to the way of life alike in Rampart Street...and the mystery-haunted bayous of the back-country Mississippi."¹⁷

The life others commemorated, the one Beebe celebrated, was Lyle Saxon's greatest artistic achievement. There were two sides to Saxon's character never separated by more than the width of the Mardi Gras mask he loved to don. His public posture as New Orleans bon vivant and leisured man of southern letters disguised a painful search for identity never fully achieved, one stirred, perhaps, by Saxon's own obscure origins. Close friends and casual acquaintances all knew him as the progeny of an old plantation varying in size according to the credulity of the reporter. Saxon himself made frequent allusions to his aristocratic upbringing, a finely spun myth belied only once in all the author's voluminous correspondence. He had, in truth, been born in Washington state to parents wed less than six months. The marriage lasted only briefly, and when it broke up Saxon's mother, Katherine Chambers, returned to Louisiana, her childhood home. He never saw his father again. Instead, he was raised in Baton Rouge. His maternal grandfather had been the city treasurer for forty years and had retired recently to open a bookshop. Meantime, Katherine published a column in the local newspaper, and between these two influences, literature and journalism, Saxon's future took shape. Contemporaries remember a

¹⁷ Wendell Tynes, "A Talk With Lyle Saxon," The Harvester, (January 22, 1933), pp.4,6; Marshall Morgan, "The Voice of Louisiana," unpublished manuscript in the Saxon Papers, (TU). Lucius Beebe quoted in the Newspaper File in *ibid.*, (TU).

serious child often seen reading in the corner of his grandfather's bookstore. Others recall his early zeal for creative thought. Stories the old folks told left him spellbound. His imagination blossomed. He populated a dream world with imaginary characters, ghosts and goblins and creatures drawn from mythology. He never broke the habit. It became a lifelong practice, virtually an obsession, especially during the most critical periods of his life. As a boy he listened at night to the trilling of frogs and heard "mournful cries of otherworldly creatures." As an adult he hoarded occult literature often purchased at prohibitive expense.¹⁸

A fine line often smudged separated fact from fancy in Lyle Saxon's imagination. He filled his fictive world with nymphs and satyrs and centaurs, standard Symbolist devices common in his day, yet for Saxon something more than mere inventions. Beneath the surface of his literary mask a chaos swirled, sometimes paralytic. Few certainties governed his life, least of all a concrete distinction between fact and fiction, or two of the fundamental organizing principles of any social world: sex and race. Raised by his mother and by two maiden aunts for whom he cared in later life, a strong feminine influence left its

¹⁸ Accounts of Saxon's early life are sketchy; assertions of his plantation origins are legion. The most extensive treatment of the author's lineage appears in the obituary published in the State Times of April 10, 1946. The Morning Advocate obituary of April 11, 1946 mentions a "serious child, who rode often through the streets on a white pony that had one eye." Other sources documenting the growth of the young Saxon's imagination are in Harvey, "Lyle Saxon," p.4ff; and Mercedes Garig to Lyle Saxon, July 22, 1937, Saxon Papers (TU). Saxon's fascination with the grotesque and macabre is documented in the catalog of the author's personal library in the Melrose Collection, (CGHRC), in David Culbert, "The Infinite Varieties of Mass Experience: The Great Depression WPA Interviews and Student Family History Projects," Louisiana History, 19(Winter 1978), p.44, and in Saxon to Olive Lyons, July 24, 1933, August 3, 1933, Saxon Papers, Box 2, (TU).

impression on the artist and his art. Strong women were a staple of Saxon's fiction. They were the strongest characters in his work, the ones he sketched most fully. Similarly, his folklore researches focused repeatedly on the figure of Marie Laveau, the legendary voodoo queen. Even in idle moments, his thoughts swam along such channels. When Lyle Saxon doodled, sometimes in the margins of his business letters, sometimes with greater care on fresh sheets of paper, he sketched sturdy women of firm jaw. The drawings reflected his own circumstances. Aside from Roark Bradford, his fellow New Orleans author, and the aspirant writers on whom he doted, Saxon had no lasting male associations. He ran in no circle of cronies, not even during the newspaper days of his early career. Rather, Saxon cultivated the company of matronly women, with whom he formed the closest relationships of his life. He mixed gingerly with polite society, and often painfully, feeling a sense of alienation no doubt reenforced by an ambiguous sexual orientation. During his lifetime and since his death rumors have swirled around Saxon's private life. Most assert that he was homosexual, others say bi-sexual. The evidence supports the plausibility of either claim, but in any case the salient point is not the activity but the uncertainty, that gray cloud gathered over something traditionally depicted in tones of black and white.¹⁹

The author's racial thinking reveals a similar uncertainty. New

¹⁹ Rumors of the author's homosexuality or his bi-sexuality are substantiated by private correspondence in the Saxon Papers at Tulane and the Melrose Collection at the Henry Research Center. See also Harvey, "Lyle Saxon," pp. 48ff. The most representative of the author's fictionalized characters is Kate Dangerfield of "The Gay Dangerfields," published originally as a short story in Century Magazine and later incorporated into Chapter Two of Saxon's Old Louisiana, (New York, 1929).

Orleans blacks who mourned his passing recalled Saxon's unflagging personal and professional support for their interests. He donated funds to a myriad of black philanthropic organizations and even defied Jim Crow in public. Once he insisted that a black friend accompany him to dinner at the St. Charles Hotel. His guest demurred in vain. When white patrons rallied to the defense of local law and custom, Saxon defused the situation by feigning intoxication. Larger contributions accompanied these small acts. He encouraged the efforts of local black writers, especially the poet Marcus Christian, wrote sympathetic observers, he even established an all-black unit of writers within his WPA organization and became its unofficial cheerleader. Speeches delivered to a variety of groups and organizations championed the work, but Saxon gave more to the black unit than simple lip service. His literary prominence, together with the novelty of the Dillard Unit, attracted attention and applause among prominent black political and cultural leaders. Many visited the Project, such as Sterling Young, Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, and Jacob Lawrence, providing valuable contact between local writers and national leaders.²⁰

Still, for all his compassion, Lyle Saxon never transcended the white racial conventions of his day. The black press hailed Saxon as a dedicated folklorist with a sharp eye and a tender feel for the rhythms of Negro culture. Since the mid-twenties, they asserted, he had made a close if informal survey of Louisiana blacks, a practice begun after visiting Melrose Plantation near Natchitoches. He spoke at length with field hands and their families, suppered with them, even attended their

²⁰ Louisiana Weekly, April 11, 1946; Times-Picayune, April 10, 1946; "Diaries," Christian Papers, (UNO), Box 1.

rural church services. Such contact had only deepened the author's yearning for a true understanding among the races, though at times he despaired of the possibility. The experience may also have formulated in him the conviction often expressed in later years that prolonged contact between whites and blacks would lead inevitably to tolerance. Yet even as such hopes germinated, the author's notebooks reveal someone fully in accordance with the prevailing racial stereotypes of his day. Blacks, wrote Saxon, were "whimsical," "superstitious," "licentious," "impulsive," "fond of colorful things," and "undisciplined." They were given to "incessant clowning." Black boys sent to Angola, the state penitentiary, he asserted, acquired the same badge of family honor that their white contemporaries earned when they enrolled at LSU. Louisiana blacks ordered everything they could out of the Sears and Roebuck catalog on the unshakable belief that Roebuck was black. They refused to plan ahead. They felt a special kinship with animals, their fellow beasts of burden. They could accomplish only menial tasks requiring constant supervision--all of this from a man whose diary contained this simultaneous lament: "Why are people so damn mean to blacks?"²¹

Such inconsistency formed the essence of Saxon's character. Shortly after the WPA unit closed, Marcus Christian, the black poet, called on the former Director. By then the two were old friends and former co-workers. Saxon had been among the earliest and most ardent champions of Christian's poetry, and had eventually hired him onto the Writers' Project. Over the years a mutual affection had developed, deep

²¹ Louisiana Weekly, April 11, 1946; Times-Picayune, April 10, 1946; "Diaries," Christian Papers, (UNO), Box 1; "Notes For Children of Strangers," Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 11; Diary, Bound Volume #8, *ibid.*, Box 17, (TU).

enough from Christian's perspective that he had come to regard himself as Saxon's "black son." Yet that night when they parted, the author called the poet "boy." The warmth of the tone suggested a term of endearment; the pride in Christian's character wondered. He sensed a division within his friend and probed for its source. "What had happened to Saxon," the poet ruminated, "where along the line did he get the seeds of a tragic melancholy and frustration which will sooner or later tear wide the bonds of his existence? Where came that love of the underdog and hatred of the overlords, of which he himself is one and even likes it sometimes? Were the black blood connections in the ascending or descending scheme of things. Or was it love?" In truth it was neither. Saxon was no more the prisoner of mixed blood than blind devotion; he was someone alienated from the mainstream of society, someone forced to tread a narrow path between private impulse and public acceptance, like the southern blacks with whom he empathized, someone forced to suppress his private yearnings beneath a mask carefully contrived for public display.²²

Lyle Saxon fashioned this mask from history. A romanticized past inspired and sustained him. He saw history as a living pageant in which he too was an active participant. "The facts of history are but an outline of the pictures of the times:" he once wrote. "[T]he picture is black and white, [and] if one seeks color, he must study the footnotes."

²² "Diaries," Christian Papers, UNO, Box 1. Few sources document Saxon's sense of alienation with greater clarity than the sketch he did in 1924 entitled "Society-Why I Don't." The sketch depicts four women, representing the archetypical social classes, and including a hooker, heavily painted and smoking, a doyen, corsetted and coiffed with buck teeth and overemphasized swinish features, a plump woman with thick glasses, and finally, a young woman depicted in three-quarters profile whose empty gaze reflects a vapidly devoid of emotion. Melrose Collection, (CGHRC), Scrapbook #153.

Saxon sought color. He immersed himself, characteristically, in the large gray areas comprised of the meaning he read into the footnotes he prized so highly. "He learned the past by heart until he could in fancy repeople old houses," wrote one keen observer, and "when passing one of those great green doors so mysteriously bolted and barred [in the French Quarter], he would feel an impulse to let the dashing equipage of Baron Carondelet pass out." Yet, if Saxon revelled in Louisiana's colonial and antebellum history, he borrowed from a more recent era in order to incorporate the past into his living present. He affected the manners of the Genteel Culture, restoring two homes in the Quarter to the overstuffed style of the 1890s. Each became a salon where Saxon mimicked the previous generation with an earnestness that never abated, and each represented a facade of baroque ornamentation behind which the author masked his struggle for self-identity.²³

History, anchor of the author's rootless soul, also provided the basis for his literary career. An aspiring writer, the young Saxon cupped his ear to the past and heard the siren song of the Old South. He discovered what he took for a lost world of grand mansions and gay balls and sparkling wit. Louisiana's colonial and antebellum years, redolent with Old World charm and the odor of intrigue, paraded before him with a pomp and color he frequently likened to Carnival pageantry. This was no casual association. Carnival masks, as Saxon frequently asserted, provided those who wore them the rare opportunity of enacting fantasies freed from the constraint of social conformity. So too with

²³ Dorman, "Southern Personalities," p.26. For a description of the Royal Street apartment, the second and most elaborate of Saxon's New Orleans restorations, see Times-Picayune, April 16, 1933. Photographs of the apartment are in the Melrose Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 328.

the past Saxon envisioned. Characteristically, his history was non-conformist. It did not concern itself with law and politics; it shunned military glory. Its object instead was romantic arcania. Saxon burrowed into plantation diaries and records searching for bizarre plots and tales of intrigue. He rooted out the macabre and the fantastic, off-beat tales of murder and suicide and unrequited love, dressed them hoop skirts and frock coats, and told them to a reading public anxious to hear them. Early on, the formula worked with unerring precision, bringing Saxon by the close of the 1920s to the brink of national literary celebrity. Ultimately, however, his attempt to reconcile discrepancies between his public posture and his private doubts, a struggle reflected in the long and painful completion of his only novel, represent a crucial frame of reference for any understanding of the man who headed the Louisiana Writers' Project.

3. The Second Most Popular Man in Louisiana

Between the Great War and the Great Depression, Lyle Saxon rose to the brink of national literary celebrity. By 1930 critics hailed him as the "new voice of the Old South." Closer to home newspaper and radio interviewers referred to him as "the Voice of Louisiana." He was by then the celebrated author of three books and several short stories, having established and begun to perfect his role as leisured man of southern letters, guide to New Orleans and to Louisiana, the celebrity of rising fame and, after Huey Long, the most popular man in Louisiana. The mask was, indeed, in place after a decade of careful creation, a period commenced in 1918, the year Saxon ended a self-imposed exile and climaxed by his emergence onto the national literary scene. Yet beneath the surface, Saxon's divided character nurtured a festering sense of disillusion and despair capable of transforming the most prolific period in the author's career into the darkest moments of the man's life.

The career began as the war ended. Saxon's youth and adolescence are the most thinly documented periods of the author's life. He attended public school in Baton Rouge and matriculated at LSU where he spent four years, made steady progress toward his degree, then vanished two weeks before his scheduled commencement. Saxon's only other biographer relates a transvestite incident involving Saxon and another friend, George Favrot, just before graduation, a point too far from Mardi Gras and not close enough to Halloween. Yet these are conclusions supported only by the thinnest of means, the recollection of one of Saxon's classmates sixty years after the fact. What is evident, however, is the hasty character of Saxon's departure and the shroud of

mystery that covers the next four years of his life, a period completely lost to the historical record. He does not appear again until February 1918, when as a newspaper reporter living in Chicago he registered for the draft but was deferred. He left no evidence of disappointment and did not remain long in the city. Instead, he returned to Louisiana that spring, followed shortly by Noel Strauss, a close friend he had met in Chicago. Together the two established themselves in temporary quarters on Royal Street in New Orleans. By July each had landed jobs with rival newspapers, Saxon with the Item, and Strauss with the States. Three months later, on Saxon's twenty-seventh birthday, the two moved into a more permanent situation in the 600 block of Royal, the first house Saxon restored to period, and the site of his first salon. Here he would emerge in the years to come as the "Last Victorian," patron of the arts, cultivator of "beautiful things," and defender of the Vieux Carre.²⁴

The move marked something of a new beginning and an act of defiance. The Vieux Carre, literally "Old Square," was the original section of town established in 1718. After the American occupation in 1803, Canal Street became the dividing line between French and American inhabitants of the city, and the Vieux Carre acquired its more common name, French Quarter. Since the Civil War the area had degenerated, becoming by the turn of the century a center of vice and gambling, and the home of Storyville, among the more notorious red light districts in America. The Quarter rankled in the noses of progressive city fathers. Many proposed a general clean-up, one that would raze the old section

²⁴ Harvey, "Lyle Saxon," pp.48-50; Saxon Diaries, Bound Volume #5, Saxon Papers, (TU).

and permit the expansion of the city's business district across Canal Street. Initial steps were taken by the Navy in 1917 when it invoked a little known and seldom used statute in order to close Storyville. The loss of trade added an economic dimension to the section's deterioration. Nature and modernizers hastened what the Navy began. Frequently, buildings would either burn or collapse. Some had grown so structurally unsafe that they required demolition. Saxon mourned each loss.²⁵

Professional assignments and personal tastes made Saxon the arch-defender of the city's oldest section. The reporter stayed only briefly with the Item before transferring to the larger Times-Picayune, a respected conservative editorial voice across the South. Once he arrived there, Saxon's career advanced rapidly. He rose from reporter to feature writer to Sunday editor, all in the space of eight years. In addition, Saxon spelled his newspaper work with a host of private activities, most on behalf of saving the embattled Quarter. Much of his best reportage focused on the social outcasts inhabiting the section, subjects with whom he sympathized, people whose lives he told in a gritty, confidential tone attractive to middle-class ears then and since. He slumped the Quarter for a living. Still, more than professional ambition drew Saxon to the defense of the Quarter. Here was a rich past ripe for creation, for to Saxon the Quarter was no simple geographical quirk on the city map; it marked a temporal and social distinction from the rest of town. The boy who once heard mournful cries in the croaking of toads now quickened to the gay echoes of a romantic past, making attacks on the old facades a personal affront

²⁵ Sarah Searight, New Orleans, (New York, 1973), pp. 189-207.

and a bitter tragedy.²⁶

One such loss in particular forged Saxon's career as French Quarter preservationist. One night in 1919 friends rushed into the reporter's apartment with news that the old French Opera House was burning out of control. Built in 1859, site of more musical triumphs than any other in the South, Saxon would claim, the Opera House was, perhaps, the architectural jewel of the entire Quarter and certainly its cultural center. The flames spared nothing. By morning little remained but a blackened brick facade and heaps of twisted iron. Saxon had watched the entire scene from across the street, weeping openly, and when it was over he dragged himself to his typewriter and reported to the city that, "last night the heart of the Old French Quarter stopped beating." The loss helped to crystalize a plan no doubt germinating for some time. Saxon began in earnest to establish the Royal Street house as an artist's salon. He invited friends with increasing frequency, conducting his visitors on impromptu walking tours through the old section, replete, no doubt, with repeated bows to Baron Carondelet. Against the advice of others still convinced that removal to the Quarter meant certain harm and possible death, some followed Saxon's lead and located in the area. They attracted others drawn by the promise of romantic adventure. An arts colony, quickly dubbed a southern Greenwich Village, flourished and over it hung an aura of bohemian exoticism. Young men just beginning professional careers as lawyers or stock brokers who suddenly dropped out of sight were said to have "gone

²⁶ A good sampling of Saxon's newspaper style is preserved in Scrapbook #153, Melrose Collection, (CGHRC). Saxon's devotion to the Quarter is well-documented and surfaces in virtually all of his public pronouncements.

Quarter." Writers and painters, some of them serious artists, moved to the section for varying lengths of time. Soon the Quarter had its own semi-official journal, the Double Dealer, founded in 1921 and featuring the contributions of Thornton Wilder, Hart Crane, and Allen Tate together with an editorial style modeled on Mencken's American Mercury. A year later local artists established the New Orleans Arts and Crafts Club, complete with a fledgling school for developing talent. From modest beginnings, the Arts and Crafts Club expanded operations throughout the twenties, ultimately providing much of the local talent tapped by the federally sponsored cultural projects of the Depression. Saxon himself had attended the organizational meeting, accompanied by his friend Alberta Kinsey, the painter, one of the first people Saxon convinced to risk life in the Quarter.²⁷

The effervescent romanticism characteristic of much American cultural expression throughout the twenties remained the dominant attitude of the Vieux Carre gathering. John Peale Bishop likened New Orleans in general and the Quarter in particular to an American Marseilles. Oliver LaFarge recalled the colony as small, never numbering more than fifty, and dominated by two personalities: Sherwood Anderson and Lyle Saxon. Saxon had been a guiding spirit in the Quarter's transformation, but the experience had shaped the artist as well. As the Quarter evolved so did the reporter and his reporting.

²⁷ Federal Writers Project, The New Orleans City Guide, (Boston, 1938), pp. 134-5. Saxon quoted in Robert Tallant, Romantic New Orleanians, (New York, 1950), p.311. The best sources tracing Saxon's involvement in the movement to preserve the Quarter and to establish an arts colony there are Tallant, Romantic Orleanians, pp.308-15; "Close-Ups," The New Orleanian, (September, 20, 1930), pp.20-1; "Arts and Crafts Club Notebooks, 1928-31," (THNOC); Scrapbook #153, Melrose Collection, (CGHRC); Harvey, "Lyle Saxon," pp.104-45.

His reputation among the artists gave him a sense of identity, a sense of self. It cast him for the first time in the role he played for the remainder of his life. Here he became the whimsical artist and celebrity tour guide, wit, charmer, and satirist, someone devoted to beauty and gay times, the creator of an arts colony set boldly against the tide of so-called progress. It was here in the Quarter that Saxon adopted the role of High Victorian, mimicking the previous generation with a devotion easily lampooned. In their send-up of the French Quarter arts colony of the nineteen-twenties, Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles, William Faulkner and William Spratling dubbed Saxon "The Mauve Decade on St. Peter Street." Spratling's sketch featured a purse-lipped Saxon stretched out on an overstuffed sofa reading a volume titled "Eminent Victorians, Or L.S." The sharpness of the wit found its target. Saxon responded with anger. The transformation of the French Quarter also reshaped Saxon's newspaper career. Artists and writers now supplanted the prostitutes and dope peddlers of earlier reportage. Later he developed a successful "Literature and Less" column, establishing a reputation as arbiter of local cultural tastes. Strategically placed in Louisiana's largest newspaper, Saxon's column extended his reputation across the state, a development of immediate impact on Saxon's artistic development and lasting effect on the writer's future.²⁸

Near Easter in 1923 Saxon accompanied a group of painters invited up from New Orleans to a small artist's retreat at Melrose plantation in

²⁸ John Peale Bishop, "New Orleans: Decatur Street," in Etolia S. Basso, ed., The World From Jackson Square: A New Orleans Reader, (New York, 1948), 395-9; Oliver LaFarge, "Completely New," Ibid., pp.363-71; William Spratling and William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles, (Austin, 1966), p.46.

north Louisiana. Spring blossoms tinted a rolling landscape. Nearby in Natchitoches Saxon found "quaint architecture" with wrought-iron railings reminiscent of the Quarter. Yet nothing impressed the reporter so much as the plantation itself and its mistress, Cammie Henry. She and her husband had acquired Melrose more than a quarter of a century earlier. Widowed since, Mrs. Henry oversaw the operation with formidable energy. She directed plantings and harvests. She spun, churned, canned, milked, and quilted. She even promoted the idea of establishing an artists colony, and her energy immediately overwhelmed the young reporter. "She is white-haired and matronly," he wrote of their first meeting, "and she is the type of woman who strikes you as being alive. And she is overflowing with love for her fellow man. Her manner is cordial, and her handshake is firm. She wins her to you at once."²⁹

The trip to Melrose marked a pivotal episode in Saxon's life. It provided him initially with a series of articles published in the Times-Picayune. Subsequent visits yielded stories sold to the national press, but ultimately Melrose became the focus of his life's work, a place he equated with home. "Melrose Plantation lies within a bend of the Cane River," he wrote of that first visit. "The plantation is almost surrounded by this quiet stream. It is comprised of one thousand or more acres, planted for the greatest part in cotton, and it is a little world all by itself.... A great many of the Negroes who live at Melrose have never been away from the plantation more than once or twice in their lives. It is that feeling of permanence that makes plantation

²⁹ For an account of the trip and Saxon's impressions of the area and of Cammie Henry, see his article "Easter Sunday at Aunt Cammie's," Times-Picayune, April 22, 1923.

life so charming. One has the feeling that things have been as they are for many years and will continue to be for many years to come." Saxon idealized the plantation. He ascribed to it all the characteristics and values of previous generations of plantation apologists, investing Melrose with the familiar virtues: stability, order, harmony, gentility, and breeding. Melrose became a place where geography and imagination coincided, a lasting intellectual and emotional haven where Saxon lived intermittently between 1927 and 1935. Throughout the WPA years, he spelled bouts of Project work with visits to the plantation. He even intended to retire there once the Project closed, a dream never realized.³⁰

A good portion of the attraction was also personal. A permanent kinship grew between him and Cammie Henry. She cherished his devotion and returned it warmly. "Thank God for Lyle," she often confided to her diary, "truly he is a blessing to me..." She was still living when Saxon died in 1946, and those who understood the depth of their mutual affection sent her sympathy cards. "You loved him almost as one of your sons," wrote Irene Wagner, who believed that Cammie Henry and the years at Melrose were the twin anchors of the author's soul, the source of his success. There is much to confirm the opinion. Henry's guidance gave the young writer direction. Her ideas and observations echoed in his notebooks and surfaced in his art. They shared enthusiasms, revelling in the "old-world ways" observed on the plantation. They loathed anything modern, roaming the countryside together, touring the old

³⁰ "Cane River," typewritten manuscript in "Notes For 'Children of Strangers,'" Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 11. Two thick scrapbooks also document Saxon's attachment to Melrose. See Scrapbooks #219 and #222, Melrose Collection, (CGHRC).

plantations, lamenting those destroyed and fearing for the rest. In Mrs. Henry Saxon found a preservationist of equal passion. Together they restored an oil portrait of a mulatto patriarch from nearby Isle Brevelle and the old cabin on the plantation grounds that Saxon moved into in 1932.³¹

Melrose also focused Saxon's art. A "hypnotic trance" drew him to the land and held him there, spellbound. Melrose and all he envisioned it to be, symbol of charm and elegance and site of fading grandeur, provided a valuable balance to the urban throb of the Quarter. Staid and enduring, its rural rhythms tranquilized an increasingly frustrated reporter. Newspaper work, the avenue of Saxon's early successes, had become by the mid-twenties his chief source of irritation. He never liked deadlines and cared even less for the burly political style of longtime New Orleans Mayor, Martin Behrman. Thick-necked with heavy mustaches, Behrman was in the twilight of a long and colorful career as master of the New Orleans Ring, and running in the spring of 1925 for a final term in office. Saxon backed the opposition with a series of unflattering articles about the incumbent and, presumably, with his vote. The Times-Picayune lined up behind Behrman, who swept the Democratic primary, ensuring his re-election. Saxon confided his chagrin in a two word diary entry, "Good God!," but the election provided Saxon with the sort of tangible proof people often need to act on convictions long since formed. Eight years of rewrites and rushed columns had done little to bank Saxon's desire to create serious art;

³¹ The best glimpse of how close the two became and how deeply ran their preservationist impulse is Mrs. Henry's diary for 1934 in the Melrose Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 1333. Irene Wagner to Cammie Henry, April 30, 1946, *ibid.*, Folder 447.

quite the reverse. Instead, newspaper work had limned the parallel lines of his artistic future, bringing him into contact with the romantic spirit of the Quarter and taking him to Melrose. Shortly after the election, he cleaned out his desk and made off for the point on the horizon where the lines converged.³²

It began a period lasting roughly ten years, marked first by meteoric rise and later by bitter eclipse. Perihelion coincided with the coming of the Great Depression. Saxon left New Orleans in the fall of 1926, vacationing his way northward at Baton Rouge and Melrose, before removing to New York and a national stage for his regional voice. He arrived in the middle of October, rooming intermittently with friends, among them Noel Strauss, once again a frequent dinner and theater companion. At the end of November Saxon rented a flat on Christopher Street, just below the Village. He frequented the haunts of the city's literary circles, attracting the favorable attention of Edmund Wilson, among others. His work, too, attracted an enthusiastic audience. Stories appeared in a variety of fashionable journals: Century, The New Republic, The Dial, and Harper's Magazine. His story "Cane River," won the O. Henry Prize for short stories in 1926 and was included in the American Caravan for that year. Another, "The Gay Dangerfields," was included among the O'Brien Best Short Stories of 1927.³³

³² Saxon to Olive Lyons, August 3, 1933, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 2; Saxon Diaries, Bound Volume #5, *ibid*, Box 17. Studies of Behrman and the character of New Orleans appear in John R. Kemp, ed., Martin Behrman of New Orleans: Memoirs of a City Boss, (Baton Rouge, 1977), and Edward Haas, DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform: New Orleans Politics, 1946-1961, (Baton Rouge, 1974), pp.7-25.

³³ Harvey, "Lyle Saxon," pp. 51-5. Collections of Saxon's writings from this period appear in the Melrose Collection, (CGHRC), Folders 65,

Such honors and awards merely presaged the author's emergence to literary celebrity in the wake of a natural disaster. In 1927, the spring thaw and torrential rains burst open the Mississippi River just below Cairo, Illinois. Terror and water swept southward. Devastation ran all the way to the Gulf. Property losses alone totalled in excess of one quarter of a billion dollars. Hundreds drowned. Thoughtful people like William Alexander Percy saw in the catastrophe a sign of something larger. The flood and its aftermath also stirred Lyle Saxon. When the river broke its banks he returned to New Orleans where near-panic gripped the city. He ventured northward as far as Memphis, viewed the struggle to avert greater disaster, interviewed survivors, and recorded his impressions. In a summer of hectic writing at Melrose and in Baton Rouge he combined these with an impressionistic narrative of the river's discovery, settlement, and evolution as a commercial highway. In August, exhausted, he returned to New York with a completed manuscript. Two months later Century published Saxon's first book under the title, Father Mississippi. The first of three Louisiana volumes Saxon published, Father Mississippi established a formula followed in the others. He divided each into four parts, beginning with a fictional section calculated, he asserted, to set a mood, "a sugar coating of the pill of history which followed." Each began with a child's impression, as in the first volume when a small boy recollects the big house: "All my childhood seems centered in that hall... looking out toward the river." Three non-fictional sections always followed. In this case two recited the history of the river from discovery to the golden age of steamboats just prior to the war, and a final section chronicled the

119, and 328.

great flood itself, the battle waged between man and river, and the devastation left behind. It concluded with a plea for federal relief and river control.³⁴

Critics hailed the work. Popular readers revelled in the details of discovery and colonial intrigue, gleaned largely from court records and personal memoirs. Advocates of regional planning and flood control raised it as a rallying standard. Quipped one such reviewer, "This book explains the problems of flood control so that even a congressman can grasp them." Others considered it an even greater work and its author a new voice of the Old South. "Father Mississippi is part epic, part pageant, and part rhapsody," wrote Bernard DeVoto. "More than anything written since Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi it conveys the power and glamour and terror of the river." "Of all the new southern writers of prose," added John McClure in The New Republic, "Lyle Saxon... [provides] the finest interpretation of plantation life yet done in American literature." Even if the essence of critical review is artful hyperbole, there is still much of the book that remains significant. Father Mississippi contains all the romantic flourishes then in literary vogue. Yet beyond its baroque facade the final section describing the Great Flood anticipates the sort of hard-boiled reportage that represents a dominant genre of American letters during the Great Depression. Saxon's prose loses its florid tone in his final chapters. Instead, it chronicles a people overcome with sudden disaster not of their own making, though defiant in adversity. The story is relayed

³⁴ Pete Daniel, Deep'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood, (New York, 1977); William Alexander Percy, Lanterns On the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son, (New York, 1941), pp.249-69; Lyle Saxon, Father Mississippi, (New York, 1927), pp.3-5. Saxon discussed his literary technique in States Item, January 30, 1930.

first-hand, an eyewitness account permitting a vicarious participation on the part of the reader. Years later, an editor at Houghton admitted to Saxon how the shouts of a newspaper boy recorded in the book made him leap literally out of his chair. The final section, in short, bears the stamp of documentary literature, for if it allows audience involvement, it also demands action. Saxon assembles facts that suggest a single and unavoidable conclusion: the federal government must accept responsibility for Mississippi River planning and flood control in order to prevent another disaster. Here the special case is flood control, just as in the future it would become social and economic programs for the unemployed, the ill-clad, and the undernourished. It is a harbinger, this final section, a glimpse ahead and a connecting link between the two dominant literary impulses between the wars: romance and realism. Small wonder then that the documentary filmmaker Pare Lorentz would cite Father Mississippi as one of the guiding influences of "The River", or that in 1937, when the film made its world debut in New Orleans, that Lorentz sent Saxon a special invitation.³⁵

Before the decade closed Saxon finished two additional Louisiana volumes, rounding out the series and establishing his reputation as the state's greatest living author. Fabulous New Orleans appeared in 1928

³⁵ For DeVoto's review of Father Mississippi see Saturday Review of Literature, (February 4, 1928) in Bound Volume #4, Saxon Papers, (TU). Although Henry Steele Commager took Saxon to task for his "distracting eclecticism" and shoddy organization, he still fell under the charm of "the gay social whirl of the grand old society." See Herald-Tribune, November 24, 1929, in Scrapbook #224, Melrose Collection, CGHRC. John McClure, "Father Mississippi," The New Republic, (December 21, 1927), in Scrapbook #220, *ibid.* Darel McConkey to Lyle Saxon, January 19, 1938, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 4. Additional reviews of Father Mississippi appear in Bound Volume #4, Saxon Papers, (TU). Lorentz' tribute the book is repeated in George Tucker's "Man About Manhattan Column," in the Newspaper File, Saxon Papers, (TU). Lorentz to Saxon, October 27, 1937, *Ibid.*, Box 4.

and Old Louisiana the following year. Neither were particularly innovative. Both were immensely popular. Fabulous New Orleans alone sold more than fifty thousand copies at a cost of five dollars apiece. It revelled in the traditional image of New Orleans as the city care forgot. "This book is like a Mardi Gras parade," asserted Saxon, "a series of impressions. Each chapter is like a decorated car which tells a story." Begun with the colorful noise of Carnival, it gives full rein to Saxon's predilection for romanticized history and other worldly creatures. "Aboard the scurrying cars," he maintained, "are centaurs, mermaids, satyrs, gods and men, illuminated by flaming torches carried by strutting negroes robed in red." Celebrating the myth, adopting it for his own, Saxon repeated the method and the success in Old Louisiana. Like its predecessor, the book was lavishly illustrated with pencil sketches by his friend, Edward Suydam. It was what its author wanted it to be, a handsome volume pretty to look at. The dedication to Cammie Henry is also a key to its content. Old Louisiana is a staple of early twentieth century popular southern literature, a saga of faded grandeur, of steady declension of fine old families gone to seed and great mansions fallen to ruin. Its heart is an extended tour through the plantation homes of Louisiana, celebrating those left standing, eulogizing those destroyed.³⁶

Together these volumes established in print the twin postures of Lyle Saxon's adulthood. Through one he became the urban raconteur; through the other he became the leisured southern author. Through them both he also became a local celebrity. Reviewers of Fabulous New

³⁶ Saxon, Fabulous New Orleans, (New York, 1928); Saxon, Old Louisiana, (New York, 1929).

Orleans styled him next in line to the long tradition of New Orleans romantics passed down through Lafcadio Hearn, George Washington Cable, and Grace King, a succession manifested in 1930 when Saxon shouldered Grace King's coffin. Afterwards his fame continued to grow, acquiring statewide and regional, even national dimensions. Invitations to address literary circles accumulated. Tourists began to seek him out in earnest. Interviewers elbowed their way to his doorstep. Fan mail thickened. Still another book, a biography of Jean Lafitte, was snatched up by Cecil B. deMille as the basis for his swashbuckler, "The Buccaneer." Lyle Saxon, the boy conceived out of wedlock and born far away, the young adult so unsure of so much, had become Lyle Saxon, admired gentleman of southern letters and someone careful to preserve the image. He regaled interviewers with recollections of his plantation youth. He continued to publish plantation tales. Photographs of the period employ conventional plantation symbolism, depicting the young author well-tailored and stiff-backed, seated in his cane rocker with lap pad and pen. Behind him waits his white-jacketed servant, coffee pot in hand, the soul of faithful vigilance. Still, a proportionate anxiety accompanied Saxon's growing fame. Friends telephoned him all afternoon the day Father Mississippi was published. Another, Paul Rosenfeld, held a tea in the author's honor attended by the greater and lesser lights of the New York literary scene. Saxon found the whirl unsettling. "The publishers insist that I must accept these invitations and must 'assume my place as one of the recognized writers of America' ... which seems screamingly funny to me," he confided to an aunt. "Me! Well I always have the feeling that I sort-of sneaked into these affairs under false pretenses...." "I'm being dragged around so from pillar to

post," he worried, "that I don't know what my life is all about."³⁷

It was a revealing confession never fully shaken. Throughout the early years of his new celebrity the man and author continued to search for identity. In New York he engaged in what may have been the only heterosexual relationships of his life, one with the first wife of Barrington Moore, who quickly left him. The other, the more serious of the two, involved Rachel Field, then a children's writer and later a novelist. The two met only months after Saxon's removal to New York, beginning a romance lasting two years. They dined frequently together at Saxon's apartment. In the fall of 1928 they vacationed for a week at Field's summer cottage in Maine. Together they collaborated on a poem, "Delphinium," published in one of her collections, Points East. Things took a more serious turn in the summer of 1930. Saxon brought Field south to meet his aunts in Baton Rouge, and from there he showed her Melrose and Aunt Cammie. The two were already correspondents and remained so until Field's sudden death in 1943, but it was the only time the women ever met, for Saxon broke off the affair abruptly in January 1931.³⁸

The decision symptomized a downward spiral unchecked until 1935. Since their meeting and long after the affair broke off, Rachel Field championed Saxon's literary talent. The success of the Louisiana cycle delighted her, but she felt him capable of greater things. "He is just

³⁷ Critical reviews of Fabulous New Orleans and Old Louisiana are in Newspaper Files, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 15; Tallant, The Romantic Orleanians, p.302; Saxon to "Auntie," n.d., Lyle Saxon Papers, (LSU-BR), Box 1.

³⁸ Harvey, "Lyle Saxon," pp.164-216; Lyle Saxon to Cammie Henry, September 19, 1928; Rachel Field to Henry, August 23, 1928, Scrapbook #214, Melrose Collection, (CGHRC).

at the threshold of what he can do," she wrote to Cammie Henry shortly after Fabulous New Orleans was published. Perhaps, she hoped, he could now concentrate on his fiction. Perhaps he would now draw to novel length the easy grace of his short stories. Doubtless the subject had been raised between them many times. He shared her hopes for his artistic future, though he never matched her faith. Saxon understood that fiction was his highest aspiration. He, too, hoped to create a novel, an impulse acquired long before they met. Indeed, before leaving for New York, Saxon already had selected his subject, the mulattoes of Cane River, and his title, "Children of Strangers".³⁹

One day in 1925, along the Cane River road, Saxon saw a mulatto woman riding behind a black man on a mule. She was crying. He never knew why, but he always wondered. This was the year Saxon first lived at Melrose, and the plan of a novel suddenly unfolded. Flashes of what became Children of Strangers appeared in print as newspaper articles and short stories long before the novel was completed. Saxon carried it with him in inchoate form when he moved to New York. No doubt he shared these with Rachel Field, for by 1930 she had become a tireless promoter of the novel. She encouraged every advance and chafed at every interruption. The death of his grandfather in 1930, publication of two additional books, his Aunt Maude's bout with tuberculosis, all these she saw as roadblocks to the writer's purpose. Even after he quit writing her, Field cheered from afar. By then, however, Saxon had lapsed deep into silence. Nothing documents the exact nature of Saxon's artistic lapse, only the debilitating languor. He ceased all correspondence and

³⁹ Rachel Field to Cammie Henry, November 21, 1931; January 17, 1932; May 27, 1932, *ibid.*

commenced a series of homosexual encounters, paying for services carefully initialled in his diary.⁴⁰

Between 1931, the year he published Lafitte, The Pirate, and 1935, the year he went to work for WPA, Saxon suffered through a long and gin-soaked torpor. Funds already taxed to near depletion were now exhausted in the purchase of macabre and semi-pornographic literature. The cocktail hour inched toward noon, then whisked beyond it, in a prolonged binge requiring "the cure." Those closest to him attributed the descent to his difficulty producing the novel. Rachel Field, through a mix of tender advice and shrewd market analysis, pleaded through Cammie Henry for Saxon simply to get it over with and move on to something else. "O I wish he could shake off this strange abnormal state which grips him," she lamented, "It's like any other disease, only harder to cope with. He made such a brilliant start, why couldn't he have followed it up when times were good and there was interest in his special thing."⁴¹

Others are equally baffled as to why Saxon wallowed so long in his depressed state. Record of the difficulty abounds, though evidence of its ultimate source does not. One biographer suggests that Saxon, whose real ambition was fiction, simply broke down under its demands. He failed to muster the sort of discipline the craft required, she maintains, retreating instead to the comfort of factual writing. Then too, she concludes, the years in New York drove Saxon beyond the point of depression, years when love went unrequited, homesickness festered,

⁴⁰ Unpublished manuscript dated November 4, 1937 in Saxon Papers, (LSU-BR), Box 1; Rachel Field to Cammie Henry, April 21, 1930; November 7, 1930; January 2, 1931; February 1, 1931; March 29, 1931, Scrapbook #214, (CGHRC); Harvey, "Lyle Saxon," pp.185-6.

⁴¹ Field to Henry, July 7, 1932; September 19, 1932; November 10, 1932; July 4, 1933; August 9, 1934, Scrapbook #215, (CGHRC).

and the social calendar dominated the writing schedule. She even hints at the possibility of a bout with syphilis, and under this weight, she asserts, the author buckled, returning to Melrose and alcoholic prostration. Such evidence is persuasive, but perhaps an additional dilemma caused the lapse, one involving the author's own sense of identity. Perhaps the material itself, the larger implications of the novel, kept Saxon from writing. He was a keenly sensitive man racked by insecurities, whose troubled identity led him to create the role of genteel southern man of letters. For a time the pose succeeded, especially during the late twenties when "genteel southerners" were so much in demand. So long as Saxon spun the old myths and chanted the old homilies, so long as he sang of juleps and moonlit magnolias, the pose remained safe, the mask secure.⁴²

Then came a larger fictional experiment about a mulatto colony, where mixed ancestry blurred all the basic lines of social identity. This trod personal grounds in such a way threatening to expose the mask for what it was. Ostensibly, Children of Strangers told the story of one mother's devotion to her bastard child. In truth, it was Saxon's own tale, a record of his search for self. Children of Strangers, so accurately titled, took the author twelve years to write. He began with great hopes at the height of his fame, he finished under extreme pressure while directing the Writers' Project, and he filled the years in between with a prolonged struggle for identity that provided the direction of his WPA work. Saxon based his story on the mulatto colony of Isle Brevelle, in north Louisiana, among a people with whom he identified completely. These were people of mixed blood, meaning

⁴² Harvey, "Lyle Saxon," pp.185ff.

uncertain identity, and a people of noble heritage falling into decay. Saxon's mulattoes were the antithesis of the plantation blacks sketched in his notebooks. They were neither lazy nor irresponsible nor superstitious; rather, the mulattoes were products of "a glorious past," prisoners of a "drab present," "a free-born people," who "love color." Their Roman Catholicism reflected their devotion to beauty, while their aristocratic carriage contrasted sharply with the "shoutin' Baptist of the nigger." Saxon pictured his mulattoes as he pictured himself, as aesthetes adrift in a modern society devoted to a beauty threatened with extinction.⁴³

Children of Strangers, the clearest record of Saxon's search for identity, also reflects the author's resistance to the growth of modernism. He filled his plantation notebooks with lamentations bemoaning the modern trend towards cultural standardization. He flouted the aesthetics of modern art; he loathed modern architecture; he ridiculed modern manners. In his novel, modernity represents a destructive force overwhelming the aristocratic traditions of both the Old South and the mulatto colony of Isle Brevelle. It appears, for instance, as a venomous cloud of mosquito repellent whose fumes overwhelm the hero, a tubercular symbol of decaying gentility. Highways and automobiles, twin evils of the modern temper, hasten the colony's destruction by carrying its young people away and permitting swarms of tourists to reduce his once proud people to the status of curios. Modernism makes Isle Brevelle a romantic archipelago isolated in the

⁴³ For a history of the mulatto colony on which Saxon based his novel, see Gary B. Mills, The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color, (Baton Rouge, 1977). For Saxon's studies of the colony see "Notes For Children of Strangers," Saxon Papers (TU), Box 11.

rising seas of a standardized present, the rural equivalent of Saxon's Quarter.⁴⁴

The struggle for identity, the struggle against modernity, were synonymous crusades. What was crafted from the past was imperilled by the future, both in its physical forms--highways, corporate bureaucracies, and skyscrapers--and as an intellectual movement dedicated to stripping off the Victorian mask Lyle Saxon had so carefully crafted at such cost. Writing *Old South* apologies had been a liberating experience, giving its author an identity to which he could cling, but one destroyed by implications reached in his study of the mulattoes of Isle Brevelle. Saxon himself hinted that this might be so in unguarded moments of correspondence. Once, responding to an inquiry about his writing, he asserted that the novel was the "truest" book he ever wrote. Deep in the most troubled period of its creation, in August, 1933, he reflected on the Cane River country, sensing the trap his material represented. "It is strange this hypnotic trance that the country gives me," he wrote. "At the moment I could live here forever... but of course I know full well that as soon as I make up my mind to stay here indefinitely, I would die of ennui...."⁴⁵

Saxon's rise to celebrity and plummet to obscurity coincided with

⁴⁴ The author's opposition to the growth of cultural standardization is well documented. See, for example, Saxon to Laura Snow, October 22, 1937, FWP Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 39; and "Cane River Country," an unpublished manuscript in *ibid.*, Folder 126. Lyle Saxon, *Children of Strangers*, (Boston, 1937).

⁴⁵ Unpublished manuscript dated November 4, 1937 in Saxon Papers, LSU-BR, Box 1; Saxon to Olive Lyons, August 3, 1933, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 2. An excellent treatment of the effect of modernity on Southern thought between the wars is Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945*, (Chapel Hill, 1982), especially pp.3-33.

the coming of the Great Depression. The author's struggle for identity occurred just as the nation commenced its own redefinition, the most massive and compelling since the crisis of the 1890s. Values and assumptions long held were challenged along virtually every facet of American life. Historians and other observers have since viewed the ferment of the thirties as a series of interlocking dialectical confrontations pitting romance against realism, gentility against modernity, a traditional individualistic producer society against a newly organized mass consumer society, cultural purity against cultural pluralism, and a showdown between traditions of political localism and an innovative expansion of federal power. Some were inherited unresolved from the 1920s, some are unique to the Depression Decade, and others abound. Lyle Saxon's life does not incorporate each of these confrontations, does not unite in a tidy package all the myriad themes of thirties America. Yet his subsequent fate provides a succinct parallel to the immense political and cultural transition undergone by the nation during the Great Depression. This troubled man would become one of the more prominent figures in the massive inventory of American life known officially as the Federal Writers Project. The romantic would become a bureaucrat and once more guide to New Orleans and to Louisiana in an experience echoing in minor key the major themes of his day--convergent lines between individual and society reached one evening in Baton Rouge when a young optometrist stepped from behind the marbled shadows of the new State Capitol.⁴⁶

The same shot that killed Huey Long gave Lyle Saxon another chance. Long returned to Louisiana in September, 1935, after Congress

⁴⁶ Susman, Culture as History, pp.150-83.

adjourned its summer session. Back in Baton Rouge he convened still another of his whirlwind special sessions. Anti-Long opposition had been stifled, and legislation calculated to consolidate the administration's power breezed to passage in record time. On the evening of the eighth, Huey strode the marble floors of his new Capitol to indulge his twin passions, concentrating power at home and attacking the Roosevelt administration everywhere else. Forty-two bills were introduced that night and forty-one passed. Long voiced opposition to one, but two typified the ambitions of a career eclipsed only moments later. One sought at once to satisfy the whims of a local group of party men to gerrymander a long and bitter opponent out of his judicial seat. The other, astonishing even to loyal supporters, was designed to prevent federal appointees from disbursing any funds for political activities on penalty of a mandatory fine and jail term. Few doubted the unconstitutionality of the measure. The Senator did not care. At worst the measure would provide a block to federal patronage inroads that would require the New Dealers months to tear down. This accomplished, the phone rang at the Speaker's desk in the House where the Kingfish sat talking to Allen Ellender. On the other end of the wire a favorite reporter speaking from the Governor's office upstairs cooed about a recent disaster in Florida where a hurricane had blown down a CCC camp in the Keys drowning several boys. Would the Senator care to comment on this most recent episode in New Deal mismanagement? "Stay right there," Long roared, "I want to talk to you." With that Long was off, bounding up the corridor, into the path of a slim bespectacled doctor crouched in the shadows and clutching a small

caliber pistol. Three days later Huey Long was dead.⁴⁷

The news delighted Saxon. Contemptuous of the Longs though never consistently a political man, he confined his opposition to his private correspondence. Saxon seemed ready to take an active part in the political storms wracking the state. High tension gripped the capital in the wake of the assassination. Longites screamed for vengeance. Anti-Longs living in the capital and elsewhere celebrated openly. Others hinted of a plot. Surely, they said, Carl Weiss, the young assailant whose body had been riddled on the Capitol floor, could not have committed such an act. He was from good people, a man by breeding and outlook incapable of violence. Surely, they concluded, he was the victim of some bloody set-up hatched by one of Huey's goons, and a movement to clear Weiss' reputation took shape. Through Mercedes Garig, Saxons's former teacher and frequent correspondent, the friends of Carl Weiss approached the writer in the hope of publishing a sympathetic biography, something to clear the Weiss name. Saxon seemed reticent at first, later warmed to the idea, but never got the chance to take it up.⁴⁸

Instead Lyle Saxon went to work for the federal government. Following Long's death his successors had faced two options. They could carry on as Huey would have, opposing the national administration with all means at their disposal, or they could make peace with the New Dealers. The latter opinion prevailed. A deal was struck, known by historians and pundits since as the Second Louisiana Purchase, and the

⁴⁷ Williams, Huey Long, pp.890-920.

⁴⁸ Mercedes Garig to Lyle Saxon, October 19, 1935; Lollie Brousseau to Saxon, October 23, 1935, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 2.

federal relief spigot, slowed to a trickle while Long was alive, gushed forth in the months following his funeral. Five weeks after the assassination Lyle Saxon became the Director of the Louisiana Federal Writer's Project, the only one it ever had. This began an eight-year career as a government publicist, writer, and bureaucrat, roles not always harmonious. His closest friends would claim that the mix was lethal, that Saxon, at heart a writer of fiction, squandered his creative energies writing travelogue for a federal agency happy to rob him of energies better applied to his art. Bureaucratic pressures and incessant deadlines, they insisted, broke his health and hurried him to his grave.⁴⁹

Perhaps, but another explanation seems as plausible. Saxon often complained to his friends and to his diary about the endless harassment of the government project. Indeed, in 1939 it proved too much, and the Director's physique buckled under the strain. Yet Saxon remained with the WPA to the very end, even after closing the Louisiana office, and the exchange was never so one-sided as his friends asserted. As head of the project, Saxon once confided, listening to the hard-luck tales of aspirant writers begging for work gave him the courage to finish his novel. Perhaps the protracted stillness of the Melrose years haunted the author, a spectre from which he sought the protective shelter of WPA for as long as possible. Perhaps what sapped the State Director's

⁴⁹ The best surveys of Louisiana politics during the aftermath of the Long assassination include Harnett T. Kane, Louisiana Hayride: The American Rehearsal For Dictatorship, (New York, 1941); V.O. Key, Southern Politics, pp.156-82; Allen P. Sindler, Huey Long's Louisiana: State Politics, 1920-1952, (Baltimore, 1956). An excellent study of the relationship between the Longites and the Roosevelt Administration is Betty Marie Field, "The Politics of the New Deal in Louisiana, 1933-1939," (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1973).

strength more than anything else and rendered the future so uncertain was the magnitude of his own efforts to realize the romantic portrait of Louisiana depicted in his earlier writings, one so crucial to his own self-image. Saxon's administrative efforts were not confined merely to directing the Writers' Project or, until 1937, the state Historical Records Survey. Rather, he became a principal Southern contact among the network of relief agencies. His FWP responsibilities quickly assumed a regional dimension, making him instrumental to the American Guide efforts in Arkansas and Mississippi, but this was only a beginning. Toward the end of its existence, when the national office of the Writers' Program unveiled an ambitious roster of projects designed to document American life, Saxon's New Orleans office was assigned to edit a volume on national eating habits. In addition, while Saxon played a secondary role in the life of the Federal Arts Project in New Orleans, he was far more active as local contact and tour guide for a succession of FSA photographers travelling through the area. Nor did this exhaust his activities. Throughout its existence, Saxon's project enjoyed a warm relationship with the national office, earning the unofficial status of a favored son, largely on Saxon's skill as an entertainer. New Orleans became a vacation haven for harried officials from the national office in Washington who travelled South for "Papa Saxon's" sazerac cocktails and personal tours through the Quarter. Better still, Saxon's office was a model of quiet efficiency. No major controversies rocked the Louisiana Project. There were no labor disputes as in New York, no charges of political intrigue as in Missouri, and no controversial guide copy as in Massachusetts. Considering the charged atmosphere along the bayou, this represented

something of an accomplishment, mute testimony of Saxon's unheralded political savvy. Even after the arts projects were withdrawn from WPA funding and incorporated into the newly created Federal Works Agency, the relationship continued. Directorship of the Agency passed eventually to Howard Hunter, a Baton Rouge native whose apartment in the French Quarter was leased from his old schoolmate, Lyle Saxon.⁵⁰

The variety and extent of such activities nevertheless shares a common theme. As an author of guide-books, the host of various project officials, or a local guide for national photographers, Saxon struggled to create a romantic portrait of Louisiana, something in keeping with his predecessors, Lafcadio Hearn, George Washington Cable, and Grace King. An odd amalgam of personal and professional needs and desires drove him forward, sapped his energies and when, it was over, left him exhausted. For even as he struggled to preserve his Victorian mask, his service with the Writers' Project helped uncover evidence which peeled it back.

⁵⁰ Unpublished manuscript in Lyle Saxon Miscellany, Michael D. Wynne Papers, (LSU-BR), Box 1. Saxon and the Historical Records Survey in Louisiana are the subject of Burl Noggle, Working With History: The Historical Records Survey in Louisiana and the Nation, 1936-1942, (Baton Rouge, 1981). Major FWP controversies such as those in Missouri, New York, and Massachusetts are treated in Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, pp.101-6, 162-3, 186-96. Saxon and Howard Hunter's wife, Marge, were frequent and intimate correspondents during her husband's tenure as Director of the Federal Works Agency. Sources documenting the friendship are in the Saxon Papers, (TU), Correspondence, Box 5.

4. Papa Saxon's Literary Plantation

For two days, just prior to the New Year, 1943, WPA truckers broke down the office of the Louisiana Writers Project in the Canal Bank Building in New Orleans. They dismantled desks and removed typewriters. Maps were rolled and sheathed in tubes. Framed photographs of Franklin Roosevelt and Henry Hopkins were taken down from the spot over the Director's desk, where they had hung for nearly seven years. Typing stools were folded and rolled away. Chairs were stacked, waste paper baskets collected, telephones disconnected. Rows of project files were crated, carried to the street, and stacked in a truck for shipment to the state library at Baton Rouge. The boxes contained a vast array of materials. In them were collected an immense and varied inventory of Louisiana, reports, alternately hand-scrawled on scratch paper or typed on onion-skin or carbon, essays on points of interest across the state, on economic and agricultural practices, on styles and vari  ties of architecture, on a host of other topics such as geography, natural history, transportation, climate, natural resources, the impressions of three centuries of visitors, the history of the region, the states, parishes, and local communities that made up Louisiana, a record of its authors, artists, and musicians, explanations of its place names and its racial distribution. There were essays on local cuisine, hotel accommodations, government, education, religion, newspapers, arts and crafts, theaters, and social life; essays described, counted and collected, they detailed the lives of individuals interviewed by project workers. The files included indexes of local newspapers, title searches of French Quarter properties, publications ranging from pamphlet to book

length, and a vast array of cultural materials retelling the folklore and customs of the state, its ghost stories, legends and horror tales, superstitions, cultural etiquette, local folk and craft ways, language and dialect--the residue of a seven-year survey of Louisiana conducted by word of mouth or culled out of libraries or city and parish courthouses. Two days and several trips were required to transport this material from New Orleans, cultural capital of the state, where it had been collected and organized, to Baton Rouge, the political capital where, in part, the effort had been sponsored. When it was finally over, the workers gathered on Canal Street, climbed into the trucks, and disappeared uptown. Upstairs, the Project Director, Lyle Saxon, made sure that everything had been squared away. Only the scattered detritus of office work remained. Paper clips and pencil shavings littered the floor, together with rubber bands in molded balls and bits of tattered carbons. The Director wheeled, snapped off the light, and closed the door behind. Within the week, Saxon's project had ceased to exist.⁵¹

There was a final accounting, a record of its physical achievement. The project operated for a little over seven years, employing as many as eighty-six and as few as thirty workers at an average of almost \$100 per worker per month in as few as one and as many as seven offices scattered across the state. In time, the effort had produced millions of words on nearly a dozen different projects. Only three saw publication, guides to New Orleans and to Louisiana, plus a collection of Louisiana folklore, Gumbo-Ya-Ya. Others included a collection of travel tales recorded by visitors to the state since its

⁵¹ Lyle Saxon to Clarice Rougeau, January 26, 1943, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 6.

discovery, a walking tour of the French Quarter compiled for visiting servicemen, indexes to DeBow's Review and the New Orleans Bee, histories of the Louisiana planters and their plantations, a record of French Quarter property searches, partially completed volumes on the military history of the state, a record of national culinary practices, "America Eats," a guide to the City of Shreveport, a history of Baton Rouge, a bibliographic record of publications on the state, a biographical compendium of Louisiana authors, and, finally, a one thousand-page record of Louisiana blacks since colonization compiled by an all-black unit of writers affiliated with the project. Each had been sustained completely or partially by a network of sponsoring agencies and directed, ostensibly, by a statewide advisory committee.⁵²

The sheer volume of materials gathered, arranged, and placed at the community's disposal, asserted Lyle Saxon, more than justified the cost of the effort. Scholars and students at all levels and for any reason, compelled by whatever whim or requirement, he continued, could put the collection to use in a virtually limitless number of ways. This prophecy, though largely unfulfilled, was, if anything, understated. The material assembled by Saxon's project represents one of the largest primary and secondary research collections available to the student of Louisiana history and culture. Beyond this, however, the project itself, the administrative unit revealed in its own records, as well as the things it focused upon and the things it omitted, the information it collected, distilled, and distributed, the organizational evolution of

⁵² Ibid.; Works Progress Administration of Louisiana, Service Division, "Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment: Writers," FWP, State Series, Final Reports, RG 69, (NA), Box 9, [hereinafter cited as LWP Final Report].

the project, and its stylistic point of view offer a unique glimpse into the character of American society during one of its greatest moments of transformation. The history of the project underscores the fragility of political relations, not only between the states and the federal government, but within Louisiana itself. Certain aspects of Saxon's project, a tangible legacy of the Second Louisiana Purchase, mirrored the political and cultural structure of the state it studied. Other aspects paralleled developments and tensions characteristic of American society at large, things typified not just in the organizational evolution of the project or the subjects it studied or ignored, but also in the quixotic association of Lyle Saxon and the WPA, often frustrating and sometimes maddening, usually conducted with warmth and fraternity, always enlightening and, in the end, achingly poignant.

A flurry of telegrams roused Saxon from his torpor at Melrose. Most came from Henry Alsberg, a lanky, dyspeptic man trained for the law but lacking the temperament. More recently, Alsberg had been a newspaperman and a playwright for the Provincetown Players. Now he was National Director of the recently organized Federal Writers Project, and he needed a Director for the unit organized in Louisiana. Saxon was the likeliest choice. No one in the state had a wider literary reputation and none in the Long clique knew how much he disliked the late Senator. His name would attract attention to the local project and lend it prestige. Perhaps more importantly, it would raise no new frictions in Louisiana's tense political atmosphere. From Saxon's perspective, it was a chance to end long months of poisonous inertia; besides, he was broke. He wired his acceptance, packed a duffle, promised Cammie Henry

to return soon, and boarded a train for New Orleans, glad, he remarked, "to see the very end of the red plush era in my life!"⁵³

Nothing could have prepared him for the scene that awaited. He had been authorized immediately to begin work by establishing an office and interviewing potential employees referred from relief rolls. Saxon contacted Frank Peterman, head of the Louisiana WPA, and secured office space on the second floor of the Canal Bank Building in the heart of the New Orleans financial district. Yet nothing in the modest budget provided the Director had been appropriated for office supplies and equipment; rather, he was expected to obtain such material through "cooperating agencies," meaning he was to beg or borrow everything he needed from affiliated WPA offices equally strapped for supplies. In the meantime, he began interviewing prospective staff workers, a host of unemployed hopefuls, among them out-of-work teachers, newspapermen, aspiring novelists, and pulp writers. Pouring over the maze of bureaucratic regulations required by the WPA, sifting through the operating procedures of the massive and always changing American Guide

⁵³ Henry Alsberg to Lyle Saxon, September 30, 1935; George Cronyn to Saxon, October 9, 1935; Alsberg to Saxon, October 15, 1935, "Alsberg Correspondence" WPA Collection, (LSL-BR). Alsberg is characterized in Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, pp.4-6 and in Penkower, The Federal Writers Project, pp.18-9. See Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, pp.29-50 for an account of the hectic first months of the national project effort. One reflection of Saxon's literary reputation surfaces in the number and variety of offers received during the thirties from publishers organizing studies of America. These included the chance to cover the Mississippi River for the Farrar and Rinehart "Rivers of America" series, a Louisiana folklore study for Dodd & Mead, because in "these days of sectional strife and misunderstandings there seems to us a grand opportunity to tell to all the states the story of each state," the New Orleans volume for a Doubleday series on American cities, and a biographical portrait of some unnamed Louisianian for the Alliance Book Company's "American Lives" series. Pertinent correspondence can be found in the Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 2, Folder 14; Box 4, Folders 7, 23, and 26; Box 5, Folders 1, 6, and 9; Box 6, Folder 17. Saxon to Cammie Henry, n.d., FWP Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 134.

manual, continuing to wheedle paper clips and typewriters, Saxon spent a bewildering month opening his office. "I still don't know what everything (anything I should say) is about," he confided to Cammie Henry, "but I am 'at work' or I think I am."⁵⁴

Hopes of balancing his time between official duties in New Orleans and leisure at Melrose soon collapsed under the enormity of the undertaking. Saxon was overwhelmed. "This job has me nearer the asylum than I've ever been in my life," he confided to his diary, and the principal strain, like Ellsworth Woodward before him, stemmed from the constant parade of people asking for work. Most brought a tale of woe, others an intention "to grab any government money they can--and not work for it." Some were friends, such as Caroline Dorman, local expert on flora and fauna and an old acquaintance of Cammie Henry's, or the New Orleans artist, Caroline Durieux. Others were complete strangers, such as twenty-four year old J.M. Rone of Shreveport, who had studied journalism at Centenary College and the University of Texas, and had worked part-time for the Daily Texan in Austin and the Shreveport Journal back home. For references, he produced a wad of rejection slips from the American Mercury, the Atlantic Monthly, and Esquire, explaining that he had hoped to have a letter from his former managing editor, but since he was on his honeymoon the rejections attested just as well to his literary aspirations. Others fairly demanded a chance to slop at

⁵⁴ "Special Instructions, Number One, To State Directors of the Writers' Projects, Works Progress Administration," WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File #17; R.D. Pittman to Lyle Saxon, October 28, 1935, *ibid.*, File 34, Drawer 4; Saxon to Alsberg, October 17, 1935, Administrative Correspondence, 1935-9, RG 69, (NA), Box 1. A discussion of the types of people who applied to Saxon for work on his new project appears in Ronnie W. Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana," (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1974), pp. 72-97; Saxon to Cammie Henry, n.d., FWP Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 134.

the pork trough. An ex-reporter from Alexandria claimed that the son he had lost in the European War more than entitled him to a share of "made work." Some campaigned, offering alliance with the New Dealers in their on-going quarrel with the Long political heirs. "As for my own personal convictions and ideals," wrote Robert Edwards, future supervisor of one of Saxon's district offices, "I have always been opposed openly to the odious dictatorship set up in this state by the present nefarious state political machine." Others sent barely literate appeals such as one black woman who declared, "I am a writer. Have Plenty Drama. Both school and church I have a book or a composition. Sub. Our Progress since Slavery. I think it is very interest... I have a desire to become a famous writer so help me if you please." Sometimes the effort taxed Saxon to his limits. At one point he was too "nervous and 'all in'" to hold a pen, and at another he simply fled the office in nervous panic, vowing to return to Melrose "with my tail between my legs." He didn't. "Instead," he wrote, "I sit in an office and dictate form letters to poor devils who want work. If only I had the power to just hire people and then put them to work, but all I say now is 'come back Thursday'... and it always tears me up to refuse people who need work so badly."⁵⁵

Yet for all his distraction and uncertainty Saxon established his office within three weeks. By early November he had already hired thirty people, a group including trained research workers in history,

⁵⁵ Saxon to Cammie Henry, October 15, 1935; October 16, 1935; October 18, 1935, FWP Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 134; Robert Edwards to Saxon, October 18, 1935, WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 31, Drawer 4; J.M. Rowe to Saxon, November 10, 1935, *ibid.*, File 24; Oliver M. Thompson to Saxon, March 3, 1936, *ibid.*, File 33; Laura Lee Spencer to Saxon, December 25, 1935, File 39; Carolyn Durieux to Saxon, February 16, 1937, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 2.

the arts, the physical and the social sciences, authors, critics, feature writers, reporters, editors, lecturers, a librarian, a lawyer, and a draughtsman. He had also hired Edward Dreyer to manage the office. It is uncertain how the two met, but their mutual affection was immediate and lasting. Eddie Dreyer was a young man still in his twenties and not long out of Tulane where he had majored in English, taken a B.A. in 1930 and an M. A. one year later. Intermittently, between 1931 and 1934 he had studied for the Ph.D. at Duke, completing all the requirements except his thesis. A year later, returned to New Orleans, he had landed a clerkship in the Social Service Division of the local FERA office where Saxon found him and requested his transfer. The Director thrived on the company of keen young men. They made up a disproportionate share of Saxon's retinue, noted one shrewd observer, and were always quick to fetch him highballs or to light his cigarettes. Many were aspirant writers seeking a patron, others were simply hangers-on. But among them all Saxon developed an affection for Dreyer unequalled until late in life when he met Robert Tallant. Eddie Dreyer had bright eyes, a thick shock of curly hair, and a quick wit. When a friend on the Project celebrated a birthday Dreyer telegraphed "congratulations on attaining our mental age, signed the Dionne quintuplets." He quoted Shakespeare to project typists. He engineered office pranks, including an impromptu minstrel song announcing the publication of Children of Strangers, performed by a secretary in light mulatto make-up. He had an incisive mind and knew it. "The trouble with us is that we are too clever for words," he once confessed, "especially me." Saxon cherished him for it. He admired Dreyer's intelligence, "his keen, tough mind." They worked together, inseparably, for six years, Dreyer

ultimately becoming Assistant State Supervisor then Assistant Regional Supervisor, each time as Saxon's right hand man. When Dreyer enlisted in the Navy in 1942 Saxon brought all the influence he could muster to keep Dreyer stateside. The next year, a travel assignment for WPA provided an opportunity for a brief reunion in Chicago, where Dreyer was training. "Little did I think I'd be spending the afternoon of Father's Day with the Ensign!" Saxon exclaimed. The emphasis was his, reflecting, perhaps, a residual glow. Dreyer had bought him a card.⁵⁶

Dreyer became one of the basic foundations of the Project's success. He provided Saxon with someone on whom he could depend for emotional and professional support, a relationship whose dual roles complimented one another. Saxon gained not only a confidant, someone to brighten his salon, but a capable administrator able to relieve Saxon of a large measure of project tedium. Dreyer was an adroit manager. He whipped the New Orleans office into shape, showed an easy grasp of guidelines handed down from the national office, and adjusted handily to sudden and frequent shifts in policy and procedure. His efficiency earned the approval of the Project Field Supervisors, a roving band of troubleshooters fanned out from Washington to facilitate the establishment of state units. Dreyer also established local project

⁵⁶ Edward Dreyer to Saxon, November 6, 1935, Alsberg Correspondence, WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 18; Saxon to George Seuzeneau, Jr., October 26, 1935, *ibid.*, File 34, Drawer 4; Saxon to Alsberg, January 6, 1936; March 3, 1936, Alsberg Correspondence, *ibid.*, File 18; Dreyer to Cammie Henry, June 28, 1937, Melrose Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 344; Saxon to George M. Reynolds, February 9, 1939, FWP Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 8; Undated Lucius Beebe column in Melrose Scrapbook #225, (CGHRC); Saxon to H.L. Griffin, September 10, 1937, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 3; Dreyer to "Marge," July 8, 1941, *ibid.*, Box 5; Saxon to Edward Tomlinson, July 28, 1942; Saxon to Commander Richard McNulty, June 30, 1942; Saxon to Commander Fender, September 2, 1942; Saxon to Marge Hunter, n.d., *ibid.*, Box 6.

operational procedures and oversaw their implementation. Later, once district offices had been established statewide, he coordinated their activities, oversaw their correspondence, and chided them for their literary style. "Please don't use two adverbs where only one will do," he once requested.⁵⁷

Dreyer's ability helps account for the internal stability of the project effort, the high literary quality of its effort, and the smooth relations it enjoyed not only with local and state politicians but also with national project directors. His efforts shielded Saxon from the sort of bureaucratic burdens responsible in part for the high rate of turnover among FWP directors in other states. In the office he was spared the necessity of close supervision that often drew other directors into imbroglios with disaffected workers. Most such disputes were petty and all were damaging to morale and to production. Not so in Louisiana where, with Eddie Dreyer as overseer, "Papa" Saxon exercised a benevolent and kind-hearted lordship over his literary plantation. Freed by Dreyer from office responsibilities Saxon devoted his energies to a careful shaping of guide copy, really his first interest. In the meantime his literary reputation and genial demeanor stiffened project morale. He inspired a confidence in his workers shaped by his public image as a humble man uncomfortable with literary fame. Then, too, Saxon hit the luncheon circuit, addressing local gatherings of Rotarians and other civic leaders and small-town literary clubs, enlisting support for the project. It was a chore he always despised, yet one

⁵⁷ Darel McConkey to Henry Alsberg, February 4, 1936, February 5, 1936; Lawrence Morris to Alsberg, April 10, 1936, "Field Reports," RG 69, (NA), Box 1; Dreyer to All Project Supervisors, April 7, 1936, WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 17.

accomplished with his characteristic charm.⁵⁸

Saxon's reputation and savvy also cemented relations with local politicians and the state machine run by the Longites. He charmed them with an easy grace, eventually wooing New Orleans Mayor Robert Maestri, formerly a close associate of the Kingfish and currently the machine's hand-picked master of the city, into sponsoring the New Orleans Guide. This was no mean piece of state craft. Saxon had assembled his office in the middle of a full scale political brawl over Huey's succession. The machine converted an upcoming gubernatorial election into a popular crusade, lambasting the opposition as the "Assassination Ticket" intent on riding to power on votes purchased with WPA dollars. Cleveland Dear, head of the so-called "Home Rule" ticket opposed to the machine was accused by the Longites of striking a bargain with the New Dealers in order to steal the election and despoil Huey's legacy. For the most part Administration officials and national FWP supervisors remained on the sidelines, though each viewed the contest warily. "[S]hould the Long crowd get control of the WPA," warned Darel McConkey, Henry Alsberg's Field Supervisor on the scene, "there will probably be some tough sledding for the writers' projects. Saxon intimated that he had been very careful... about publicity on the Writers' Project," and indeed he had.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ MacDonald, Federal Relief Administration, p.672. Fewer than one-quarter of the state directors selected in the early months of the FWP effort were still on the job when the state guide was published. Saxon was one of only four directors to retain his position from beginning to end. Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, pp. 79, 92.

⁵⁹ Ronnie W. Clayton, "Guides and Gumbo: The LWP's Major Publications," unpublished manuscript in possession of the author. The gubernatorial election is treated in Field, "The Politics of the New Deal in Louisiana, 1933-1939," pp.196-260; Darel McConkey to Henry Alsberg, February 4, 1936, Field Reports, RG 69, (NA), Box 1.

Despite professing a lifelong revulsion to politics, Lyle Saxon played the game skillfully. Among his first assignments he established a district office in Shreveport, Louisiana, a city in the northwestern section of the state in a parish adjacent to the Texas border. A lingering political and cultural rivalry smoldered between Shreveport and New Orleans, and here, early on, Saxon encountered some of his "toughest sledding." He began by spending the first week of November in Shreveport, where he selected Hugh Spiva to head the office. It appeared to be a fortunate choice. Spiva was a college-trained newspaperman and editor of a weekly sheet, The Webster. More importantly, in a town notorious for the jealous guardianship of its local prerogatives, Spiva, "a man with a large personal following," seemed to be the right political choice. The selection backfired. Spiva lived in nearby Minden, Louisiana, dividing his time between newspaper duties at home and project affairs in Shreveport. But Spiva had no Eddie Dreyer to run the office in his absence. Whenever he returned to Minden managerial authority went with him. Before long Shreveport officials, hostile to the "boondoggle" anyway, began to lodge numerous complaints about the district office. Project workers were noticed sipping coffee for long hours at a downtown hotel. Others, evidently, preferred livelier refreshments and more creative diversions. Critics claimed that the project trash cans contained more empty whiskey bottles than waste paper. Reports surfaced alleging that several drunken writers had repeatedly disrupted affiliated offices nearby, especially the local sewing project. For his part Spiva suspected a plot. "You are no doubt aware of the feeling of animosity toward the project that exists in almost every parish in the state," he cautioned

Saxon, and "as I have told you in two previous letters, every possible attempt to cast suspicion of almost any conceivable misdemeanor--from drinking to illicit relations--has been made toward the employees on this project." Liquor bottles discovered in the office, he charged, had been planted by someone hoping to sabotage the project in Shreveport. This is certainly plausible. As a young man fresh out of law school anxious to make a name for himself and not bashful about how he did it, Huey Long had moved to Shreveport where on at least two occasions he was forced to defend his boat-rocking tactics with his fists. This new form of meddling, inspired by the federal government, was no more welcome. Still, no evidence supports Spiva's accusations of outright sabotage. Rather Spiva's troubles seem more of a managerial nature. Left to themselves his project workers played more than they worked. Bickering and petty squabbles among the personnel of the Shreveport office characterize the district operation throughout its existence, even after injuries sustained in an automobile accident forced Spiva's resignation in the Spring of 1936. Nevertheless, despite the trouble to the north, Saxon realized the political advantage of expanding his operations statewide, and he pursued expansion with greater vigor in the Spring of 1936.⁶⁰

Such efforts met with mixed fortunes. Seven in all were established, aside from the state office in New Orleans, giving the Project representation in each of the state's congressional districts.

⁶⁰ Saxon to Alsberg, November 19, 1935, Alsberg Correspondence, WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 18; Spiva to Saxon, December 19, 1935, February 28, 1936, April 7, 1936; Saxon to Spiva, March 2, 1936, *ibid.*, File 26, Drawer 4; Saxon to Rougeau, April 30, 1943, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 6; McConkey to Alsberg, February 8, 1936, Field Reports, RG 69, (NA), Box 1.

This would facilitate the collection of guide material by easing the burden on the state office to be sure, but it would also cement relations between the national project and its local constituents. Saxon's district offices led a gypsy-like eighteen month existence between February, 1936, and July, 1937. All were small, averaging no more than four workers apiece, including a supervisor. All operated on the thinnest of fiscal allotments, forcing most to beg among communities not always sympathetic to their plight. Each district project worked out of makeshift offices often moved and seldom stocked with even the basic rudiments of necessary equipment. Finally, when a general WPA quota cut was enforced in the summer of 1937, Saxon closed the districts, ending a unique episode in project history of which the experiences of Blanche Oliver were, more or less, typical.⁶¹

Oliver, a free-lance contributor to several publications and the author of a book of black verse, Cawn Pone and Pot Likker, supervised the district office in Monroe, Louisiana. Appointed in March 1936, she found herself and her four co-workers responsible for reporting on the fourteen surrounding parishes with no fiscal provision for travel. Cautiously, she requested the services of a photographer to facilitate the research, hoping aloud that it would not land her "in the federal pen at Atlanta." When she finally obtained the use of a government car, she found them all "in about the same condition as the United States was during the administration of the past President, Herbert Hoover." Six months later, after much haggling, many supplications, and a hands and knees estimate of her total office space, she installed a telephone in

⁶¹ The records of each of Saxon's district offices are part of the WPA Collection, (LSL-BR).

her new office, her third office since March. Originally her tiny project had been settled among a cluster of affiliated WPA offices in downtown Monroe. Shortly afterwards, district supervisors who engineered the consolidation of all FERA and WPA relief activities under the same roof, judged that the floor space occupied by Oliver's unit would better serve as a storage area for dead files. She was evicted. Local authorities, grateful for the expansion of WPA efforts in the area, secured her free office space on the fourth floor of the Central Bank Building. Dwindling revenue had forced the management to shut off elevator service, requiring Oliver and her staff to navigate three flights of stairs in the summer heat, but the whole floor was hers provided she paid for janitorial services and electricity. She never complained, although she knew exactly how many steps there were between the street and her office. Clearly, though, this situation could not last, or so she was informed by WPA authorities after they discovered that Oliver had neglected to secure the mandatory three bids required by the code of administrative procedure before authorizing a lease agreement with a private organization. She took this second eviction with considerable aplomb and, presumably, great relief. Her new office, established in a nearby estate, was a whole floor nearer the ground. She remained undaunted. In her new office, Oliver assembled materials gleaned from her searches into the surrounding parishes, and rechecked her work in a hectic trip to Baton Rouge where she spent twelve-hour days in the LSU library. When it was all over and Saxon had been forced to close her office, she packed off nineteen thick envelopes of material, including various tours conducted through her district, histories of each parish, monthly reports on her activities and business

correspondence, folklore researches, write-ups of every town and village in her region, excerpts from significant documents and diaries, human interest stories, interviews with local residents on a variety of topics, and one poem, "Swan Song of the Fifth Louisiana District Federal Writers' Project":

There ain't no nothin' much no more
An' nothin' ain't no use to we,
In vain we'll wish that we could write
More stories for the likes of thee.

We seen a letter in our box,
with "CONFIDENTIAL" writ thereon,
We haven't did a thing but weep,
At what was wrote inside upon.

So fare thee well, a fond farewell,
Ah, woe is us---alas! alack!
We done our job so doggone well,
You'll never more recall us back.⁶²

The remaining district offices fared little better, and a couple fared much worse. Among the best administered was the Alexandria office supervised by Velma Juneau. A petty bureaucratic haggle within the local relief structure forced Lyle Saxon repeatedly to her defense, and her project office was as travelled as Blanche Oliver's; yet despite such handicaps, Juneau established solid relations within the community and a general interest in her work. She encouraged the donation of any material related to the history and folklore of the region, accepting every contribution with equal enthusiasm. In Baton Rouge, too, the establishment of a district office cemented relations between the national administration and local authorities. This had been "doubly important," in Saxon's estimation, justifying an expansion of the local

⁶² Monroe Correspondence, WPA Collection, LSL-BR, File 21; Louisiana Writers' Project, Monthly Narrative Reports, Districts, "June 30, 1937," p.14, RG 69, (NA), Box 1, [cited hereinafter as LWP Monthly Reports].

relief budget in order to secure the cooperation of the administration at LSU. "As you know, " he wrote Henry Alsberg, "this was Mr. Huey Long's greatest stronghold, and there had been some friction in that quarter until very recently." As a result, Saxon opened one of his largest and most energetic offices in Baton Rouge, staffed by eight workers. Here the district office not only completed its share of folklore and guide related activities, but also conducted ex-slave interviews, compiled a history of the city, and a survey of the surrounding plantation region. It closed with the other district projects in 1937, but again to soothe relations with the Long faction it was re-opened in 1938.⁶³

Other district offices operated less smoothly and with more local disruptions. Personnel squabbles continued to hamper activities in Shreveport, and the wholesale resignation of the Lake Charles unit forced its temporary closure. By far, however, the most troublesome of Saxon's districts was in Lafayette, the political and geographical heart of Acadiana. Saxon chose Mary Jane Sweeney to head the local project after Sweeney had conducted an aggressive campaign for appointment, easily the most active and imaginative of its kind. She barraged the Director with a volley of letters of reference that left him incredulous. "The number and variety of your endorsers," he confessed, "is astonishing." Sweeney was a former high school teacher, originally

⁶³ Alexandria Correspondence, WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 33; Saxon to Alsberg, March 18, 1936, Alsberg Correspondence, *ibid.*, File 18; Baton Rouge Correspondence, *ibid.*, File 27; LWP Monthly Reports, RG 69, (NA), Box 9. In order to help reestablish the University's tarnished reputation after the indictment in 1939 of its President, James Monroe Smith, one of many implicated in the so-called "Louisiana Scandals of 1939," it became a co-sponsor of the Louisiana Guide. Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana," pp.61-5.

from Gueydan, Louisiana, who held an M.A. from George Peabody University. She was earnest, anxious to be a part of "this worthwhile undertaking," and chafed at the interval of inactivity between her appointment and the official opening of her project. In the meantime, she drove to New Orleans, secured a copy of the massive compendium of instructions directing the collection of guide material, and assembled an impressive advisory board composed of educators and influential citizens in the district. The list included, among others, E.L. Stephens, Ellsworth Woodward's old friend and founder of the Southwestern Training Institute, and Rufus McIlhenny, whose family dominated the economic and political life of nearby Iberia Parish. At this point, however, Sweeney's fortunes soured. Her abrupt decision to move her offices alienated local relief officials. She bickered with her staff, accusing one member of a congenital inability to make verbs and subjects agree. She quarrelled with district WPA supervisors when they removed one of her workers no longer qualified for relief. She had connections and the inclination to use them, appealing this matter all the way to John Fournet, a prominent Longite who had been at the Senator's side when he was assassinated, and currently a Justice of the State Supreme Court. While she fought her war on many fronts, Sweeney's office work declined. Deadlines were never reached for a host of reasons. At one juncture she reported that her typist, close to a nervous breakdown, would require a two-week convalescence. A car borrowed to check local tour mileages had a broken speedometer. She disagreed with Eddie Dreyer over the content of her essays, presumably as a result of Dreyer's campaign against adverbial accolades. "In many instances in my revised edition," she complained, "I added only a short phrase to soften the

cruel and untrue words but...these were eliminated." Ultimately, his patience exhausted, Saxon issued her a sharply worded rebuke and washed his hands of the situation at the first opportunity. When the national quota reduction was announced forcing Saxon to trim his budget by liquidating the district offices, Mary Jane Sweeney's was the first to go.⁶⁴

This did not happen before Sweeney's tenure had revealed the most vulnerable points of the entire guide program. Throughout her affiliation with the project, Sweeney struggled to create a portrait of her local region both enticing to out of town tourists and acceptable to local political leaders. Her reputation was at stake, she insisted, in each volley fired in the protracted skirmish with Dreyer's editorial staff. Yet her squabble, if isolated, also called into question the focus of the entire effort, inquiring whether the guide would be created as a patchwork of local self-images or as a truly national literary portrait. An incident, amusing as it is instructive, illustrates the clashing points of view. After months of imploring Saxon to come to Lafayette "to be on the scene of action," Sweeney received not the State Director but two members of the state editorial staff. They had just embarked on a swing around the state to assist each district office in its final check of tour mileages, and decided to make Lafayette the first stop. Sweeney was delighted. She busied herself with a flurry of preparations, inflating the visit into an elaborate round of social calls to local politicians and prominent residents. Teas were arranged

⁶⁴ Lake Charles Correspondence, WPA Collection, LSL-BR, File 31; Saxon to Sweeney, November 19, 1935; Sweeney to Saxon, December 9, 1935, June 10, 1937, Lafayette Correspondence, *ibid.*, File 32; LWP Monthly Reports, RG 69, (NA), Box 9; Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers Project in Louisiana," pp.49-70, 98-115.

in the visitors' honor, and a visit to Shadows-on-the-Teche, the antebellum plantation recently restored by Saxon's good friend, Weeks Hall. Sweeney even arranged for a luncheon at the McIlhenny's home on Avery Island, where, presumably, the state representatives would sample the full magnitude of all the charms Mary Sweeney's district could muster. Here they would see her point of view, realize first-hand the intricacies of her local position and, she hoped, give her copy wider latitude. This never happened. Saxon's two representatives, travelling on a tight budget in a battered car, kept Mary Jane Sweeney in the field checking tour mileages twelve hours a day for one solid week. For seven consecutive days they "hunted the end of so many dirt roads" filled with ruts, holes, and other obstacles that two weeks after her guests had departed without attending a single tea or luncheon, Mary Jane Sweeney was still under the care of an osteopath.⁶⁵

Saxon retained a firm grip on the character of the Louisiana guide copy, but Mary Jane Sweeney's experience could cut both ways. From the moment of its inception and throughout the span of its operation, Saxon's project evolved into an organization of mass production guided by the principles of the assembly line and governed by the overriding concern of creating a product marketable nationwide, something designed specifically for mass consumption. A tightly organized production system supervised the creation of guide material according to the same formula in each of the states. All were required to complete essays on a variety of common topics such as government, history, social life, and others, each based on information collected, more or less, in a common

⁶⁵ Sweeney to Saxon, March 8, 1936, March 25, 1936, April 3, 1936, April 11, 1936; Saxon to Sweeney, September 15, 1936; Cassibry to Sweeney, September 21, 1936; Sweeney to Cassibry, October 10, 1936.

fashion. In Louisiana, as elsewhere, it began in the field, where workers in the district projects gathered facts and figures, the Project's raw material. In each of these districts, NYA workers joined the harvest. Mostly kids just out of high school or working their way through college, they rifled through parish libraries or courthouse records or interviewed local citizens, usually older inhabitants and sometimes ex-slaves. Notes jotted on scraps of paper at the scene were then transformed by district writers into preliminary essays referred to as "field continuity." These were reviewed by field editors, either district workers or, perhaps, volunteer experts in specialized fields, a process that yielded "field editorial copy." Field editorial copy was shipped to the state office where a second editing produced "state editorial copy," shipped in turn to Washington, the final station along the line. At each point quality control checks condensed the essays, stripped them of booster rhetoric, watered down phrases of potential political controversy, and checked the accuracy of facts. An overriding concern all along the line thus became the smooth flow of production copy. National officials constantly implored state directors to provide regular shipments of state copy in order to avoid periodic gluts of material in Washington. Field workers were assigned minimum quotas of weekly field continuities. The tone of monthly reports as well as their arrangement focused on a cost-benefit analysis of man hours worked versus words produced, either created or edited.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana," pp.148-76; Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, pp.75-95. According to Penkower, the Washington staff blacklisted such obvious blasts of booster bombast as: "interesting," "unique," "unusual," "quaint," "odd," "amusing," "famous," "well-known," "shrine," "panorama," "kaleidoscope," "quest for pleasure," "amusement," "cornucopia," "beauty of the deep," "loves of the sea," "altogether

Over the years of its operation, then, the writers' projects developed a system of mass production modeled on the assembly-line and devoted to the industrial values of economy, diligence, and professionalism. In Louisiana, as on the other state projects, the method of production most closely resembled the operation of a daily newspaper. Relief rolls provided a supply of laborers grouped according to skill into one of four classifications: professional, skilled, intermediate, or unskilled, paid accordingly on a regional wage scale. Classrooms were established where the uninitiated learned the rudiments of reporting and the publishing process. Topics included basic techniques of interviewing, editing, proofreading, and all other steps required to publish or compile a book. The classes also stressed a familiarity with basic reference works such as the Periodical Guide to Literature, The Dictionary of American Biography, and the Union List of Serials. Project writers were then assigned specialized topics of research requiring essays of a specified length to be submitted within an allotted time. Emphasis, too, was placed on the professional status of the project worker, a value reflected in the nomenclature of the parent organization. The WPA, that titanic and sprawling industrial giant, was divided into a host of affiliated divisions, among them the Women's and Professional Division, supervising authority over all white collar projects. Later, the name of the division was altered to reflect even more closely its professional orientation. Under the Federal Works Agency created in 1939, locally sponsored arts projects were overseen by the "Service Division." In accordance with such values, the members of

colorful," "thousand and one services," "infectious spirit of play," and "innumerable quiet havens." Ibid., p.75.

the writers' projects worked standardized hours in a five day work week. They were required to fulfill minimum standards of discipline, diligence, and attendance. They were, in short, held to a situation inherently contradictory. By design relief work was temporary. The ultimate goal of the entire effort was re-employment of relief workers within the private sector. By organization, however, the writers' program depended for its flow of copy upon a smooth-functioning assembly-line of operators steadily on the job. The satisfaction of one aim lead inevitably to the frustration of the other.⁶⁷

The persistent tension between talent and need inherent in each of the arts projects played itself out in Saxon's project by a constant juggling of personnel. Generally, however, whenever possible the ultimate aim of the project, the production of copy, governed its composition. Saxon retained Blanche Oliver, one of his most trusted subordinates in the field, long after her name was removed from the relief rolls. Mary Jane Sweeney, whose sinecure supported an ailing mother, was let go at the earliest opportunity. More importantly, however, the industrial form of Saxon's unit came ultimately to direct its literary content, something the State Director fought throughout his tenure at WPA, explaining why, perhaps, he stayed so long. For if the organization aimed at creating a national portrait in letters by cleansing guidecopy of local boasts and blusters, then the inherent trend of the effort posed an equal threat to Lyle Saxon and Mary Jane Sweeney. This was something Saxon opposed with great energy and, it seems, at tremendous personal cost, something ultimately he fought

⁶⁷ Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers's Project in Louisiana," pp.148-57; LWP Final Report, RG 69, (NA), Box 9.

unsuccessfully. Saxon once explained his novel, Children of Strangers, as an attempt to see the unique social composition of Melrose, a "country very dear to me... put down upon paper before it lost its quality and became standardized.... Ten years ago this community was far from a highway or a railroad," he lamented. "Today, a highway passes through this community and the old customs are disappearing. The young mulattoes, like young people everywhere, are adapting themselves to the modern standards of living. Automobiles whiz along the road today, and one must go into the lanes and byways to find the picturesque."⁶⁸

Small wonder then why Lyle Saxon spent the final years of his life doing what he did. Houghton-Mifflin published Children of Strangers in 1937, two years after Saxon became State Director of the Louisiana section of the FWP. Once aboard, he remained on the WPA ship to the very last. Yet these were not years idly wasted treading the federal mill. Saxon did not, as his mourners lamented, abandon his creative talent for the security of Harry Hopkins' dole. Instead, hoping simultaneously to recoup his literary fame and restore his literary world, he used his talents and his unit in a sustained rear-guard action waged against the arch-foe, modernity. By 1937, the effort had fully commenced of turning field continuity and district reports into the published volumes that would introduce the American reader to Lyle Saxon's Louisiana. Yet a central tension would characterize this effort. In its early phases, the American Guide Program represented an immense excursion into the picturesque as defined by Saxon himself. He

⁶⁸ Lyle Saxon to Laura Snow, October 22, 1937, FWP Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 39; "Free Mulattoes of Cane River," unpublished manuscript in *ibid.*, Folder 126.

applauded the effort, perhaps even typified it, in the tone of his first project publication, the New Orleans Guide. Much of the Program was dedicated to finding the end of every byway in the nation, a project whose size and scope inspired romance, a celebration of the small and forgotten hamlet together with the large and bustling city, and in it the Whitmanesque affirmation of the democratic chant. Yet at the same time the ultimate implications of the undertaking helped confirm Lyle Saxon's greatest fears. The national inventory accomplished by the Guide Program was achieved by the creation of a large-scale industrial organization that created a standardized product for domestic consumption. While it may have celebrated the picturesque it did so according to a formula followed in each of the states. For the massive effort expended simply to find the picturesque, together with the sort of energies expended in its veneration, underscores the existence of a certain nervous anxiety, a fear that the object of celebration was no longer the rule of American life but the exception.

The later years of Saxon's WPA experience seemed only to confirm such anxieties. In the face of slim budgets, shifting guidelines, and chronic employee turnover, his project amassed an enormous collection of Louisiana research materials, and used these to produce two guidebooks, a folklore volume, and numerous lesser publications. Suffused with romance and rich in the spirit of the Louisiana cycle it imitated, the major project works represent Saxon's last stand against the modern onslaught. The spirit of the Baron Carondelet fills the New Orleans Guide. The Louisiana Guide sneers at modern architecture. And Gumbo Ya-Ya, a collection of voodoo charms, ghost stories, and tall tales published in 1945, represents the author's final attempt to secure a

literary world from destruction. Wartime rationing required the release of this final volume on pulp stock; yet this seems more than simple coincidence, as though the paper's fragility symbolized the book's diminished influence and the waning powers of its guiding spirit. Within a year of its release, Saxon was dead, along with the romantic past he relied upon so heavily. It is hard to say which out-lived the other. Saxon waged his final struggle overmatched and in the enemy's camp. He spent the last years of his creative life neither as New Orleans bon vivant nor leisured man of southern letters; he was a government bureaucrat. The project volumes might have echoed the romantic writings of his early career, but the method of their construction made them fundamentally different. The project work was mass produced. It was never so much written as it was assembled according to standard guidelines established by a central office, whose policies of procedure, production, and content were enforced through a regional network of bureaucratic supervision. The effort bore all the characteristics of industrial manufactures. The former artist and man of letters now supervised a literary assembly line, manufacturing words by the same method Henry Ford used to make cars.⁶⁹

This was no small irony. Just as the New Deal challenged the American tradition of political localism, the Writers' Projects it sponsored undermined the long supremacy of literary Regionalism. The industrial character of the Projects' operation inevitably directed the flavor of its work. Assembled according to modern principles of mass

⁶⁹ Federal Writers' Project, New Orleans, The New Orleans City Guide, (Boston, 1938); Louisiana Writers' Project, Louisiana: A Guide to the State, (New York, 1941); Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, Robert Tallant, Gumbo Ya-Ya, (Boston, 1945).

production, the American Guide Series, of which Saxon's three volumes were a part, celebrated the distinctive tang of the regions even as it blended each into a stew ladled out for mass consumption. The Guide Series, an attempt to explain the various localities of the country in terms easily understood by any American, reduced the regions to subordinate roles, making shallow stereotypes of the Southern Mythology Lyle Saxon depended upon for so much for so long. Seeking to regain national acclaim for his regional voice, he seized the opportunity to broadcast his vision of the past through the medium of mass communications offered by the Project. It was a losing bargain struck with the Devil. When the Confederacy was defeated on the field by arms and industry, its champions turned to the battleground of the press where they perfected the myth of the Old South. It passed virtually intact across successive generations, carefully preserved by a guild of literary craftsmen. The young Saxon had heard the spectral chant, taken up its refrain, and briefly held center stage. But the cottage industry of southern myth-making proved no more impervious to mass communications than cobblers were to the Industrial Revolution. Struggling again for the limelight, Lyle Saxon, first of the literary manufacturers, had himself unmasked Lyle Saxon, last of the southern mythologists.

While evidence accumulated confirming the futility of the struggle, the author redoubled his efforts to preserve his mask. In the capital at Baton Rouge, the Longites continued their program of steamrolling the state into the twentieth century. At LSU a remarkable collection of literary critics, among them Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, happily dynamited the romantic foundations of southern literature. Closer to home, WPA engineers busied themselves

transforming the face of Saxon's beloved city. Even in the Quarter, the Baron's own castle, artists were experimenting with modern forms of expression. In politics as in culture modernity had triumphed, and the strain proved overwhelming. The crisis, long brewing, broke in the Spring of 1939. That year Congress, increasingly hostile to the administration, began dismantling the arts projects. It abolished Hallie Flanagan's Federal Theater Project and threw the others onto the states for funding and support. Saxon, who hated the Longs and all they stood for, now drew his check out of an appropriation from Earl Long's travel budget. "Where to now, little man," he rued in his diary. In the Spring of 1939, too, weakened by nervous exhaustion, his body ravaged by frequent alcoholic binges, Lyle Saxon's health broke, and he never recovered it. Instead, that year he commenced a practice continued for the remaining seven years of his life. At first, in letters published anonymously in the Times-Picayune, then later, openly in print and over the radio, Saxon implored his fellow Orleanians to revive an old Carnival practice fallen into disuse by masking on Mardi Gras Day. Few moments in his life, few struggles of his complex character, are more telling than this final attempt to restore a facade so irretrievably shattered. For Saxon, the physical embodiment of the Mardi Gras spirit, Ash Wednesday had long since arrived, a development

illustrated in the composition and evolution of his three major FWP publications.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The political and physical modernization of several Southern cities, among them New Orleans, is the subject of Douglas L. Smith, The New Deal in the Urban South, pp.106-27. For a treatment of the growth of a modern, mass system of politics in Louisiana, see Sindler, Huey Long's Louisiana. The evolution of modern literary criticism at LSU is the focus of Thomas W. Cutrer, Parnassus on the Mississippi: The Southern Review and the Baton Rouge Literary Community, 1935-1942, (Baton Rouge, 1984). Saxon Diaries, Bound Volume #8, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 1. Saxon's illness is carefully recorded in his diary for 1939, including Saxon's response to Eddie Dreyer's quip that it would have been easier and cheaper to die: "It is quite true nevertheless." The fullest record of Saxon's campaign to purge Mardi Gras of its modern trends and restore the tradition of public masking appears in Scrapbook #225, Melrose Collection, (CGHRC).

CHAPTER FIVE
LAST EFFORTS AND LOST STRUGGLES

1. A View From the Quarter

When New Orleans had a blackout drill one night in early 1942, Lyle Saxon watched it from the French Quarter, atop the Monteleone Hotel. He was not alone. Saxon had come at the personal invitation of the owner himself, Frank Monteleone, whose wife or mistress, Saxon was unsure which, accompanied the party. So did Eddie Dreyer, a one-legged justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court "who just happened to be there," and a bell hop carrying a chair for the judge. They reached the rooftop with ten minutes to spare, enough time to take in a vista that dazzled Saxon. "The town was ablaze," he recalled, "and Algiers [across the river] was ringed with lights; the lakefront was blazing too, and all of the shipyards were easily discernible. It seemed to me that the town was more illuminated than I can remember it." The alarm sounded. Lights in office buildings winked out. Canal Street went black "in a great surge of darkness," then Camp Street and St. Charles Avenue. In the space of half a minute the town was black, with but a few exceptions. Saxon's eyes adjusted. He saw stars overhead. Buildings loomed out of the darkness. The river ran silver below. "It was awe-inspiring," he wrote, "the city blacking out I mean, and it brought the war home to me." It also brought Saxon, nearing fifty and in ill-health, a comforting image he had nurtured for most of his adult life. "And I realized something else. There was a mob of people in the streets, just like Mardi Gras, and they were whistling and screaming and

shouting and running around, and you could hear girls screaming "Now stop!" and bursts of laughter. It seemed so strange coming from the pitchblack canyon below...and all so typical of New Orleans, that silly city that will make a holiday out of All Saint's Day or a war or anything else...like cracking jokes on your deathbed as you take your last Absolution or whatever they call it...."

Then the lights came on and the whistles sounded "All Clear."¹

¹ Saxon to Marge Hunter, March 12, 1942, Saxon Papers, (TU), Correspondence, Box 5.

2. "Gay Times in Old New Orleans"

One Friday afternoon in the summer of 1937 Henry Alsberg sat in his office, nursing a headache. The room was crowded and stuffy. His staff, as usual, was overworked and undermanned. Correspondence criticizing his Project lay in heaps on his desk. Nor was any relief in sight. After a trying week, Alsberg could not even afford himself the solace of an evening cocktail at home. He was obligated instead to fight cross-town traffic and board the train for New York. He kept a bottle of bisodol locked in his office safe as a precaution against moments such as these and may already have reached for it to brace himself for the ride to Union Station, but Alsberg would not need it for long. As he gathered his things, the Director's secretary, Dora Thea Hettwer, delivered a package just arrived from New Orleans. Alsberg summoned what Project officials he could find into his office and, accompanied by "oh's and ah's from them all," opened the bundle. Inside, he found the rough draft, a working dummy, of the New Orleans guide compiled by Lyle Saxon and his staff. Alsberg rocked back in his chair, browsing through a collection of photographic illustrations. A smile creased his lips and broadened into a satisfied grin. The headache vanished. New York could wait. He tucked the package under his arm, trundled it home, and spent the entire weekend poring over Saxon's manuscript.²

A massive effort had produced the draft. Work on the New Orleans guide began almost as soon as the Project was organized, and despite

² Dora Thea Hettwer to Saxon, June 22, 1937, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 3.

repeated entreaties from Alsberg and his staff to concentrate efforts on the state guide. Instead, reflecting the Director's own interests, the city guide became and remained Saxon's first priority. He was already the recognized chronicler of New Orleans and his reputation was at stake, he explained to Alsberg in tones reminiscent of the departed Mary Sweeney. So from the start, aside from the state editorial office staff also housed in New Orleans, virtually every other Project employee in the New Orleans office worked on the City guide. They hunted facts, counted houses, parks, people, and statues, interviewed, measured, described, compiled, researched, surveyed, assessed, and explained a staggering number of topics related to the City past and present--208 separate essays on as many different topics, one million words sprawled across more than 3200 pages of material. After months of cutting and rewriting, Saxon, Dreyer, and the editorial staff managed to reduce this literary behemoth by four-fifths, trim it with artistic decorations, including original plates by Caroline Durieux, and pack it off to Washington in time to cure Henry Alsberg's headache.³

The Idaho Guide may have been the first, and the Washington, D.C. Guide the thickest, but the New Orleans Guide was, perhaps, the fullest expression of Project desires. It was witty and urbane in tone, cosmopolitan in outlook, comprehensive in scope, and it was also innovative, establishing a precedent followed by each succeeding FWP publication. Six months prior to completing the dummy, Saxon and his staff had begun to speculate on how best to get their work published.

³ For a report on the size and scope of these activities see "Manuscripts originally prepared for the New Orleans Guide," RG 69, (NA) Field Reports, 1935-7, Box 15. Saxon to Alsberg, March 10, 1937, RG 69, (NA), Editorial Correspondence, 1936-9, Box 45.

Newly-elected Mayor Robert Maestri had just taken office in New Orleans, and Saxon, himself a canny politician when necessary, saw an opening. Maestri was a Longite politician and former furniture salesman, a man of means reaping the rewards for a crucial loan made to the late Senator from Louisiana. Here was a chance with a single effort to secure many goals. Saxon went to his state WPA boss, James Crutcher, with a plan to secure the Mayor's good graces by inviting his office to publish the manuscript. The merits were obvious. This would not only "cement a friendship between the WPA and present leaders of the state," as Saxon advised. It would also hasten publication of the manuscript, redounding to the credit of all. Maestri would appear as a patron of the arts, something clearly more statesmanlike than used furniture, and Saxon and state WPA officials could silence persistent charges of boondoggling. Alsberg liked the idea, but Saxon was not through. Undoubtedly his anxiety to produce a volume equal in quality to his earlier works made him equally suspicious of local publishers and the Government Printing Office. As a result, three months after Alsberg approved the original plan, Saxon advanced a second suggestion, the brainchild of Clark Solomon, then with the New Orleans Item and a member of Saxon's state advisory staff. Solomon had suggested that in Maestri's name the manuscript could be offered to one of the larger New York firms, Harper's perhaps, or Scribner's. If accepted, the firm could publish the manuscript exactly as if it had been their own from the start, affording the Project all the benefits of a major publishing venture with national distribution and marketing systems. This would guarantee a vastly larger press run than any local firm could offer with all royalties accruing to the public beneficiary of choice, in this case,

the New Orleans Department of Public Welfare.⁴

Henry Alsberg liked what he heard. He not only approved Saxon's suggestion, he made it Project policy governing all future FWP publications. Here was a major turning point in the life of his Project, the chance to reach an audience commensurate with the undertaking itself. But what thrilled Alsberg more, and what delighted critics once the New Orleans Guide was released, was the spirit and content of the volume itself. Saxon's manuscript simmered with the sort of romantic nationalism that flavors the American Guide Series. Taking the Guide Manual as his blueprint, Saxon raised the basic facade required for each of the guides--the requisite compendium of explanatory essays and social statistics--then garnished it with baroque splendor. Alive to project ideals, he made New Orleans a symbol of romance and a model of cosmopolitan virtue, the ideal synthesis of historical development and modern desire. True to his own impulses, Saxon missed no chance to wage war on the standardizing influences of modern culture, something suggested by the first guide his writers completed, one never published. As Saxon and his editorial staff polished the New Orleans guide, his district office in Shreveport completed a guide to its own city, and the contrast could not have been starker. The Shreveport workers had assembled the portrait of a modern city organized around a burgeoning petroleum industry and painted it with booster colors. Pointed sentences ridiculed the big city to the south, a perennial

⁴ Saxon to Alsberg, August 7, 1936; Saxon to Alsberg, November 25, 1936, RG 69, (NA), Editorial Correspondence, 1936-9, Box 45; Alsberg to Saxon, May 28, 1937, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 3; Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana," pp.163-76. Monty Penkower discusses the publication of the guides in The Federal Writers Project, pp.117-35; Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, pp.227-30.

political and cultural rival, asserting that no progressive city with a bright industrial future need concern itself with a lack of history and culture. Since Shreveport had a future, the guide suggested, it had no need for a past. Saxon's response, never set to paper, was nevertheless immediate. The Shreveport guide found its way into the state files and never saw the light of day. Instead, in what might be regarded as Saxon's greatest literary achievement, he gave full voice to his romantic aspirations in a volume released, most appropriately, just in time for the Carnival Season of 1938.⁵

The guide proclaimed New Orleans as the romantic capital of the nation, the product of a rich historical legacy, and described it as a haven from the standardized culture of modern life. Saxon's essay on the city's historical development set the tone. "Early in its history," he asserted, "the town took on a gay and light-hearted appearance." New Orleans was the most thoroughly European of any American city, "a Babylon where Creoles, English, Spanish, French, Germans, Italians, and Americans did little else than dance, drink, and gamble," and where the principle forms of entertainment included everything "from bear and bull-baiting to Voodoo rites conducted by Negroes in Congo Square." No amount of puritanical influence had cramped the style when the Americans arrived. New Orleans social life had been modelled after the spirit of Versailles, the State Director insisted, something impervious to the simple changing of flags on the Place d'Armes. Even after the sale of Louisiana to the Americans, New Orleans remained a scene of revelry and romantic desire, the cornerstone of Aaron Burr's fantastic scheme and

⁵ Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, p. 129; "Shreveport: A Guide to the City," WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 31.

the place where a handful of pirates, prisoners, and plain-shirted frontiersmen, "as strange a force as ever served under one flag," defeated an army of British regulars down on the mudflats east of town. Burr's Conspiracy and the Battle of New Orleans were simply preludes to the city's golden age, the steamboat days of antebellum America, when opera flourished, literature blossomed, and European theater stars crowded New Orleans. "Gambling, horse-racing, dueling, steamboat racing, and cock-and dog-fighting," wrote Saxon, "in addition to the magnificence of balls, receptions, and Mardi-Gras, made New Orleans, which was even then becoming a winter haven for well-to-do Northerners, a gay metropolis." But the railroads and the Civil War eclipsed the years of antebellum splendor. The steamboats disappeared, the quadroom balls diminished, and New Orleans began the process of industrialization that established the base of its twentieth century economy.⁶

Still, Saxon would not be put off, insisting that the romantic charm of New Orleans not only remained intact but visible in the city's architectural heritage. After all, he noted, New Orleans was composed of many sections notable for the tenacity with which they clung to older forms "in the face of changing modes and modern standardization." It was also home to the Vieux Carre, one of the most distinctive architectural sections in the entire country and the physical embodiment of the town's spirit. Here two-story edifices stood nearly flush to the narrow streets decorated with intricate iron grillwork, a hint of the inner beauties arrayed behind simple plain-board or brick facades:

To enter the courtyard house one passed through massive

⁶ The Historic New Orleans Collection, The WPA Guide To New Orleans: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New Orleans, (New York, 1983), pp.7-39.

portals into a high-arched flagstoned alleyway which, wide enough to admit a carriage, led from the banquette to an inner courtyard garden, surrounded by high walls that provided an abundance of shade throughout the day. Life in such habitations as these possessed a distinctly European flavor; for the inhabitants, seated on their cool patios or on the verandas that surrounded them, enjoyed absolute freedom from the hot, dusty streets.

Yet, French Quarter architecture, reflective of the closed society of New Orleans, and so crucial to Saxon's own romantic aspirations, was but a part of the City's distinctive appearance. To Saxon, successive waves of construction innovations and stylistic fads from Greek Revival to Steamboat Gothic charted the city's cultural and social development, sustaining his assertion that the city had been little influenced by the impact of modern styles. Indeed, against the advice of his own advisory committee and of the national editorial staff, Saxon dispatched the subject of modern architecture in New Orleans with three sentences, one of them an assertion that there was very little of it in the city. The remarks, however brief, were prefaced by an admonition dear to Saxon's heart. Surveying the grand old structures of the city and ruminating over the loss of others such as the French Opera house and the St. Louis Hotel, the author warned his readers against the two greatest perils threatening local architecture and all it embodied, twin evils listed, presumably, in ascending order of danger. "The loss of the St. Louis Hotel... has been termed an architectural calamity," he wrote, but "a still greater calamity is in store... for unless the famous old buildings are carefully and properly preserved against the corrosive effects of time and modern standardization, the city will eventually lose its most distinctive claim to fame--a native architecture that

flourished a century ago and has never been equalled since.⁷

The romance of the city's past embodied in its architecture was also, in Saxon's estimation, embedded in its folkways. These he conveyed with a literary device common both in his own work and throughout the literature of the thirties. Saxon introduced his readers to the social life of the Crescent City by making them participants in its web of relations and cultural practices. He used the technique to commence each of his previous books, one calculated to draw the reader into his own romanticized portrait of the city. Naturally, as with the essays on history and architecture, Saxon's survey of New Orleans folkways emanates outward from the French Quarter and commences abruptly with the shouts of the streets and an encounter with a chimney sweep. "Look at him closely," the author warns, setting the tone of the piece. Here stands the last of a dying breed, the symbol of a fading past heated by coal and threatened with extinction by the modern conversion to natural gas. Soon the reader is befriended by a local guide, a Creole, who deciphers the cries of street vendors, translates snatches of patois French, expounds on the mysteries of New Orleans coffee, and graciously indulges his guest's desire to visit the more prominent Voodoo shrines of the City. Together they visit the grave of Marie Laveau, renowned Voodoo priestess of the late nineteenth century, and browse through a Voodoo drugstore whose wares and prices are reprinted in the text.⁸

⁷ Ibid., pp.145-55. For editorial comment on the content of Saxon's survey of New Orleans architecture, see Roderick Seidenberg to Henry Alsberg, January 28, 1937, RG 69, (NA), "Correspondence and Editorial Reports Pertaining to Architectural Studies, 1935-9," Box 187.

⁸ The WPA Guide to New Orleans, pp.56-66.

Similar trappings appear throughout the New Orleans Guide. Various essays and photographs retell Creole myths and legends, repeat Voodoo charms, and describe Carnival practices, "Negro Cults," and the graveyards of New Orleans, its celebrated "cities of the dead." All point to a common theme embodied in Saxon's essay, "Gay Times in Old New Orleans," the philosophical heart of the volume. The essay established and explored a subject announced in the title, the image of the town as a place care forgot. It includes such stock Saxon images as the quadron balls of the early nineteenth century, places, he explains, "like many a Parisian salon of the same or earlier periods," where wealthy young white men met current or future mistresses. Included, too, is a wry survey of the tenderloin districts, including Storyville, and tales of various reform movements never taken seriously either by the local populace or the author. Instead, in perpetual refrain, there echoes the whisper of an imagined past crushed underfoot by an unglamorous present. Saxon concludes the piece with an anecdotal paean to the roiling humanity of Storyville before the war, a place where thieves connived, drunks reeled, lovers shouted, and working girls beckoned, a place vanished forever and sadly missed:

...for where can one find the equals of former celebrated procuresses? Countess Willie Plaza, under whose roof a Central-American revolution was hatched, is dead. She is dead and her gilded mirrors and green plush chairs and white piano sold at auction; the piano, badly in need of tuning, going for \$1.25. Josie Arlington was buried in and later removed from Metairie Cemetery, but a bronze maiden, representative of the virgins whom Josie never allowed in her house, still knocks in vain on the door of her tomb; and a legend which tells of a⁹ red light mysteriously issuing from the grave is current.

⁹ Ibid., pp.212-9.

Steeped in nostalgia, phrased in a crisp, urbane tone, the New Orleans Guide served a double purpose. It not only reflected Lyle Saxon's romantic sensibilities, but satisfied national FWP values. Henry Alsberg and his staff in Washington actively promoted the American Guide Series as proof of the cosmopolitan character of American society. Similar to Holger Cahill, who saw in the Index of American Design a tangible record of the nation's artistic diversity, Alsberg and other FWP supervisors regarded their collection of state and local guides as a chronicle of American ethnic and cultural variety. Collectively, this literary portrait of America celebrated the heterogeneity of the landscape and its people, applauded the intricate mix of national origins and cultural practices, and pled for a cosmopolitan acceptance of all. As such, the Guide Series represents a departure from the cultural confrontations of the previous decade, when the last stand of an older, nativist, more individualized ethos challenged the modern temper in the political and cultural arena, and few FWP volumes embody this departure better than the New Orleans Guide. Saxon claimed cosmopolitanism as the cultural legacy of the city's colonial heritage on the very first page of the volume:

Have you ever been to New Orleans? If not you'd better go.
It's a nation of a queer place; day and night a show!
Frenchmen, Spaniards, West Indians, Creoles, Mustees,
Yankees, Kentuckians, Tennesseans, lawyers and trustees,

Negroes in purple and fine linen, and slaves in rags and chains.
Ships, arks, steamboats, robbers, pirates, alligators,
Assassins, gamblers, drunkards, and cotton speculators;
Sailors, soldiers, pretty girls, and ugly fortune tellers;
Pimps, imps, shrimps, and all sorts of dirty fellows....

Such diversity, argued Saxon throughout the volume, was the central characteristic of the city it describes. "The melting pot has been

simmering in New Orleans for over two centuries," he asserted, "and the present-day Orleanian is a composite of many different racial elements. Intermarriage has broken down distinctions and destroyed the boundaries of racial sections. With a few minor exceptions there are no longer any districts occupied exclusively by one group." Then, too, the guide spun yarns, comforting to an audience gripped by the Depression, of the city's long tradition of snickering in the face of disaster. Finally, the overall tone of Saxon's work reflected the romantic nationalism dear to the heart of national FWP supervisors. Saxon's style was a model of its sort, projecting an air of urban sophistication immensely popular among its middle-class readership. Invoking a style honed since his newspaper days, Saxon once again proved his ability to titillate with scenes slightly prurient and asides slightly suggestive. He knew his audience and gave them what they wanted, romantic stories deviating just enough from convention to entertain but not offend, tales told with enough knowing winks and wry grins to flatter the reader and make him a participant in the tale. The combination fostered an aura of superiority, a gentle paternalism, especially visible in the telling of "negro tales." Yet it stopped short of pomposity and actively deflated the self-important, an attitude announced immediately by the cover illustration, a cartoon sketch of the equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson on the Square that bears his name. Succinctly put, the guide condescended with charm. It dared others to disagree, and in so doing risk exposure as someone boorish, a prig several paces behind the times.¹⁰

¹⁰ For discussions of the cosmopolitan aspirations of the guide program, see Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, pp.vii-viii and Hirsch, "Portrait of America," 158-213. The WPA Guide to New Orleans,

Few took up the challenge. The finished product delighted Henry Alsberg and his national FWP supervisors, as well as reviewers across the nation, who received the guide with an ovation of critical applause. Privately in 1940, Edna Ferber called the guide "my Bible," the basis for the opening chapters of her recent novel, Saratoga Trunk. Public response was more immediate and equally enthusiastic. "It gives the spirit as well as the substance of America's gayest, most romantic and best fed city," wrote Jean West Murray for the Washington Post:

And if you are one who has never walked along the levee top and smelled that rich mixture of crushed oyster shells, ripe bananas, green coffee and raw sugar which is the waterfront's distinct aroma, never lingered under the heavily fragrant magnolias by moonlight; never seen the old Dueling Oaks in City Park, or sipped cafe au lait at dawn in the French Market, this book will present to your five senses something of what you will see, hear, taste, smell, and feel when you go for a real visit to New Orleans.

Others echoed Murray's sentiments, revelling in the sensory richness of the guide and praising the extent and lavishness of its illustration. The guide, they insisted, not only narrated stories of Carnival pageantry but presented itself with the same elaborate ornamentation. Photographs studded the work. Pen and ink sketches appeared at the head and tail of essays and tours, and a series of original Caroline Durieux prints complemented the text. Recipes for cocktails and favorite local dishes garnished the essays on night life and cuisine. Yet even more, what had originally delighted Alsberg and his staff also delighted the critics. Readers of the volume, assured one reviewer, were certain "to retain a general impression [of New Orleans] compounded of mirth, sobriety, frivolity, asceticism, and above all tolerance." "Not the least value of these volumes," agreed another, describing both the

pp.xxxv, 43-6.

specific guide and the general series, "will be their use as a source book and as a guide for further research and study into what many have called the 'Pluralism of America.'"¹¹

Since its publication, the New Orleans Guide has remained among the best remembered and most celebrated volumes in the American Guide series. It should also be considered Saxon's greatest work, his richest collection of New Orleans tales, and the fullest expression of his own romantic spirit. It was also among his last. Despite this much-heralded work, the description of a city delightfully against the American grain, there were manifest signs that such vibrant splashes of local color were already giving way to a national portrait less gay, less romantic, and a good deal more standardized. For all the trappings of the guide itself, it had been constructed from a model followed across the nation from Maine to Arizona. Moreover, to make the finished product palatable across the land, the final editing process had cleansed the original manuscript of some of its more colorful touches. On Henry Alsberg's suggestion, for instance, all references to illegal gambling activities in New Orleans, of which there were many, were prefaced with warnings that declared gambling an illegal activity wherever conducted. The Director also scrapped "The Red Light District," original title of an article devoted to the history of local prostitution, once again requesting the same admonition that the institution was no longer recognized in the law. Similarly, national project editors cleansed a survey of the city's infamous female

¹¹ Edna Ferber to Saxon, November 11, 1940, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 5; Washington Post, March 6, 1938; "Library and Work Shop," Social Forces, (May 1938), p.4; "American Panorama," Prairie Schooner, (Summer 1938), pp.1-2.

impersonator clubs. "You might get criticized for including them," cautioned the National Director. Alsberg's editors took other corrections more seriously, such as the line excised from a poem included in the introductory essay, "New Orleans Old and New." The poem commenced the piece by advancing Saxon's central theme that Orleanians were the product of many social, ethnic, religious, and cultural influences, united in mutual disrespect for and indifference to the sort of puritanical conventions that prevailed throughout the remainder of the nation. "A progeny of all colors--an infernal motley crew," the poem asserted, New Orleans was a place of "White men with black wives, and vice versa too." This was enough to send waves of panic through any national administrator. "No Southern State will admit in print that a black man could ever have a white wife, as the vice-versa implies," warned one of the copy editors, "If this poem is the opinion of the essayist, I can suggest the substitution of one word (tan) to make the line read as follows: "Tan men with black wives, and vice-versa too." Saxon's response went unrecorded, but his supervisors in Washington held firm. The piece, when finally published, retained neither its original nor its suggested coloring, but had disappeared entirely.¹²

Yet not even this threat to southern racial sensibilities, real or imagined, compared to the furor raised over the tone of Saxon's centerpiece essay, "Gay Times in Old New Orleans." The original piece, written by Saxon and submitted with the rest of the rough draft, was

¹² Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, p.129. Among the guide volumes published by Houghton-Mifflin, The New Orleans Guide was easily its best seller. "Report on Royalties," RG 69, (NA), General Subject Series, Box 0476. Alsberg to Saxon, January 29, 1937, RG 69, (NA), Editorial Correspondence, 1936-9, Box 45; "Editorial Report on State Copy," November 13, 1937, *ibid*.

both longer and livelier than the one ultimately published in the New Orleans Guide. It almost had to be, since it covered a topic so close to Saxon's heart, so near his own self-image. In its original form, the essay was not only more detailed, it was more insistent, both in the relish it took in its own subject and the degree to which it lamented each successive concession to the scruples of civic virtue. Alsberg, who valued Saxon's contribution to the Project, and, it would appear, who understood the relationship between the author and his topic, agonized over the fate of the essay. It had become something of a cause celebre among project supervisors, an on-going topic of debate that included several prominent members of the administration. Given the sensitivity of either group to adverse publicity, the ultimate fate of "Gay Times in Old New Orleans" was almost certain from the start. Reluctantly, after two paragraphs of introduction applauding Saxon's efforts, Alsberg suggested that the essay needed considerable toning down. "The consensus of opinions among the people in my office and in the Administration," he advised, "is that the article as it now stands would get us into trouble and therefore I have to ask you to do something about it." The Director minced no words. "I do not think that there is any point in our trying to make minor changes and deletions," he wrote. "My conviction is that it should be rewritten altogether in considerably shortened, and generalized form, that its tone should be somewhat different, more objective... What I mean is that the article should, perhaps, be less outspoken in its details and not make the subject as attractive as it is made."¹³

¹³ Charles Wood to Henry Alsberg, November 16, 1937; Alsberg to Saxon, November 23, 1937; Saxon to Alsberg, December 10, 1937, *ibid*.

The incident caused neither rupture nor recrimination between the National Director and his state supervisor. Saxon merely followed orders and rewrote the piece in its watered-down form, content, perhaps, that the incident itself simply confirmed conclusions drawn by the original. Yet, the editorial cleansing of the New Orleans Guide commenced a trend continued for the duration of Saxon's work on the Project, one accelerated by the departure of Henry Alsberg in 1940. What began in 1935 as an experiment in American letters sustained by a romantic nationalism became ultimately an exercise in literary manufactures, the construction of a national self-image assembled according to a common blueprint. Political and cultural considerations shaped the finished product, often eschewing local color for the sake of national clarity. Homogenizing trends common to the more standardized exertions of the mass media began to work themselves into the operations of the arts projects, the FWP included, developments reflected by the two other major publications turned out by Saxon's organization.

3. "God What a Nuisance!"

In the Spring of 1936, having spent the better part of the previous month working late nights and long weekends, Lyle Saxon and his staff of writers finished the rough draft of their guide to Louisiana. "I've got reams of papers to read and correct," he wrote Cammie Henry amidst the effort, "my eyes hurt, and I'm hot and cross and don't like this guidebook business nohow, nowhere, no time...God what a nuisance!" The exhaustion and the frustration were understandable. In less than eight months Saxon had established project offices in New Orleans and Shreveport, supervised the collection of research materials, weathered all manner of bureaucratic emergencies, completed reports, budgeted resources, survived a political attack by a Longite faction determined to drive the WPA out of Louisiana, and assembled an enormous dummy for the proposed Louisiana Guide. The manuscript sent to Washington covered the state in three volumes totalling nearly one quarter of a million words. "We rather surprised ourselves when we saw the complete dummy," Saxon wrote to Henry Alsberg. "It had grown to such preposterous proportions, but I thought it wiser to have too much than too little." Yet, despite periodic notices announcing the guide's imminent release, nearly five years separated the completed draft from the published book, and therein lies the tale. By then personal and organizational changes had made both the State Director and his project something different from what each had been in the Spring of 1936.¹⁴

¹⁴ Saxon to Cammie Henry, "Thursday," [May, 1936], Melrose Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 1279; Saxon to Alsberg, Alsberg Correspondence, WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 18; Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, p.92.

The Louisiana Guide, so often delayed, so much the product of organizational and personal turmoil, typifies Saxon's later years with the WPA. These were years of declining health when changes in structure and personnel transformed the project in ways ill-suited to the State Director's temperament. They were also years spent working on a topic on the periphery of Saxon's interest. To be sure, as the author himself asserted, though compiled according to the standard FWP formula, the Louisiana Guide told the story of a unique place in American society and history, "a section of the United States which is different from the other states." By different Saxon meant unhomogenized, making Louisiana a splash of color on an otherwise dull canvas, a place, not surprisingly, cast in the image of the New Orleans Guide. In truth, however, the state was not the city, and no amount of editorial improvement could make it so. Instead, compiling and editing the state guide forced the State Director to treat some subjects of only passing interest and others for which he had a positive aversion. There were large stretches of the state neither witty nor gay, ones the spirits of the past seldom frequented, if at all. This was something reflected in the order in which the guides appeared. New Orleans more than Louisiana captured Saxon's attention and fired his imagination. He dispatched the city volume with twice the enthusiasm in half the time, and there were hints of future trouble from the very start.¹⁵

Henry Alsberg received the Louisiana dummy with his characteristic enthusiasm. We have "your amazing three-volume guide of Louisiana," he wrote to Saxon, "you have done a marvelous job." Alsberg, in fact,

¹⁵ "Publication Report, WPA Writers' Program, February 2, 1942," Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 5.

considered it the best received to date, but his editors took immediate and specific exception. Most had praise for Saxon's crisp prose. They enjoyed the overall tone of the work, its lively style, while spotting minor flaws common among most of the guide copy: repetitious information, awkward sentences, and a tendency to boost rather than to explain. But the editors also found omissions and oversights characteristic of Saxon's own biases. In particular, there was a uniform dissatisfaction with the essay detailing the state's history. "State history is not adequately carried through to the present," commented one editor. "The later history from 1861 to the present is especially bad." Others focused on the superficial treatment of the state's vital industries. Nearly fifty pages of copy discussed the art and literature of Louisiana, they observed, while only six pages detailed Louisiana agriculture, ostensibly the principal economic base of the entire region. Additional criticism focused on the uneven coverage of the guide. "The history and development of the cities are very well covered, but we find the copy somewhat deficient in contemporary scene description," wrote one reader. "This is particularly true of Abbeville, Alexandria-Pineville, Gretna, Lafayette, Natchitoches, New Iberia, Opelousas, Ruston, St. Martinville, and Winnfield," in short, true of everywhere in the state outside of New Orleans.¹⁶

These were not random omissions. Rather, what was missing from

¹⁶ Alsberg to Saxon, May 14, 1936; May 19, 1936; June 22, 1936, Alsberg Correspondence, WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 18; Turner, "Preliminary Report on Louisiana Dummy," Ruth Crawford, "Preliminary Report on Louisiana Guide," RG 69, (NA), Editorial Correspondence, 1936-9, Box 45. The New Orleans bias of Saxon's project publications is the subject of Clayton, "Guides and Gumbo: The LWP's Major Publications, pp.4-9.

the guide were those things most threatening to the literary world of Lyle Saxon. Like the New Orleans Guide, the Louisiana dummy eschewed the modern for the antiquated. A survey of Huey Long's contributions had been "tactful," in the estimation of Washington editors, but in most other instances attention to modern developments of industry, society, and race relations had been cursory. This was true also of the architecture essay. Architecture as metaphor is a common thread running through Lyle Saxon's writings, the principal vehicle of his preservationist impulse. He had begun the New Orleans Guide with a stroll through the French Quarter, establishing from the outset the vital link between its opulent courtyards and the City's unique culture and society. Likewise, the tour section of the Guide began with the Quarter and emanated outwards into the surrounding districts of New Orleans. So, too, in conveying the flavor of a state "which is different from the other states," Saxon relied on a favorite metaphor to convey a familiar theme. "In my childhood, thirty years ago, I remember perhaps fifty plantations which were in operation," reflected the author. "Now, three decades later, I do not know more than five of these families that are still living on their plantations. There is a sadness in all the old houses nowadays, for their day is done. To one who remembers the life and gaiety in these old dwellings, a tour through the plantation country is heartbreaking...[E]ach year [one] finds fewer and fewer of the old houses. Fire and flood have taken their toll, and many have crumbled into the Mississippi. In twenty years they will all be gone; all, that is, except those few which have been restored and cared

for. And the restorations have been few indeed."¹⁷

As Saxon suggested, architecture reflected the social and political evolution of the state, a legacy of modernization told succinctly in his tale of two capitols. Then and since, Baton Rouge was the home of two very different state capitols, and there was no mistaking the side Saxon chose. One, an impressive display of the "Steamboat Gothic" style, had stood for decades impervious to time, tides, and the satirical wit of Mark Twain. The other was a new structure built earlier in the decade by Huey Long, the most tangible symbol of the Longite regime. "Compared with the old statehouse, nearly a mile to the south," wrote Saxon, "the new capitol of Louisiana is a significant monument to the increasingly important place of the State in the life of the nation since the early years of the twentieth century. The graceful but outmoded structure that stands among old oaks and magnolias and crowns a bluff of the Mississippi River has for its successor a towering display...on an open sweep of land back from the river." To Saxon's view the structures represented rival ways of life. "As the old building was typical of more reposeful trends in the past century, the new one is the embodiment of industry, efficiency, and large movements in the present age," he asserted. "In contrast with its placid surroundings it is startling and somewhat incongruous in appearance, a bold reminder of the State's new objectives, a rather violent departure from the things belonging to the old life of Louisiana." For a man of Lyle Saxon's sensibilities, his comparison of the two capitols stands as a model of restraint. Still, there could be

¹⁷ The WPA Guide to New Orleans, pp.xxxv-xxxix, 229-69; "Louisiana Plantations," FWP Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 17.

no smoothing over the meaning of this modern usurper. It soared several stories above the great homes up and down the river, overshadowing each, physically and spiritually, an eyesore from Saxon's perspective, planted in the heart of the plantation tours sprinkled throughout his writings. North of Baton Rouge, there were other glimpses of the gathering threat. Writers in the district offices had returned guide copy marvelling at the progressive character of the small towns and cities beyond New Orleans. But none were more shrill or more eager to challenge the hegemony of New Orleans than the compilers of the Shreveport guide, whose booster rhetoric ridiculed the faded charms of Creole grandeur and championed instead a bright industrial future. "The dominant theme of the book," announced the district supervisor in 1937, "is that although Shreveport may lack the glamour of the deep South, it is steeped in an atmosphere of progress. That Shreveport is a city with more of a future than a past, that it is a city going forward instead of backward, are points [to be] stressed...[A]lthough the city has a log cabin background," she concluded, "it has a skyscraper future." Small wonder Saxon buried such disturbing commentary and once again dismissed modern architectural forms in Louisiana with a single sentence. "Modern architecture of the new international style," observed the State Director, "is excellently represented by the Municipal Incinerator in Shreveport," an analogy he must have relished.¹⁸

There were additional problems. Besides invoking shop-worn images and episodes, ones told and retold by Saxon for more than fifteen years, besides sifting through a gathering collection of evidence illustrating

¹⁸ "Shreveport Guide," WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 31; The Shreveport Times, June 30, 1937; Federal Works Agency, Louisiana: A Guide to the State, (New York, 1941), p.160.

the growth of modernization in Louisiana, completion of the guide came only after a long and taxing series of organizational crises. Chief among these occurred in the Spring and Summer of 1939, when the demolition of Federal One forced Saxon to reorganize his operation. This was the Spring his health broke and the year many favored staffers were forced off the project by the infamous eighteen-month ruling. There were other frustrations large and small. Maps were mislaid, and other items went astray in the mail. Critical personnel changes caused additional delays. There was chronic difficulty finding adequate illustrations for the volume, all of this compounded by a prolonged and frustrating search for a publisher. Most were reluctant, owing to the immense popularity of the New Orleans Guide and the fear that it had already stolen any thunder the Louisiana Guide contained. When Hastings House published the volume in 1941, making the Louisiana Guide among the last in the series, it appeared in a edition four times smaller than its celebrated predecessor.¹⁹

More importantly, Saxon struggled to finish the guide at a crucial juncture in FWP history. He had nearly completed the finished manuscript when John Newsom replaced Henry Alsberg as National Director of the newly-titled Writers Program. This was a change tantamount to the completion of the new capitol building in Baton Rouge. Saxon and Alsberg had much in common. Both were romantics at heart, people

¹⁹ The reorganization of the FWP is well treated in Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, pp.201-37 and Hirsch, "Portrait of America," pp.251-8. For an account of the demise of Federal One from the perspective of the national FWP office and subsequent difficulties encountered during the reorganization, see Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, pp.3-26, 329-48. The difficulties Saxon and his staff encountered completing the Louisiana Guide are documented in the Saxon Papers, (TU), Folder 8 and "Louisiana," RG 69, (NA), State Series, Box 1432A.

uncomfortable in the bureaucratic world of federal cultural production. Such a perspective had cemented a friendship whose warmth was measured both in their enthusiastic correspondence and in the comfortable working relationship they established over the years. Alsberg relished Saxon's wit and easily fell under the author's charm. But there were professional attractions as well. The Louisiana office functioned smoothly almost from the moment it commenced operation, and it turned out precisely the kind of copy Henry Alsberg was looking for--crisp, witty, and urbane, a style well-suited to the middle-class tourists marked as the consuming audience of FWP guidebooks. In addition, Saxon's image of New Orleans as model of cosmopolitan tolerance fitted the political message of the New Dealers, and as a result, Saxon and his office enjoyed a good measure of local autonomy.²⁰

This ended as soon as Alsberg left Washington. Neither he nor Saxon had much in common with the new national director. John Newsom was an experienced administrator and former newspaperman, recently the state director of the Michigan unit of the Writers' Project. He lacked the artistic sensibilities that had cemented the rapport between Lyle Saxon and Henry Alsberg, and was a man less concerned with content than production. "This is a production unit, and it's work that counts," observed the new Director. "I've never been for art for art's sake alone." Although Newsom professed an interest in providing a wider latitude for his state directors, Saxon viewed his frequent urgings to finish the guide as an unwanted intrusion. Indeed, to expedite publication of the guide, Newsom himself travelled to New Orleans to

²⁰ Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, pp. 211-4, 220-31. Saxon and Alsberg's mutual admiration and comfortable working relationship is well documented in the Alsberg Correspondence, WPA Collection, (LSL-BR).

confer with Saxon. The two huddled, reached an amicable accord, and paved the way for final publication. Once again, release coincided with Mardi Gras in order to boost sales, and the volume played to an enthusiastic critical audience. Yet it never reached the level of the New Orleans Guide, either as a sales item or as a literary achievement. It was, instead, a pale reflection of its predecessor, frequently repeating material, sometimes word for word. Within four years of its appearance, the guide was out of print. The effort also took its toll on the State Director. Shortly after Hastings House released the guide, Saxon vented his frustration to Cammie Henry over yet another in the chronic succession of petty bunglings that characterized the effort to finish the book. "The Guide is out, as you know," he wrote, "but we have not received a single copy for ourselves, nor have the newspapers been sent review copies. I'm in a rage about it but what can I do? It certainly was a sad day for the Writers' Project when they got rid of Henry Alsberg and substituted this Newsom creature who manages to get everything mixed up."²¹

Earlier Lyle Saxon had made arty wisecracks about service for a government writers program. But by the Spring of 1941, after such a prolonged effort to complete a project so often delayed, the State Director's reserves of patience and humor were running thin. The pressure had shattered his nerves and left him exhausted. His drinking did not help. Saxon was also aging and conscious of it. He was thinner

²¹ Newsom's tenure as National Director is discussed in Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, pp. 220-1. He is sketched more fully in Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, p.321. A photograph included in Mangione's book provides a vivid contrast between Newsom and Saxon. See Ibid., p.331. Saxon to Cammie Henry, March 4, 1941, Melrose Scrapbook #222, (CGHRC).

since leaving the hospital in 1939, more drawn, noticeably grayer, and more inclined to reflection. Youthful poses of romantic charm were giving way to a troubled reverie typified in advice offered in 1942, presumably to a younger correspondent. "[N]ever ruin your middle age in order to make things easier when you are old. I've completely ruined five years, and I'm not sure the game is worth the candle...I'm rapidly turning into an old man, very white as to hair, and sort of on the haggard side..." Indeed, by then the candle was burning low and the game was playing out. The Louisiana guide was the last of the major publications turned out by Saxon's unit before it ceased operating in early 1943. It was not, however, the Director's last book. His service to the Writers Program had redeemed Saxon's national reputation only partially, and the personal toll had been, by his own estimation, prohibitive. The theme proclaimed and celebrated in the New Orleans Guide had been challenged by events ever since within and without the State Director's organization. There was much to suggest that Lyle Saxon's world was crumbling, that the pace of modernization had overwhelmed his every effort at restoration. Work on the Louisiana Guide had forced him to view a less palatable landscape beyond the Vieux Carre, one dotted less by the great houses along the river and more by such eyesores as Huey Long's capitol and the new incinerator in Shreveport. Such material only reemphasized events within the newly-organized FWA structure, one now supervised not by an artist but a bureaucrat. The Louisiana project was still a vital link in the national effort, but there had been a trade-off. In recognition for the quality of his service to the project, Saxon and his staff had had their responsibilities expanded. Saxon became a regional supervisor, and his

office the central clearing house for a survey of American eating habits. But in the exchange it had been more closely incorporated into the federal system, existing on a shorter bureaucratic leash in the hands of a firmer master. Such a context framed Saxon's final literary effort. During the troubled creation of the Louisiana Guide, he commenced another project, one dear to his heart and one that must have been a haven from the guide work. This was his attempt to assemble a collection of Louisiana folklore, the final expression of what the State Director had already come to consider as the essence of Louisiana, and the last major project of his life, one pursued long after his project closed and completed only shortly before he died.²²

²² Saxon to "Pete," September 14, 1942, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 6.

4. "The Real Under-the-Crust Louisiana"

Lyle Saxon spent the early months of 1936 on the road, establishing the district affiliates of his writers' project. He loathed the chore. Deadlines and other details pressed the office on Canal Street, making time spent away from New Orleans a costly adventure. A growing pile of guide copy towered on his desk awaiting his editorial approval. National editors in Washington sent urgent wires to each of the state projects, hurrying the submission of completed rough drafts. But this would all have to wait. Thoroughness demanded statewide expansion of the effort, even if it meant delaying completion of the draft. The deadline dictated haste and Saxon was not a man to be rushed. But the effort proved distasteful for other reasons, too. By opening FWP offices throughout Louisiana, Saxon was doing more than simply facilitating his research project. He was also exchanging jobs for support of the federal relief effort, a public relations ploy guaranteed to bring him face to face with the sort of clubwomen and boosters he despised. Still, his efforts, if onerous, were anything but unrewarded. District offices seeded in the Spring had sprouted by the summer and proved a crucial aid to the harvest of materials gathered by Saxon's writers. Most of the offices were efficient; none were overly controversial, and one gave Saxon the title for his life's work. In March he had left New Orleans and headed west through the Acadian parishes to Lake Charles, near the Texas border. He oversaw the usual round of details, explaining the project to local relief administrators and civic groups, clarifying procedures to local workers, and drafting a press release for the hometown newspaper. But

somewhere during the trip came an unexpected windfall, or lagniappe as Saxon himself might have called it, while drafting his release for the Lake Charles American Press. The guide project, he asserted, represented a chance for Louisianians to discover their own heritage, one whose magnitude few understood and less appreciated; seldom, if ever, did he himself go anywhere in Louisiana without uncovering some new facet of the state's culture. The trip to Lake Charles, he asserted, was a case in point. Along the way Saxon had run across an unfamiliar phrase used by the Acadian women of Opelousas to describe their weekly talk fests, something akin to a sewing circle or a quilting bee, an occasion they called "gumbo ya-ya," or everybody talks at once.²³

He never forgot it. Saxon spent most of his adult life panning for such serendipitous glimmers. He collected enough of them by the time he died to earn the title of folklorist, though Saxon had no interest in the academic connotation the word had acquired during his lifetime. Ghost stories and superstitions filled his notebooks and fired his imagination. Early in his career, they became the foundation for a budding literary reputation. Later, they became virtually the exclusive focus of Saxon's interest, and in between, during the long fallow period at Melrose, when so much seemed so uncertain, they were a straw grasped and held. During 1933, while he struggled with his novel, Saxon first conceived the idea for a full-sized collection of Louisiana folklore. "I could write another non-fiction book on 'Curiosities of the Deep South,' he suggested to one correspondent, [using] "...strange

²³ Lake Charles American Press, March 6, 1936 in WPA Collection, (LSL-BR), File 31.

old stories, true ones, of old Creole days in New Orleans and in the country of Louisiana. Or I could do a book about the Acadians and Southwest Louisiana. Or maybe something else entirely, but a non-fiction book with this background. I've gone into the folklore a good deal in the last four years and have encountered both mermaids and werewolves..." Nor did he ever abandon this chase. Rather, Saxon incorporated these suggestions into a single volume, the last he published in his lifetime, and one whose construction, intent, and meaning to its principal compiler provides the most succinct depiction of his life and career.²⁴

Fortune provided an intersection for private interest and public service when folklore collection became an early FWP priority and still another link between Henry Alsberg and Lyle Saxon. Saxon delighted in the opportunity to use his organization on a project so dear to his own heart, and the National Director, for his part, drew satisfaction from such enthusiastic cooperation. Indeed, by July of 1936 Saxon's energies had already netted substantial results. By then, too, he had become a jealous guardian of this material, resisting requests to share it with other FWP folklore researchers. "We have a vast quantity of folklore collected," he explained to Henry Alsberg, "and we anticipate doing something rather good with it." Such hopes went unrealized for nearly ten years. In the interim, Saxon and his staff assembled an enormous mass of folklore materials, chiefly through word of mouth. For seven years the Louisiana writers fanned out across the state,

²⁴ Saxon diaries, Saxon Papers, (TU), Bound Volume #5; Saxon to Barry Benefield, November 1, 1933, *ibid.*, Box 2. For early examples of Saxon's folklore writings see, Times-Picayune, September 20, 1925 and "Voodoo," The New Republic, (March 23, 1927), pp.135-9.

ransacking libraries and memories in an exhausting search for the way things were. They filled whole filing cabinets with legends and tales and social customs and superstitions, the reminiscences of former slaves, home remedies, folk sayings, cultural rituals, and religious practices, all of these collected among a variety of ethnic groups--Creole, Irish, German, Italian, and Cajun--and three different races: white, black, and red. Yet while project workers conducted interviews and checked facts, while Saxon and his editors began to flesh out chapters for the proposed study, others were redefining the concept of folklore in such a way as to make the Louisiana volume more a checklist of the quaint and picturesque than a serious social survey. This was not what the State Director had intended; it was instead a good measure of how strongly the tide was beginning to run against him.²⁵

Lyle Saxon's project publications chart the decline of the author's romantic regionalism. He had achieved an astonishing success in the Spring of 1938 with the publication of the New Orleans Guide, but he never matched its success for several and compelling reasons. Fewer than twelve months after the release of the New Orleans Guide, a combination of professional and personal crises had overwhelmed the author, breaking his health and leaving him ill-equipped either physically or spiritually for the long ordeal required to bring the Louisiana Guide to print. The effort had been at once taxing and frustrating, and the reception was nothing like the applause heaped on the earlier volume. Indeed, the entire experience bore little

²⁵ Oscar K. Gill to Lyle Saxon, July 1, 1936; Saxon to Alsberg, July 7, 1936, Alsberg Correspondence, WPA Collection, LSL-BR, File 18. Most of the materials collected by Saxon's researchers are preserved in more than 600 files in the FWP Collection, (CGHRC).

resemblance to its predecessor. The New Orleans Guide had been completed under the original organization of Federal One, with Saxon working for Henry Alsberg who, like most reviewers of the Guide, had applauded his romantic portrait of the city. The Louisiana Guide was an altogether different story, exasperating and disturbing. Where the New Orleans Guide had been hailed as the best of the local guides, the state volume had been one of the last to find a publisher. It lacked the romantic appeal of its predecessor, and it had been completed under the supervision of John Newsom, anything but the man Henry Alsberg had been. Neither the subject matter he was forced to deal with nor the new organizational structure he worked within held much comfort for a man of Saxon's sensibilities. Large stretches of Louisiana were neither gay nor witty, and these were terms no one ever applied to John Newsom.²⁶

The experience left Saxon with an anxiety best reflected in the depth of his commitment to Gumbo Ya-Ya. Put simply, the more evidence his workers unearthed attesting to the growth of modern society, the more determined Saxon became to refute it through a portrait of Louisiana drawn from the folklore materials. Work began in earnest even before completion of the Louisiana guide, became an overriding priority in the summer of 1941, and once again was hampered by frequent delays. These included rapid turnovers in office personnel, especially after Pearl Harbor when some enlisted, some were drafted, and others took higher paying jobs in defense plants. Two losses were critical. In the Spring of 1942, both Eddie Dreyer and Joe Treadwell, an office manager of long standing, joined the Navy. This left Saxon virtually alone

²⁶ For the critical reception of the Louisiana Guide see, "Project-Writers', Guide, October 1, 1939," RG 69, (NA), WPA Division of Information Clippings File, 1936-42, Box 42.

among the veterans of his staff, and he adjusted badly. "You'll never know how helpless I was with that miserable project after Dreyer and Joe Treadway left me," he wrote to Judith Hyams Douglas. "I look back on those last few months of last year and on the first sixth months of this year as a bad dream and I'm glad that they are over." The following year, 1943, having closed the Louisiana office, Saxon did a stint in Washington, one that he claimed nearly killed him, compiling the final record of the WPA. "This job is playing out," he wrote one friend in September, 1942, "and the quality of work has fallen off... A year ago I had gotten all fixed up in fine shape, as National Consultant for all publications, and that let me travel around...but Congress fixed all that by wiping out the Regional Staff, so now I'm like a Minister Without Portfolio, I'm grounded. As a matter of fact, I'm right back where I started from six and a half years ago...and all I've got to show for those years is the sad fact that I'm much older, and my eyes are bad now, and I've published some guidebooks...And what the hell?"²⁷

The WPA report was his last government project. Saxon returned to Melrose in the summer of 1943, rested briefly, then devoted himself full

²⁷ According to Saxon, Treadway had worked on the Project since 1935 and had "literally grown up in [the] office." Saxon admired his sharp mind and even temper, his "tact, wit, charm, efficiency, conscientiousness, punctuality, dependability, affability, and trustworthiness." Saxon to Commander Phillip C. Mulcahy, September 2, 1942; Saxon to Commander Fender, September 2, 1942, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 6. For his comments on what the office was like after the departure of Treadway and Dreyer, see Saxon to Marge Hunter, October 8, 1942, *ibid.* See also, Saxon to Judith Hyams Douglas, July 22, 1943, Douglas Papers, (LSU-BR), Box 1; Saxon to "Pete," September 14, 1942, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 6. For Saxon's appointment to the National Consultantship and his work in the WPA Final Report, see Walter Kiplinger to Saxon, April 17, 1942, *ibid.*, Box 5. See also, "Merle Colby, February 15, 1942," RG 69, (NA), Central Files, General Subject Series, Box 0391; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, p.237; "WP Accounting," Time, (February 15, 1943), pp.95-6.

time to the volume he came to regard as a life's work. He was joined by Robert Tallant, last of the aspiring young writers nurtured under Papa Saxon's protective wing and, no doubt from Saxon's point of view, someone to fill the vacancy left by Eddie Dreyer's departure. Using project files, the two condensed, rewrote, and edited, shaping the manuscript while Saxon fished for a publisher without mincing words. "Although I directed this work for a period of seven years, I was really astonished to see how much material was still available for publication," he wrote his agent at Houghton-Mifflin, "and I hoped that the Library Commission would see fit to let me edit this work and bring it out in book form...It seems too bad that this material be wasted or...fall into inexperienced or careless hands. The whole thing is nearly my life work...a popular history of Louisiana, for which there is a crying need in the Public Schools." It was the only public statement Lyle Saxon ever made on the subject of education in Louisiana, but there were even more urgent protestations to the value of the work. "Let me say here--and I will say it again in the introduction--," he asserted, "that this book constitutes a sort of cross section of Louisiana...I've put a good deal of myself into this book and it is my pet. I mean that I consider it more important, in its way, than the Guide books, for it is the under-the-crust world of Louisiana that nobody has written before."²⁸

Saxon backed such sentiments with a scrupulous regard for the integrity of the volume as he put it together. Normally, he was an

²⁸ Tallant's involvement with the project is the subject of Gerald P. Bodet, "Robert Tallant and the Federal Writers' Program," unpublished manuscript in possession of the author. Saxon to Paul Brooks, July 27, 1944; March 5, 1943, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 6.

editor's dream, an author of unusual malleability. Throughout the WPA years, for instance, Saxon routinely accepted the finality of editorial changes made by the Washington office. Sometimes suggestions appeared verbatim in the final text, but not so with Gumbo Ya-Ya. Here Saxon stiffened, especially when it came to the title of the book itself. His agent at Houghton, Paul Brooks, wrote in the Spring of 1943, informing Saxon that plans to publish the volume were proceeding smoothly. Final contractual wrinkles had all been ironed out, and the editorial staff was delighted with the manuscript, calling it "a combination of scholarship and joie de vivre" equalled by few. Only one small problem remained. Brooks and others at Houghton feared that the title might injure sales by scaring off potential customers who might feel silly asking for it by name. Saxon held firm. "We insist that the title 'Gumbo Ya-Ya' be retained," he responded, "We submitted it to some one hundred people and of those more than 80% have approved it; these were not Cajuns or Creoles, but ordinary readers...You may remember that the appellation 'Shangri-La' has been incorporated into the American language. We believe that the title 'Gumbo Ya-Ya' is good enough perhaps for national adaptation."²⁹

The editors relented. Saxon won the concession but lost the campaign, perhaps doomed from the very start, as the title controversy itself suggested. Saxon hoped that his collection of Louisiana folk tales would provide his audience with a view of what he considered to be the real Louisiana, the one beneath a surface increasingly standardized. Yet to preserve this small and endangered portion of the American folk

²⁹ Brooks to Saxon, March 24, 1943; Saxon to Brooks, February 19, 1944, *ibid.*

heritage, he planned to incorporate a local catchphrase into the national lexicon. Still, the attempt was impressive. Gumbo Ya-Ya fairly burst with all the romantic symbols and characters dear to Lyle Saxon's heart. It was, as he asserted, a life's work and, characteristically, a pretty book attractive to all the senses. Similar to the earlier works, it rang with the cries of street vendors by day and ghosts in the night, revelled in a place like Perdido Street in New Orleans, where "every night is like Saturday night...wild and fast and hot with sin," swayed to the rhythms of black spirituals, and delighted in the smells of cast iron skillets simmering in Creole kitchens. Lavish ornamentation encrusted the literary facade. Forty photographs culled from a variety of sources including local newspaper archives and the photographic file of the Farm Security Administration illustrated the text. These were supplemented by reproductions of paintings done by two Louisiana FAP painters, John McCrady and Edward Schoenberger, plus eight lithographs prepared by Caroline Durieux. Another federal artist, Roland Duvernet, designed the frontspiece, perhaps the most concise visual expression of Lyle Saxon's historical world ever created. Duvernet's contribution was a so-called "Ghost Map of Louisiana," a cartographic survey of the state's macabre past with all the trimmings: buried treasure, severed hands, leering skeletons, haunted steamboats, deserted mansions, the "Christmas Tree of Ponchatoula," decorated one night with the bodies of four black lynch victims, and an inset of the French Quarter entitled, "Lucifer takes a mistress in New Orleans," bearing the legend, "The United States of Vieux Carre."³⁰

³⁰ Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, Robert Tallant, comp., Gumbo Ya-Ya, (Boston, 1945), p.1. For Saxon's part in coordinating the artistic touches incorporated into the book see Saxon to Brooks, February 19,

Yet not even this array could sustain Saxon's romantic portrait of the "under-the-crust" Louisiana. Gumbo Ya-Ya ran through its first edition of ten thousand copies within a week and promptly disappeared. It amused, it entertained, but it did not persuade. The title never entered the language, nor, as Saxon had hoped, did the volume become a textbook of Louisiana history. Instead, it was printed on cheap pulp owing to wartime shortages, but a fitting symbol of Saxon's dwindling powers. Internal inconsistencies incorporated into the text also confirmed the point, among them the logical implications of Saxon's chapter on "Mother Shannon." Lyle Saxon devoted much of his folklore researches and portions of his writings to the celebrated voodoo priestess, Marie Laveau. She had lived, he asserted, during the late nineteenth century, was buried in a local cemetery, and still exerted a powerful influence over many Orleanians. She made an ideal symbol of Saxon's desires. He envisioned her as a solitary figure living along Bayou St. John, then on the geographical and social margin of the city. Dark and romantic and mysterious, she nonetheless exerted a hypnotic charm over polite society. "It was whispered that many an elegant gentleman and lady took part in Marie Laveau's orgies....," he insisted. Nor had her influence ended with her death. "They still talk about Marie Laveau," asserted one resident of the area. Women could still be observed stealing to her tomb and knocking on the door, the approved ritual for the granting of favors.³¹

Marie Laveau was gone, the author lamented, but contemporary

1944, Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 6.

³¹ Gumbo Ya-Ya, pp. 168-9, 323, 328, 388, 391-2. The fruits of Saxon's long search for Marie Laveau are collected in Folders 24, 25, 202, 317-9, 376, and 589 of the FWP Collection, (CGHRC).

Orleanians persisted in their spiritual unorthodoxy. Voodoo shops still thrived, the gris gris still enchanted, and people still believed, among them the parishioners of Mother Shannon's Spiritualist Church of the Southwest. Mother Shannon was a modern cult leader, the logical successor to Marie Laveau and, in the context of Gumbo Ya-Ya, an object of parody. Sketched by Saxon and Tallant, she was black and corpulent and middle-aged, more businesswoman than conjure queen, exploiting her naive faithful, also black, through all manner of fraudulent rituals borrowed from the world's major religions. She served a dual purpose from Saxon's perspective. She is first the stereotypical "darky," of thirties popular culture, a three-hundred pound mammy with heavy-lidded eyes and a child's faith in Jesus and the saints. But Saxon uses her also as he used Marie Laveau, simultaneously to challenge polite society and demonstrate the persistence of New Orleans exceptionalism. Yet there is a crucial difference the author overlooked. Where Marie Laveau practiced her craft in isolation, Mother Shannon ran a franchise, and the significance was either lost on or ignored by Lyle Saxon. As New Orleans wit and raconteur he revelled in such stories, always told with tongue in cheek and a wry wink of urbane condescension. But as another of the folklore writers on the project had asserted, "today voodoo is mainly in the hands of businessmen who sell charms to the superstitious by mail-orders." Mother Shannon, like so many other parts of the author's romantic fancy, had been incorporated into a national organization.³²

There were other indications that Lyle Saxon's literary world was

³² Gumbo Ya-Ya, pp.397-412. Bob Kornfield, "Marie Laveau," unpublished manuscript in the Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 13.

crumbling. For all intents and purposes, the transformation of folklore studies into an academic discipline during the 1930s made Gumbo Ya-Ya obsolete from the moment it was published. But there was another, more illuminating reason, one cutting to the essence of Lyle Saxon's divided character, for what he relished in print he hated in private. Faithful retainers and "happy-go-lucky darkies" such as Mother Shannon provided the foundation for Saxon's image as leisured man of southern letters. Yet in private Saxon despised and opposed Jim Crow. It was almost as though he was at war with himself, undercutting his own professional image, for even as he called the collection of folk tales incorporated into Gumbo Ya-Ya the real Louisiana, a place where lynch victims ornamented Christmas trees, or where illiterate blacks still practiced superstitions or swung hypnotically under the spell of revival religion, even as he worked so tirelessly on this romanticized portrait he held so dear, Saxon worked equally hard in support of an organization calculated to dynamite the foundations of his own literary world. It was a project he himself suggested and persistently supported, an all-black group of writers whose history of the Negro in Louisiana was intended all along and with Saxon's own blessing, to shatter the Jim Crow facade already showing several cracks by the time they began work in 1936.

5. The Dillard History

Later in life, once his reputation had been secured and his career established, Marcus Christian, a black poet living in New Orleans, penned a thumbnail autobiographical sketch. "I am single," he wrote, "I like dogs and children. I tolerate grown-up people. And I think I like good music more than anything else in the world. Moody and sometimes given over to melancholy. Nearly always bitter, but hate to wear bitterness as an outer garment... I like good books and old documents, and I am especially interested in Louisiana and Negro History. I do bone carving and wood-working, book-binding, work in copper and brass, printing, linoleum block printing." Finally, he noted, as a younger man, he had "won substantial cash prizes from the late Lyle Saxon and others interested in the encouragement of Negro talent." Christian had been born at the turn of the century in a small community southwest of New Orleans. He was the grandson of a slave, the fourth of six children who survived infancy, and an orphan before he turned fourteen. His mother died when he was three. His father, a school teacher since Reconstruction, died ten years later, events spaced almost evenly around the death of Christian's twin sister. Together with a brother and sister, he settled in New Orleans, where he attended night classes long enough to complete the equivalent of a high school education. After a succession of odd jobs, he established a modest dry-cleaning business whose meager profits sustained a literary yearning nurtured since youth. As a child, Christian had often nestled in his father's lap while his older sister read poetry aloud in French. The attraction then had been the clucking noises in his father's throat, the frequent cause of

uncontrollable laughter, but the muse once planted soon beckoned.³³

Marcus Christian developed a sensitive spirit usually vented through poetry and frequently stirred by the sufferings of his race. The slightest of provocations awakened the profoundest of responses, alternate fits of rage and remorse. When the constraints of the Jim Crow society drove one friend to a nervous breakdown, he yearned for the chance "to curse everything in the South... to blow it to smithereens." The mere sight of cotton bales in the city streets could, on other occasions, arouse outbursts of anguished reflection. "I was thinking how many hopes and disappointments of a black man had gone into those bales that line Canal St.," he confided to his diary. "How many drops of actual blood had gone into their making? How many outraged cry of an oppressed people were muffled when the huge press had descended upon the soft fleecy cotton? How many lynchings--how many cries of underfed black children--how many moans of raped black women--how many cries of help from the black manhood of the South have been called in vain because of that bale of cotton?... cotton bales [that] drip with the blood of black people."³⁴

Christian never forgot such sights or the emotions they inspired. Nor did he ever forget the night he met Lyle Saxon, friend, benefactor, and sometimes father figure, a man whose life and career often stirred the poet's imagination. Years later the memory lingered vivid and fresh, "as if it were only yesterday when I had welcomed [him] into my little shot-gun cottage." Saxon brought the bottle, Christian provided

³³ Unpublished, untitled manuscript, Christian Collection, (UNO), Box 1.

³⁴ Christian Diary in *ibid*; Irene Douglas to Christian, *ibid.*, Box 5.

the soda, and the two discussed a proposition hatched by the Director himself, who broke the ice by admiring his host's books and his brass oriental candlesticks. Then Saxon settled into an antique rocker and unfolded his plan. While his WPA workers were busy collecting material for a guidebook to New Orleans, he explained, it had occurred to him that something useful might come of a project operated by black writers collecting material on the history of the Negro in Louisiana. Christian took interest. The material excited him almost as much as the idea of being paid to write, since Saxon's visit had coincided roughly with the collapse of Christian's cleaning business. They chatted long into the evening, mostly about how Project workers went about collecting material for the guide, but also about Christian's own literary endeavors. Ultimately, Saxon would see in the poet a man of rare talent, one of the more beneficial additions to his project. Christian, for his part, gained a source of persistent reflection, this white man who had come offering a job and who would become such an enthusiastic partisan of his own work, a man whose bulk made an immediate impression and whose handshake, "a gesture of genuine fellowship," would burn in memory, along with the scene of their parting. Observing that it was late and that he had better leave, Saxon began to rise, then stopped to wrestle with Christian's dog, covering himself in the process "with a fine layer of dog hair." As Saxon stepped to the door Christian stopped him to brush the hair from his coat. "You're the only white man I've ever done this for," the host admonished his guest. Saxon chuckled and offered in smiling reply, "Oh, I'd do that much for you."³⁵

Saxon's visit commenced a long friendship with Marcus Christian

³⁵ Ibid., Historical Source Materials, Box 12.

and climaxed the lobbying efforts of another black Orleanian desperate for a job. In the fall of 1935 James Lafourche, college graduate and for the previous nine years an editor for the Louisiana Weekly, the principal black newspaper in New Orleans, was out of work and not pleased with his prospects. He had appealed to local relief authorities, requesting work on one of the white collar projects, but had been handed a shovel, instead. Lafourche would not be put off. Persistent applications for employment on the newly established writer's project went ignored, so he took his case to a higher court. He wrote to John Davis, then head of a watchdog organization designed to promote black interests among the New Deal relief administrators, providing the facts of his case. It was all the prompting Davis needed. One member of the organization after another received angry letters charging racism, a group spanning the length of the administrative chain from Lyle Saxon to Harry Hopkins, a group including Henry Alsberg and Jacob Baker. Davis deflected every attempt at conciliation and explanation short of hiring Lafourche, as well as other qualified black writers, of whom, he insisted, there were dozens. No simple explanation offered itself. Saxon insisted that his hands were tied. He had already hired one black writer, he explained, proof that his hiring procedures were not discriminatory. Rather, he asserted, Lafourche had applied sometime after the quota was already filled, and dozens of other qualified workers were already ahead of him waiting for the next opening. Alsberg's budget was already stretched to the point of break, and Baker warned his national FWP director not to let Saxon exploit the situation to obtain more money than he really needed. Davis continued the pressure, raising the specter of bad publicity, something far worse,

from the administration's perspective, than a simple budget override. Finally, the relief administrators seized an initiative made possible by an offer from the administration of Dillard University, an all-black school in New Orleans. Ever since working for the Federal Relief Administration, Lawrence Reddick, now a member of the History Department at Dillard, had nurtured an idea to interview ex-slaves living in the area. He had sought and obtained administration approval; then he went to the relief administrators with a plan, an all-black history project, sponsored with federal funds, housed on the Dillard campus, and supervised by Reddick himself.³⁶

They commenced work in January, 1936, four people in all, including Octave Lily, previously a high school teacher, Eugene William, a Dillard graduate but more recently a day laborer, an unemployed social worker, Homer McEwen, and Clarence Laws, whose college funds had run out. Saxon haggled for the next two months with Christian, imploring him to swallow his pride and get himself certified for relief. The poet refused all appeals. Rather, he came to the project two months later, after direct appeals from Saxon to Alsberg won special dispensation for both Christian and Alice Ward Smith, a young black novelist and former history teacher. At its height, the Dillard Project employed as many as

³⁶ The origins of the Dillard Project are traced in Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana," pp.86-97; Clayton, "The Federal Writers' Project for Blacks in Louisiana," Louisiana History, 19(Summer 1978), pp.327-35; "LaFourche Incident," RG 69, (NA), State Series, Box 12. Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, pp.225-66 treats the relationship between the FWP and the black writer in America, although it never mentions the Dillard Project. The best treatment of the Dillard Project, and the one on which this section relies heavily is Joan Redding, "The Dillard Project: The Black Unit of the Louisiana Writers' Project," unpublished manuscript in possession of the author. She treats the origins of the Project in "The Dillard Project," pp.3-4.

ten workers, including James B. Lafourche, whose persistence finally found its reward. Few records remain of the unit itself, specifically of the personnel, or how they interacted with one another, how cohesive or fractious a group they comprised. Shortly after he left the Project, Albert J. Bloom recalled the sort of camaraderie that made his project experience among the richest yet encountered. "They were as fine a group of men as I have ever had the pleasure of associating with," he wrote Marcus Christian, "and the memory of them and of the project will always be a bright light of experience for which I would trade nothing. It was the best display of fellowship, intelligence, ambition, and appreciation of the fundamental values of human relationships I have as yet come in contact with." Other evidence suggests some degree of internal bickering, though certainly none worse than what occurred within Saxon's office across town. Rather, for the most part, the Dillard Project followed FWP guidelines in establishing the project and dividing the labor. Each Dillard writer was assigned research topics pursued in local libraries, newspaper archives, and government repositories. Completed essays were reviewed either by Reddick or Christian after he became supervisor of the group. Even scantier evidence documents the reception afforded the Dillard writers as they pursued their topics in local research institutions. Instead, most scholarly attention remains focused on the physical legacy of the project, a twelve-hundred page manuscript assembled under the title, "The Negro in Louisiana."³⁷

³⁷ Albert J. Bloom to Marcus Christian, August 13, 1941; August 24, 1942; Christian Collection, (UNO), Correspondence, Box 5; John P. Davis to Christian, December 3, 1935; Saxon to Christian, December 10, 1935; December 19, 1935; February 15, 1936; February 19, 1936; April 6, 1936; H.M. Bond to Christian, December 3, 1936, *ibid.*, Box 4; Saxon to

Much of the effort has been misspent. For many years following the close of the project, the whereabouts of the manuscript remained unknown and the object of much speculation. This has since been solved. Marcus Christian kept the original Dillard materials and the manuscript, working on the project in his spare time, frequently under the supervision of Saxon. Indeed, the poet spent 1944 using the funds of a Rosenwald Fellowship revising, editing, and occasionally expanding the Dillard manuscript in hopes of finding a publisher. He never did. Rather, Christian made the project something of a life's work, "the family Bible," as he referred to it as an older man, whose remnants survive in his collected papers. As a result, efforts expended searching for the manuscript and sorting among the various chapters in an effort to piece together the original volume as it existed when the project closed have overshadowed the content of the manuscript itself. This is unfortunate for at least two reasons: it diminishes the individual contributions of various project writers, and it neglects the ultimate meaning of the Dillard Project.³⁸

"The Negro in Louisiana" refutes the romantic speculations of southern apologists, among them, by inference, the Project's creator and sustainer, Lyle Saxon. By its mere existence, let alone through its writings, this Jim Crow project refuted assertions made by the tour

Alsberg, December 16, 1935; March 3, 1936, April 2, 1936, Alsberg File, WPA Collection, LSL-BR, File 18; Saxon to J.D. Lockwood, March 9, 1936, Lockwood File, Drawer #4, Office Area, *ibid.*; "Supervisor's Report of November 27, 1939, Dillard University Negro History Project," Saxon Papers, (TU), Box 5; Redding, "The Dillard Project," pp.4-5.

³⁸ Clayton, "The Federal Writers' Project for Blacks in Louisiana," p.335 reports the manuscript as lost. Redding provides the clearest account of where it may be found in Christian's papers and how the manuscript evolved. "The Dillard Project," pp.16-7.

guide and bon vivant that New Orleans, by intermarriage and long proximity, had overcome the segregation of the nineteenth century. Christian understood the paradox and thought about it frequently. With an ink pen he once jotted impressions of his friend, the renowned author, short phrases noting characteristics celebrated so often by so many others. The list began where it usually did, "Saxon as Raconteur," then continued through glimpses of a gentle man: "His dislike of inflicting personal insult or injury," and "Saxon in the role of peacemaker." Considerable space was also afforded the author's support for the Dillard Project and for the cause of black rights. Christian remembered "His remarks about damn fool segregation regulations," and "His praise for our work and [efforts as] press-agent for Negro endeavor." This was enough to make Saxon "a Southern liberal," right after a raconteur, a direction reversed by the very next image, "His straddle fence stand on Negro change in the South." Other pieces of Christian's writings also suggest the complexity of the relationship between these men and, through it, of race relations in the New Deal South. Sometime after the Dillard Project closed, in a piece suggestively titled "Me and Lyle Saxon," Christian reflected on his project experience, writing what might rightly be read as the philosophical core of "The Negro in Louisiana," without ever mentioning Saxon's name. The essay traced Christian's introduction to historical research and chronicled his growing skill at seeking out and evaluating documentary sources in the light of other works published on the topic. It also traced the impression the experience registered on him and his co-workers. "Very soon we began to take an attitude which was consistently critical of most histories," he noted, "particularly those

written from the typical southern viewpoint... and very early concluded that most of them were a blending of regional prejudices and romance." Christian and his colleagues protested the unevenness of such writings, "the utter exclusion of one-third to one-half the total population" when summarizing southern history, particularly when the group excluded was the point on which "a whole way of life" was said to turn. "Very soon we began to suspect that there was an important Negro or person of Negro descent in nearly every historical woodpile and worked accordingly," Christian recalled. "To say that we were not disappointed is to make an understatement." Indeed not; rather, the Dillard writers created an image of the Negro in Louisiana unlike anything incorporated into any of the three volumes published by Saxon's workers across town.³⁹

The work was a factual narrative with a revisionist message. Similar to other assignments completed on the Louisiana Writers Project, the Dillard writers assembled their story from such standard sources as newspapers, government documents, and secondary materials culled from local libraries. Similar, too, to their colleagues on Canal Street, the finished narrative showed a decided New Orleans bias. But here the roads diverged. "The Negro in Louisiana" traced the evolution of black life and culture in the state since its colonial period, not to protest but to overturn. The manuscript intended to correct the most common misconceptions about Negroes, its authors asserted, challenging the popular assumptions "that slaves were persons sunk in the lowest

³⁹ Untitled, unpublished manuscript, Christian Papers, (UNO), Historical Source Materials, Box 12; "Me and Lyle Saxon," unpublished manuscript, *ibid.* The Dillard manuscript is retained in the Christian Papers in the sequential ordering of its chapters. Citations are to chapter then page number as in, "The Negro in Louisiana," Introduction, pp1-3, *ibid.*, Literary and Historical Manuscripts, Box 36.

category of civilization; that when brought to America they had to be taught the rudiments of ethics; that they were a people devoid of religious belief; that they were completely unskilled; that they were docilely enslaved...[or] that blacks are devoid of any sustained contribution to American history or society in such areas as art, invention, economics, education, or literature..."⁴⁰

Nearly fifty narrative and topical chapters told the story. The bulk of the manuscript progresses chronologically from 1719, the year slaves first arrived in the colony, to 1942, when the Dillard Project ceased operations. Successive chapters chronicled the contributions made by blacks to Louisiana society at various points in the state's history. Blacks proved themselves to be a disciplined labor force of remarkable and diverse talents, the authors concluded, a people equal to the varied demands of plantation life and work. There were other and significant contributions. Blacks, Christian and his co-workers found, left their mark on society through a host of cultural expressions, through dancing and language, through diet, agricultural practice, religious belief, and through folk customs, especially voodoo. Imported by slaves from the West Indies, the Dillard writers asserted, voodoo was no quaint practice easily satirized by urbane sophisticates but a basic form of black resistance, "the earliest and most frequently used power by the black community to resist the brutality of the white." Moreover, the writers found evidence suggesting how the practice unsettled white society. "It is noteworthy that the frequent charges of voodooism against the Negroes were made during periods of turbulence and stress," they wrote. "These charges grew in volume as the years advanced towards

⁴⁰ "The Negro in Louisiana," Introduction, p.2, *ibid.*

the Civil War, and what had formerly become an obnoxious manifestation of slave and free colored superstitions soon began to acquire an increasing notoriety in the local white press of the Post-Civil War and Reconstruction days. It was during the days particularly that much of the morbid interest manifested in the voodooes of the present day began to show itself." The Unit found additional evidence of black resistance, some of it violent, including tales of flight, suicide, beaten masters, poisonings, arsons, and slave insurrections small and large. Finally, several topical chapters rounded out the manuscript by providing a summary of contemporary black life in Louisiana.⁴¹

"The Negro in Louisiana" represented a direct assault on the literary world of Lyle Saxon. The glimpse of black life in New Orleans recorded by the Dillard writers refuted Saxon's romanticized portrait of a city unconcerned, a place unlike any other in America, whose collective joie de vive and cosmopolitan heritage made it a model of ethnic and racial tolerance. Blacks, the writers concluded, were not the carefree or docile figures who populated folk stories told in the Project's three major publications. Certainly, though, Saxon made his impact on Christian's efforts. Portions of the Dillard manuscript overlap, and in some cases repeat, material covered in the guides or in Gumbo-Ya Ya. In other instances, the Dillard writers echoed the Director's preservationist message. Yet, ultimately, the manuscript represents a fundamental break with the other works, and nowhere more clearly than in its account of Louisiana's antebellum years. While Lyle Saxon revelled in the imagined splendor of the steamboat days, that

⁴¹ "The Negro in Louisiana," Chapter Three, pp.1-23, Chapter Fourteen, pp.1-17, Chapter Sixteen, pp.1-22, *ibid*.

unique blend of the exotic and the bohemian he idealized as the "golden age" of gay balls, sharp wits, and elegant refinement, his Dillard scribes recorded a different story. They wrote, instead, about slave auctions, "the resounding chants of auctioneers," and "the brutality of the sale," in a section climaxed by the story of "a dark, consumptive woman" dragged to the block and auctioned off. Other assertions undercut Saxon's portrait of antebellum New Orleans, though none so thoroughly as Christian's account of the city's other public square. "There were two public squares in New Orleans six blocks apart and connected by 'the road back of town' [Rampart Street]," he wrote, "... facing the first square, which was known as the Place d'Armes [Jackson Square], one found the symbols of law and order, personified by the St. Louis Cathedral and the Cabildo. But at the other, known variously as Circus Square, Congo Square, or Filmore Square, one found there on the Sabbath a dark Saturnalia." Here each Sunday slaves gathered to talk and dance in a ritualized throwing off of their burdens, and the din echoed the length of Rampart Street, filling the opposing Square.⁴²

The Dillard Project, the organization and its manuscript, reflect a society in transition. This was a Jim Crow unit, to be sure, the brainchild of a writer whose professional success and critical acclaim, if not his personal views, rested on the tradition of white racial supremacy. Yet Lyle Saxon was neither bigot nor exploiter. He was, instead, a man caught between literary ambition and personal scruple, someone whose deeply divided character, revealed so clearly in his racial ambiguity, "his straddle fence stand" on black advancement, marks him so clearly as a transitional figure of the period. He ended his life

⁴² "The Negro in Louisiana," Chapter Fourteen, p.1, *ibid*.

and career, struggling to recapture an elusive literary fame, and his failure provides a succinct depiction of the sweeping changes of a modernizing southern society. Saxon remained professionally what he always was, the talented voice of a cultural localism increasingly out of step with his day. As Director of the Louisiana Writers' Project he chanted in print what he doubted in private, a paradox revealed most fully when this "gentleman of southern letters," "the New Voice of the Old South," this self-styled anachronism and committed preservationist, organized and championed the efforts of a dozen or so black writers to refute everything he allegedly stood for. By organizing the effort and defending it against all comers, by sustaining Christian's effort to complete and edit the Dillard manuscript long after the Project had closed, Saxon provided the opportunity for these writers to join a growing national movement of like-minded blacks advancing the cause of their race. Periodically, throughout the duration of the Dillard operation, the local writers entertained such national leaders of the black community as Sterling Young and John Davis. Among others, too, they came into contact with such prominent black artists as Richard Wright and Jacob Lawrence, forming in the process lasting friendships, in some cases, and a heightened sense of solidarity in others. The effort, then, provided the opportunity for a handful of local writers to join a national effort to assert a modern critique of American society, one anticipating professional historical scholarship by depicting the multi-faceted contributions of blacks to the national historical record. Perhaps this is why, when reflecting on his Dillard experience, Marcus Christian would title his essay, "Me and Lyle Saxon." Perhaps, too, it

explains why Christian, never a rich man, sent a twenty-dollar wreath to Lyle Saxon's funeral.⁴³

⁴³ Reddick, "The Dillard Project," pp.5-13.

6. Farewell to the Irish Channel

There were other instances when Lyle Saxon's folklore researches revealed glimpses of a modernizing world. One afternoon toward the end of May, 1939, Lenox Antony bumped into Arthur Trettivick in a New Orleans post office. Antony was then an employee of the Writers Project. Trettivick was a drifter just out of jail, and he looked the part. The sleeves were torn from his shirt. His shoes were cracked. Paint spotted his trousers. He hadn't shaved in days. He had no job, no money, and plenty of time, most of it spent in the French Quarter on Exchange Alley, "waiting for some lonely fellow looking for a drinking buddy." Antony turned a chance meeting into a professional interview. He struck up a conversation with Trettivick, who sensed perhaps an easy mark and offered no resistance. He even let Antony copy the letter he was writing to his father, an informative if barely literate summary of Trettivick's wanderings since leaving home:

Dear dad

i just got out of jail in new orleans. I had ninty days there and when i got out they gave me three dollars. they had us all working on a cathollic school and i got paint all over my shoes and pants. it looks bad i can tell you in my last letter, i told you i had a job with a raceing man, rubbing down horses and walking them. i got fired in san monico then I hitched hiked to new orleans. i guess you think it look bad like i never get anywheres, dad since i left denver 3 years now. you know there wasn't any job for me in denver so that is why i went on the road. i guess i don't look like i am getting anywhere fast.

when i got out of jail a man told me you could make money picking strawberrys over in a town called poncatala so I hitched hiked over there but i didnt do so good. i stayed there about 3 days and when i left i owed the farmer 65 cents.

please tell mom and the kids hello for me and kiss mom for me. if you see betty tell her i said hello and that i still love her please dont tell her i was in jail but just

tell her i think of her and that as soon as i make some
money im coming back.

your loveing son Arthur

Nor had things gone well for Arthur Trettivick since his return from the unprofitable strawberry fields of Ponchatoula. His three dollars were gone, and his prospects for finding work remained as gloomy as the state of his finances. He clung instead to a precarious existence on the Alley sustained only by small fortune and large dreams. At one point Trettivick told Lenox how he, too, yearned to be a writer. He even had the plot for a story he hoped one day to write, as relayed by Lenox, the tale of a young stableboy who saves his money, buys his own horse, and uses its winnings, five thousand dollars, to fund a fine suit of clothes and a triumphant return home to marry his old sweetheart.⁴⁴

Arthur Trettivick became not the author of a story but the subject of one. Having wandered his way from Denver to California to New Orleans, he wandered again into the files of the Federal Writers Project where he still remains, a subject worthy of James T. Farrell or John Dos Passos and a man with plenty of company. During their years in operation, Saxon's project workers amassed an enormous and richly varied collection of remembrances, tales, stories, and beliefs typed with carbons and bundled into thick files under the broad and often misleading category of folklore. It was a term in transition, a concept undergoing the sort of reconsideration and redefinition by professional folklorists that would bring it sharply into contrast with Lyle Saxon's own romanticized and increasingly out-dated literary yearnings. He

⁴⁴ Lenox Antony, "Arthur Trettivick," FWP Collection, (CGHRC), Folder 528.

would, as always, deny modern connotations ascribed to the field, would resist the sociological ends for which the material was sought. Yet his efforts were ultimately futile, for the material his researchers collected pointed directly to the growth of a modern society Saxon so consistently resisted.⁴⁵

The folklore researches of the Louisiana Writers Project commenced virtually with the outset of the project in accordance with a survey of national proportions. In early 1936 the folklorist John Lomax convinced Henry Alsberg to make folklore studies a priority among the researchers and writers in the state programs, the logical complement to the portrait of America sketched by the American Guide Series. Ultimately, like so many other of WPA's cultural endeavors, the folklore program grew into an enormous undertaking haphazardly administered, uneven in quality, and illuminating in operation. The program was divided into two parts, including the efforts of individual art, writers, music, and theater projects, in addition to the so-called "Joint Committee on Folk Arts, WPA," a group aided by the American Council of Learned Societies in the effort "to integrate and coordinate all the folklore, folk music, folk drama, and folk arts and crafts activities of WPA...." These were considerable. At least ten separate organizations within the government relief structure conducted researches into the national folklore, reaping a tremendous harvest of folktales, native designs, and speech and musical recordings. From the outset Saxon was a happy participant

⁴⁵ The life histories collected by Saxon's workers are preserved in several folders in the FWP Collection, CGHRC. Considerations of FWP folklore efforts appear in Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, pp.147-54; Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, pp.269-73; Ann Banks, First Person America, pp.xi-xxv; B.A. Botkin, "WPA and Folklore Research: Bread and Song," Southern Folklore Quarterly, 3(March 1939), pp.7-14.

in the program and an eager collector of Louisiana folklore. Ultimately, such materials gathered by his workers would be measured not in feet but in yards, enough by Saxon's estimate to keep him busy well into the dotage he never reached. Yet even by the time of his death what Lyle Saxon understood to be folklore others had already dismissed as romantic fluff.⁴⁶

The transformation coincided, naturally, with the sequence of circumstances that made the Spring of 1939 the most crucial period in Lyle Saxon's professional and personal life. In 1938 Benjamin Botkin replaced John Lomax as the supervisor of folklore collections, more than a simple administrative switch. Botkin's tenure signalled a switch in the focus and direction of the WPA folklore researches. Under Lomax the term folklore had embraced Saxon's own understanding and interests to include all manner of folk sayings, superstitions, charms, home remedies, and in the case of the Louisiana workers, anything connected with voodoo rites or practices. Botkin took a different approach. He claimed no interest in indulging whimsy or nostalgia for "the odd and the picturesque." Rather, he asserted, "upon us devolves the tremendous responsibility of studying folklore as a living culture and understanding its meaning and function not only in its immediate setting but in progressive and democratic society as a whole." This broke sharply with Saxon's romantic searches for ghost tales and voodoo queens. Botkin proposed instead to broaden and democratize the term as well as the search to include urban and industrial material collected not for amusement but for education. "The folk movement must come from below upward rather than from above downward," insisted Botkin.

⁴⁶ Botkin, "WPA and Folklore Research," pp.7-9.

"Otherwise it may be dismissed as a patronizing gesture, a nostalgic wish, an elegiac complaint, a sporadic and abortive revival on the part of paternalistic aristocrats going slumming, dilettantish provincials going native, defeated sectionalists going back to the soil, and anybody and everybody who cares to go collecting." Botkin believed that such a focus would clarify the country's pluralistic character, itself the basis for a fully-integrated American community. His proposals thus made folklore the cultural sinews of the nation, a stronger, more abiding tie linking locale and nation than the administrative bureaucracy of the New Dealers.⁴⁷

The transformation of folklore paralleled the development of art during the thirties. In this sense, the folklore researches of the various writers projects, including Saxon's own, divide themselves into discreet categories roughly analogous to those cleaving American Scene painting. Saxon's own interests and efforts have much in common with the sort of romantic nostalgia that surfaces in the work of such celebrated Regionalists as Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood. Similarly, folklore researches completed along lines established by Botkin conform in subject and tone to the Social Realist painters. But in a broader sense, Botkin's innovations, like the aesthetic philosophy of Holger Cahill, modernized the contemporary understanding of his discipline, giving folklore a more egalitarian and utilitarian cant. In one sense, the assurances of each man made for good public relations. As the directors of publicly-funded operations neither man lost many opportunities to justify his bureaucratic

⁴⁷ Botkin, "WPA and Folklore Research," p.8; Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, 269-71; Hirsch, "Portrait of America," pp.39-41.

existence in the most traditional of means by asserting that the work not only strengthened American democracy but justified its own expense by returning something to the community. Still, in another sense, the direction of both disciplines during the thirties charts one of the decade's most important themes. Developments in American art and American folklore trace the growth of a modern, more egalitarian and organized society, one stressing the national over the local and embracing the values of cultural relativism. For as Holger Cahill proposed to make everyman his own artist, Botkin and others now proposed to make everyman his own biographer.⁴⁸

Perhaps the most celebrated of the FWP folklore researches, and certainly the most representative example of Botkin's influence, are the so-called "Life Histories" compiled by project workers across the nation. Yet the life history project was not Botkin's own. Lawrence Reddick, for instance, had conceived of his project to interview ex-slaves as early as 1935. But the final form and tone of the Life History project was shaped principally by W.T. Couch, Director of the University of North Carolina Press and a thorough-going modernist with more than a mild disregard for the sort of romanticized nostalgia then characteristic of much southern writing. Here, clearly, was not someone Lyle Saxon could charm with a cocktail and a ghost story. Couch became involved with the FWP in 1938 on the urging of Henry Alsberg, and proposed to conduct an intimate portrait of southern labor using FWP

⁴⁸ Botkin remained as director of FWP folklore researches for one year before transferring to the Library of Congress where he began to sift through the mammoth files assembled by the various writers projects. Combining this with other materials, Botkin published three major folklore volumes during the 1940s. Botkin, A Treasury of American Folklore, (New York, 1944); A Treasury of New England Folklore, (New York, 1947); A Treasury of Southern Folklore, (New York, 1949).

resources. To this end Couch developed a standardized format of interview procedures and questions to be used by project writers throughout the South, one designed to permit the people to tell their own stories in their own words. Shot through with the documentary impulse, Couch's project contemplated an unvarnished look at the lowest rungs of southern society, and although it failed for a variety of reasons to achieve its ambition or its scope, the existence of the project in any form and regardless of result challenged the romantic writings of Lyle Saxon.⁴⁹

To varying degrees, both Botkin and Couch intimated to Saxon that collecting ghost tales and supernatural stories was no longer a project priority. Toward the close of 1938, concerned primarily with collecting material for the proposed volume of "American Folk Stuff," Botkin visited the State Director in New Orleans, where he briefed the staff on his own conception of folklore research. "I want legendary stories," Botkin explained, "local stories of real life rather than what we call supernatural. We are interested in contemporary American life and want realistic material." Yet, in the same interview, Botkin provided loopholes, stressing that for the most part what he sought were the stories of and anecdotes about local characters--essentially people who deviated from the norm, even those whose stories might prove unprintable. Saxon's writers replied in earnest, offering tales the

⁴⁹ Discussions of Couch and his involvement in the Life Histories project are in Daniel Singal, *The War Within*, pp.284-7; William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, pp.204-6; Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, p.152. Couch himself explains the project's purpose in These Are Our Lives: As Told By the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia, (Chapel Hill, 1939), pp.ix-xx.

Director often retold himself, such as the story of the woman who buried all her cats in vaults in the St. Louis Cemetery, decided she didn't like the place, and moved them all to Metairie Cemetery. Finally, when pressed again by Eddie Dreyer and another project writer, Hazel Breau, on the subject of supernatural tales, Botkin reversed himself, assenting to their collection, but warning the group once more that they would not be included in the proposed volume. This was all the room Saxon needed, and his writers resumed their search for the supernatural. Six months after Botkin's departure, Couch arrived in New Orleans where he explained to the State Director and the Louisiana staff the intent and methodology of the Life History survey. But judging from what remains in project files and from the tone of Gumbo Ya-Ya, together with the paucity of material sent to the writers in North Carolina, it is evident that Saxon cheerfully disregarded much of what Couch said too. Rather, Saxon and his writers, already deep in the research for Gumbo Ya-Ya, continued the hunt for accounts of Marie Laveau or for folk charms and spells.⁵⁰

Still, the effort yielded an immense harvest. Once again, a combination of budgetary constriction and intrastate rivalry gave the collection a New Orleans bias. Aside from ghost tales and superstitions unearthed by writers in the district offices, Saxon ignored the folklore of north Louisiana altogether, preferring to dwell on his pet subjects, Carnival and voodoo. Far and away the largest portion of materials

⁵⁰ Botkin's comments are quoted from the transcript of a meeting between him, Saxon, Dreyer, and several project workers held on November 28, 1938. "Louisiana Folklore," RG 69, (NA), Reports Pertaining to Ethnic Studies, Box 193. Couch was in New Orleans roughly six months later, having spent much of the spring travelling the South to establish the Life History Project. Couch to Saxon, May 12, 1939; July 21, 1939, *ibid.*, Central Files, Box 465.

focused on subjects incorporated into the chapters of Gumbo Ya-Ya, but the files also contain a substantial number of life histories, very few of which conform at all to anything William T. Couch had in mind. Instead, most employed Couch's methods to obtain the sort of material Saxon had been seeking all along. The result, predictably, conformed to Saxon's image of New Orleans as a tolerant haven for true characters. In this sense, the life histories must have been a comfort to the Director, for each tale of quirky behavior or backward belief must have represented fresh evidence refuting the growth of standardization and homogenization in New Orleans society.⁵¹

Better still, his own writers frequently fit the mold. Robert McKinney was the only black member of Saxon's project not assigned to the Dillard Unit. Instead, he served a vital function for the Canal Street office, providing a glimpse of black life in New Orleans usually denied the white observer. McKinney's assignments were often tough and his reports were frequently salted with the language of the street. He interviewed pimps, prostitutes, dope addicts, or "junkermen" as they were known, and gamblers among others, whose illegal activity, private and professional, offered its own set of dangers to the reporter. At least twice McKinney narrowly eluded arrest when the police raided dice games he was covering. On another occasion he interviewed a local underworld figure while clinging to the running board of an automobile in motion. Then there was the time he and Hazel Breaux interviewed a Mr. Zatarain, proud operator and sole proprietor of a divine sanctuary whose healing elixirs consisted for the most part of the root beer

⁵¹ The folklore researches of Saxon's district offices are a part of the FWP Collection, (CGHRC). See especially Files 58-9, 63-7, 72, 84, and 89.

brewed by the food company across the street. Such experiences were not unique. Harry Huguenot frequently toured the New Orleans docks where, like McKinney, he returned with stories bordering on the pornographic. Out along the Eads Street jetties, for instance, Huguenot met Rose Diourteaud, "the Goat Woman" according to local custom. She was upwards of seventy, claimed recently to have buried her one hundred and eleven year old mother, considered herself to be still in her prime, a fine catch with a firm physique, and proved the point by opening her blouse for Huguenot's inspection. "Look how white and solid it is," she demanded, "it ain't flabby and all wrinkled and marked up..." Huguenot, whose stories reveal someone not easily surprised, nevertheless must have expressed some astonishment by recording the Goat Woman's next remark: "wait you said you was married didn't you?" Finally, there was the morning when another of Saxon's writers, a woman named H.K. Aime, sat down to coffee with Antoinette Dejean, whose live-in boyfriend, "Louie," ran a bookie joint out their living room. The conversation consisted mainly of Antoinette's tearful recollection of her courtship and marriage, and desertion to and by a wandering sailor, but was interrupted frequently by obscenities screeched at Louie and at several passersby. Then an even greater storm broke over the Dejean kitchen. While Aime sat listening to the battle and carefully recording its progress, she began to notice men scrambling over the back fence. It was a raid, but Aime remained unruffled. While the police banged through the front door she rallied to the cause, sitting on what evidence she could and stuffing her bra full of the rest. She rebuffed a brief interrogation, explained the nature of her work, and after the police had gone, concluded her interview with Mrs. Dejean, now more

furious than ever with her boyfriend the bookie.⁵²

This was enough to charm anyone into the supposition that the city was exactly what Lyle Saxon said it was, a place by design and operation like no other on the continent. Yet, by the time they were packed away and shipped to various points of final destination, Saxon's project files also contained a sizeable collection of evidence to the contrary. For along the way, between the faith healers and the goat women, Saxon's writers rubbed shoulders with the Arthur Trettivicks of New Orleans, people who told tales of poverty, political corruption, and racial bigotry, and people whose lives were closer to Couch's conception of southern life than Lyle Saxon ever cared to admit. Some, such as the account of one family with three sons in jail, were recorded in sociological profile. Others, such as a series of stories collected in a local Roman Catholic church, were incorporated into portraits of everyday experience later styled "vernacular." And many contained internal clues of a rapidly standardizing culture. On one foray, Saxon's field workers returned crestfallen to report that all efforts had failed to induce a young Cajun couple recently moved to the city to speak in their native patois French. On another occasion, the rice vendor Louis Pillot provided a gloomy assessment of his independent firm in words that must have chilled the State Director's spine. "I'm telling you," Pillot lamented, "the chain stores are just ruining business for the independent dealer...the chain stores have killed the

⁵² McKinney's escapades are chronicled in *ibid.*, Folders 53-4 and 62. The most representative sample of his work is his Life History of "Jimmy Smith, The Junker," in Folder 62. Hazel Breaux and Robert McKinney, "Zatarain's Sanctuary of Christian Divine Healing," *ibid.*, Folder 600; Harry Huguenot, "The Eads Street Jetties," *ibid.*, Folder 539; H.K. Aime, "The Bookie," *ibid.*

individual worker."⁵³

Yet, perhaps no other series of stories illustrated the point more succinctly than those collected from the "Irish Channel." The Channel was a block of houses on a single street, Adele, along the riverfront, settled by Irish immigrants in the 1840s. A century later it was, to Lyle Saxon and Robert Tallant, symbolic of a passing way of life. Successive project workers had wandered through the Channel, or what remained of it, interviewing the old folks and reconstructing a portrait of the neighborhood the collaborators then incorporated into a chapter for Gumbo Ya-Ya. It fairly reeks with all the familiar images of Irish toughs and red-haired lasses, laboring gangs of hard-fisted men who worked as hard as they drank, all night wakes and happy weddings, and large families with children brought up right and no few given to the Church. It was an exercise in the stereotypical climaxed by a fit of nostalgia. By 1940 the Irish Channel had all but ceased to exist. No more than a handful of Irish remained, mostly old people unwilling to budge. Instead, local demographic movements had converted the Irish Channel into something known popularly as "the Black Sea," and the few hangers-on were upset:

On this day oldtimers who had lived their lives in the Channel neighborhood mourn the changes that have come about. The real Channel--Adele Street--is inhabited entirely by Negroes, except for Jennie Green McDonald and her family. Muddy and disreputable, the little street gives no hint of its past. At St. Thomas [Street] it comes to an end at the

⁵³ Catherine B. Dillon, "Rice Vendor," *ibid.*, Folder 534; Hazel Breau, "A Streetcar Conductor," *ibid.*, Folder 553; Maude Wallace, "Our Lady of Guadalupe Church," *ibid.*, Folder 445. A representative sample of such stories includes Gaulke, "Henry E. Hermes," *ibid.*, Folder 543; Zoe Posey, "Jimmy," *ibid.*, Folder 111; Lenox Antony, "Group Interview," *ibid.*, Robert McKinney, "A Factory Girl Who Wants a Husband, Maybe," *ibid.*, Folder 523; Jack Bradford, "Portrait of Peggy," *ibid.*; Lenox Antony, "In the City Jungles (Relief Family)," *ibid.*, Folder 530.

brand-new brick buildings of the recently constructed Federal Housing Project. The oldtimers hate these modern apartments, though the young people delight in the bathrooms and electric refrigerators, and despite prejudice against the invasion, among the tenants are such names as Kelly, O'Brien, Burke, and O'Donnell.

There was no small irony in the Channel's transformation, or in Saxon's part in telling the story. The old people had at first been reluctant to talk, clinging stubbornly to a defiant silence. In time and after much prodding they had finally opened up, giving Saxon the opportunity to incorporate the group into a standardized portrait of Irish life sketched with all the trimmings. In this sense, what Saxon did in prose had already been etched in stone. After its proud century of existence the Channel had become a slum condemned by the federal government and cleared for the construction of a housing project. Over the old Channel now stood a three-story brick facade, the vertical expression of the city grid, symbolic of standardized forms of urban life lived according to enforced codes of acceptable behavior. Now, by virtue of Saxon's efforts, the history of the Channel, too, had acquired its own standardized character, a stereotype easily recognized by people everywhere and conveyed through systems of mass communication.⁵⁴

Looming over Adele Street, the St. Thomas Housing Project represents a milestone in American society and culture. What now stood over the ghost of the Irish Channel was not so much three stories of bricks and mortar and windows arrayed in vertical grid but an idea, a new definition of America different from the ones conceived and

⁵⁴ The interviews and folklore materials used by Saxon and Tallant to draft the Irish Channel chapter for Gumbo Ya-Ya are in *ibid.*, Folders 81, 96, 436, 476, 478, 480, and 523; Gumbo Ya-Ya, pp.50-74.

practiced by the two central figures of this study: Ellsworth Woodward and Lyle Saxon. Woodward had commenced the century committed to the "Holiness of Beauty" and to the tightly structured hierarchical world of beauty's creation where artists served as the high priests of a civilization ruled by the best people, meaning those most thoroughly exposed to the ennobling power of art. Woodward's aesthetic philosophy reflected a Progressive's belief in environmentalism and the mythology of Union, where the proper surrounding would guide the citizen toward the twin pillars of Union: Public Virtue and Public Order. Woodward, too, reflected the central conflict of Progressivism. Although he practiced an incipient form of artistic nationalism, rejecting the assertions of Genteel Reformers that art and culture existed only on the other side of the Atlantic, it was nationalism grounded on an unyielding localism.

Woodward's convictions were challenged by his life's work, the Newcomb Pottery, and supplanted by his involvement with the Public Works of Art Project. The pottery represented the institutional synthesis of Woodward's reform spirit and aesthetic localism, but the popularity of Newcomb pottery altered the forms and methods of its production and decoration in ways challenging Woodward's artistic assumptions. He never resolved the impasse. Instead, Woodward's artistic localism, undermined by his experience at the Newcomb Pottery, was swept aside during the Great Depression when he went to work for Edward Bruce. The two men had much in common. Both were elitists; both devoted themselves to Renaissance conceptions of artistic craftsmanship; both believed that art could mitigate the less savory conditions of industrial capitalism; and both men, when given the choice, refused to compromise aesthetic

standards in the face of economic need. But Bruce, a younger and more cosmopolitan man than Woodward, was no localist. Bruce was an artistic nationalist, someone who conceived of American art not as a coalition of small artistic communities scattered across the country but rather as an integrated whole endowed with a single national character and a common form of aesthetic expression: American Scene painting. This made Bruce's organizational superiority a fitting symbol of the declining influence of Woodward's Progressive localism. Bruce deflected Woodward's localist impulses at every turn, something he continued to do after the PWAP closed and he and Woodward parted company.

In the Fall of 1934 Edward Bruce assumed the directorship of the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture. For the next eight years Section artists decorated American post offices and courthouses with murals and sculptures in a broader attempt by Bruce to revolutionize American art, to create a national art and establish the American artists as vital citizens in the democratic community. Section artists worked under explicit instructions to remain sensitive to local tastes and local subjects. Ultimately, however, Section art adopted a common style, a common series of themes, values and aspirations, and a common visual language recognizable to most Americans regardless of place. Art had been centralized in a way Ellsworth Woodward could never abide. Section artists were never bound by the dicta of the *genius loci*; most of the Louisiana commissions were awarded to artists in other regions who, despite their differing backgrounds, incorporated into their mural designs a common series of themes, figures, and messages. Art had not only become centralized but standardized, the logical trend of an industrial society.

The trend towards centralization and standardization was broadened even further by Holger Cahill's Federal Art Project. Cahill was the son of first-generation immigrants, an itinerant from a broken home, a self-taught bindlestiff drawn to the common arts of the common man. Shaped by his own circumstances and a simplistic view of the Jacksonian past, he idealized a vision of simple citizens creating simple art in the service of a democratic community. Cahill flouted the aesthetic assumptions of Edward Bruce and Ellsworth Woodward, branding them as artistic elitists. Instead, paralleling the social message of the New Deal impulse, Cahill broadened the definition of art and artists. Art continued to uplift; art remained a central need of the American soul, but no longer would art be judged by Renaissance standards of skill and excellence. No longer were artists the high priests of beauty or the creators of didactic Section art. The real artists, in Cahill's opinion, were the people themselves, or more succinctly, if Carl Becker made every man his own historian, and Huey Long made every man a king, then Holger Cahill made every man an artist, someone who, by virtue of his existence in democratic society, was endowed with the innate ability to create valuable art regardless of technical expertise. Yet Cahill hoped to enact his populist assumptions through distinctly modern means. Under his supervision art was industrialized as never before in federally-operated production centers modeled on the assembly line, where the FAP's principal innovation, silk screen posters, reflected the logical lines of its development. The success of Cahill's operation, as in all manufactures, depended upon the uniform creation of a standardized product, a formidable challenge to local art institutions and one stubbornly resisted by Gideon Stanton, a friend and colleague of

Ellsworth Woodward and for the first three years of its existence, director of the FAP in Louisiana. Stanton's intransigence delayed but did not prevent the triumph of industrial art, something which, defined as a product for mass consumption, was marketed nationwide in the Fall of 1940 during National Art Week, then the largest art promotion in American history.

As with art so with literature. While Ellsworth Woodward and Gideon Stanton struggled to preserve local conceptions and institutions of art, Lyle Saxon made a last stand all his own. As a young man he had risen to national celebrity, "the new voice of the Old South," with a literary style steeped in regional nostalgia. But Saxon was no standard Confederate eulogizer. He had read into the Steamboat Days of Old New Orleans a romantic bohemianism he affected for much of his adult life and defended for all of it, even in his later years, when the method of his expression undermined the appeal of his message. Saxon spent eight years as the State Director of the Louisiana Writers' Program attempting to recover his earlier fame and to secure his understanding of the past. Both were crucial to his own self-image and he succeeded at neither. Instead, Lyle Saxon, false son of an imaginary plantation, became the true life manager of a literary production center engaged in a massive portrait of American life. Like Woodward and Stanton before him, Saxon's project evolved into a regional assembly plant associated with a national concern. He no longer created art, he manufactured it with a ready supply of cheap labor and raw materials assembled into finished products according to standardized instructions sent from Washington. Some variations were produced, but never so many as to alter the basic mold. Rather, what emerged from the federal effort was a portrait of

America cast in the industrial image of the society it depicted, one that overwhelmed the regional romance on which Saxon depended for so much for so long.

Ellsworth Woodward and Lyle Saxon were different men who shared but one common cause. Each, for different reasons, sought to preserve the architectural heritage of the French Quarter. Woodward envisioned the Quarter as the fullest expression of local craftsmanship and the logical environment for local artistic expression. With Saxon it was more personal. Here, behind protective walls flush to the curb, the mask was safest and the man behind it most secure. Yet, from different circumstances and differing impulses, pursuing different careers down divergent paths, Ellsworth Woodward and Lyle Saxon would arrive on common ground and secure a common end, though one vastly changed for the effort. Woodward's environmentalism remained behind him, but in altered form. The St. Thomas Street Housing Project reflects a lingering faith in the proper environment, but one that valued function over appearance and assumed a fundamental interchangeability of American citizens obviating the necessity for local tastes and indigenous forms. Saxon, too, had preserved his beloved French Quarter but only at great cost. Appropriately, his former Royal Street apartment would become the home of the Vieux Carre Preservation Society, the newest defenders of the oldest ghosts. Yet, if Lyle Saxon had saved the Quarter from the wrecker's ball he had not left it as he found it. The act of preservation itself, his popularization of the Quarter, chiefly through the New Orleans Guide, helped make it something different, something of what it is today, a standard stop on the tourist's trek across America. Perhaps he suspected this himself. For Christmas in 1941, perhaps under

Eddie Dreyer's prompting, Saxon's old friends from the Times-Picayune presented him with a dummy newspaper whose headline read: "SAXON STUFFED FOR CABILDO." The point seemed well taken. Not much later, when Marshall Morgan interviewed the author for a local radio spot, Saxon observed "with a rueful smile," that "I began as a writer and I end as a souvenir."

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VITA

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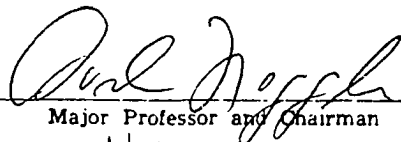
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Rich Megraw

Major Field: History

Title of Dissertation: The Uneasiest State: Art, Culture, and Society
in New Deal Louisiana, 1933-1943

Approved:

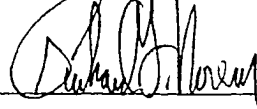

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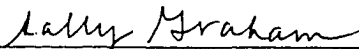
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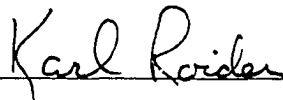
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Date of Examination:

November 30, 1990