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The Federal Writers' Project's Mirror to America: The Florida Reflection.

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**The Federal Writers' Project's mirror to America: The Florida
reflection**

Bordelon, Pamela G., Ph.D.

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1991

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Ann Arbor, MI 48106

THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT'S
MIRROR TO AMERICA:
THE FLORIDA REFLECTION

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
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FOREWORD

In the 1930s, writers of the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) plowed fertile new ground in American cultural scholarship. The writers were for the most part not professionals but unemployed white collar workers who had been dramatically rescued from unemployment by this government relief project.

Like other New Deal relief agencies, the Writers' Project had been created more to make work than to do work. But by the end of the program, it had charted a nation and comprehensively documented American life. The Federal Writers' Project produced the American Guide Series, consisting of a guidebook to each of the 48 states, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and a number of local, regional, and city guides. Mirroring the new sociological and anthropological trends of the 1930s, the FWP pioneered African-American studies, broke new ground in oral history, and revolutionized the study of folklore. Federal writers in each state unearthed the variety and texture of the nation and left an incomparable record of

localized America. Never before or since has the country been documented on such a massive scale.¹

The primary research and writing of the American Guide Series and other FWP publications took place on the state level, yet few substantial studies exist detailing how these tasks were accomplished. Jerre Mangione in his monograph The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943 (1972), outlined the contours of the national program, profiled the project's main participants, and recounted his amusing experiences working as national coordinating editor. His witty and insightful account inspired a new look at the Federal Writers' Project and generated a number of other studies. Following closely in Mangione's footsteps, Monty Noam Penkower transformed his doctoral dissertation on the Federal Writers' Project into the first scholarly monograph on the program. Like Mangione, he based his study on interviews with more than 60 of the project's main participants and a wide reading of the secondary literature of the period. However, Penkower offered little that was new.²

¹ William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 111.

² Jerre Mangione, The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943 (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1972); Monty Noam Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Daniel Aaron, "A Giant Mirror for America," Reviews in American

Although Mangione's and Penkower's studies are important and useful, an extended study of program on the state level is needed to round out the picture. How well did the national program operate on the state level? Did the state programs circumvent national goals, directives, and editorial policies? Did the state guides reflect the viewpoint of Washington's editors, or the outlook of state writers and editors? And what of the thousands of manuscript pages that remained unpublished in the files? What do they tell us about the state programs, the Federal Writers' Project, and about America?

Several unpublished state studies provide useful information on the work of the FWP in the states. Ronnie Clayton described the Louisiana program, directed by Lyle Saxon, a well-known writer of southern and regional novels. Ronald Warren Taber presented case studies of the FWP in Oregon, Washington State, and Idaho, while Jerrold Hirsch detailed the inner workings of the North Carolina project. However, none of these were typical state projects. Lyle Saxon was an accomplished writer whose professional touch and outlook clearly marked the Louisiana program. Vardis Fischer was a professional writer and a maverick who dominated the Idaho project and almost singlehandedly wrote the Idaho guide. The Washington State and Oregon projects proved too

History, (June, 1973), 277-281.

troublesome and political to be thought of in any way as typical of the state writers' project nationwide.

William T. Couch, a sociologist, writer, and director of the University of North Carolina Press, overshadowed the North Carolina program. These state projects and their publications bore the imprint of their strong directors' personalities.³

The Florida Federal Writers' Project appeared more typical. Carita Corse, the Florida director, was more a scholar than a writer. Although Corse had published several local histories, she did not possess the literary talent of Vardis Fisher or Lyle Saxon or the editorial and administrative skills of William T. Couch. Corse, like most state directors, worked closely under Washington's supervision yet retained her own ideas as to what the state guidebook and other publications should contain.

The Florida program typified the problems frequently encountered on the state level: lack of professional writing talent, high turnover of project personnel, and jealousies and infighting in state and local offices. Corse was not a strong director. She did some writing,

³ Ronnie Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana" (Ph. D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1974); Ronald W. Taber, "The Federal Writers' Project in the Pacific Northwest: A Case Study" (Ph. D. diss., Washington State University, 1969); Jerrold Maury Hirsch, "Culture on Relief: The North Carolina Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943" (M. A. Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1973)

checked copy, and reviewed historical material for the state guide and other publications, but she delegated a great deal of her authority to subordinates in the state office. Without a strong director, a power vacuum developed. The state office turned into an editorial battleground as a cabal of young, liberal-minded editors rewrote copy behind Corse's back.

Like most state directors, including Saxon and Fisher, Carita Corse had little understanding of how to get the project underway in her state. The parent Florida WPA organization resented the special status the Writers' Project enjoyed as a federally-sponsored project and often worked against it. In the early months, the central office demonstrated little understanding of state conditions or the format the guidebooks should take. Chaos and bungling abounded. Despite a myriad of problems and challenges, Carita Corse produced the Florida guide within four years. Received with complementary reviews, the Florida FWP guide today stands today as the most comprehensive, one-volume resource on the state. Florida conducted a number of other important, auxiliary FWP programs. Florida was one of only three states in the South with an African-American unit. The black writers in Florida produced ex-slave narratives and contemporary studies which have never received the consideration they deserve. Both black and white guide workers collected

Florida folklore that highlighted the state's multi-national background. For nearly a year and a half, Florida native Zora Neale Hurston, who at the time was the only trained African-American folklorist in the South, contributed her experience and knowledge to the Florida folklore program. Her story underscored the plight of other gifted black Americans struggling through the Great Depression. In the last year of federal sponsorship of the FWP, an oral history project similar to the ex-slave interviews was implemented to chronicle the experiences of ordinary Americans in all walks of life. The Florida life histories conveyed the feelings, attitudes, and the raw texture of life as it was being lived by ordinary Floridians. No other program, except the ex-slave narratives, captured the essence of the FWP so well. Here were ordinary Americans telling their life stories to ordinary Americans.

The Florida Federal Writers' Project was a part of the massive inventory of the decade which described the roots from which America had sprung. Indeed, the Writers' Project was an important part of the transformation of the meaning of culture which took place in the 1930s. Its writers' attempt to document national life and their search for concrete facts for the state and regional guidebooks symbolized the decade's search for an American culture. For the first time, culture took on an

anthropological meaning. The American Guide Series, the folklore collection, ex-slave interviews, and life histories focused national attention on the lower one-third of the nation and documented their lives, their feelings, and their attitudes.⁴

By 1943, the vast body of work collected in Florida and elsewhere had been overshadowed by the greater concerns of a nation at war. Although the Florida workers produced an impressive list of publications, the bulk of their writings remained in the files, seemingly insignificant and another example of WPA make-work. Today, the richest cache of WPA research collected in Florida lie neglected in state depositories, improperly preserved and largely forgotten. Florida folklore, including the work of Zora Neale Hurston, socio-ethnic studies, life history interviews, and African-American history, which delved even more deeply into the fabric of American life than the state guides, never saw print. That the fruits of so bold an enterprise and one of the New Deal's most singular achievements ended in such a manner demonstrates how quickly America turned its back on the work of writers on relief.

⁴ Warren Susman, "The Thirties," in The Development of An American Culture ed. Stanley Coben & Lorman Ratner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentiss Hall, 1970).

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ABSTRACT

In the 1930s, the federal writers of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) plowed fertile new ground in American cultural scholarship. The writers were for the most part not professionals but white collar workers who had been dramatically rescued from unemployment by this government relief project.

Like other New Deal relief agencies, the Writers' Project had been created more to make work than to do work. But by the end of the program, it had charted a nation and documented American life more comprehensively than any earlier effort had done. In Florida the federal writers produced a state guide, pioneered African-American studies, broke new ground in oral history, and revolutionized the study of folklore. Their records unearthed the variety and texture of cultural life, leaving an incomparable record of localized America.

The Florida Federal Writers' Project demonstrates how the program operated on the state level. Its research beyond the state guide demonstrates the contributions these state programs made to American cultural studies. Florida was one of three Southern states which had an active African-American writers' unit. Zora Neale

Hurston, the only trained African-American folklorist in the South, worked on the Florida project for a year and a half. This study explores her contribution to the project and documents her contributions to the state's folklore program.

The work by the federal writers in Florida was but one part of the massive national inventory that had created in words a giant mirror of the American scene. Yet only a small portion of their work was published and held up for the nation to see.

CHAPTER ONE: GOVERNMENT AND THE ARTS

As the bitterly cold winter of 1932-1933 blanketed the nation, Americans waited expectantly for Franklin D. Roosevelt to take office as President of the United States. Since the stock market crash of October, 1929, and the Great Depression that followed, the nation's economic system had tottered on the brink of collapse. Three years of sustained economic crisis cut the national income in half, wiped out nine million savings accounts, and precipitated five thousand bank failures. One out of every four persons remained unemployed. "Never, in modern times, I should think, has there been so widespread unemployment and such moving distress from sheer hunger and cold," confided Rexford Tugwell to his diary. "Jobs had become so scarce," Malcolm Cowley observed, "that the unemployed would no longer spend money to advertize for what they couldn't hope to find. They moped and brooded, nursed their lukewarm

cups of coffee, and thought that sometime, in some fashion, everything must be changed."¹

As the Depression deepened, the possibility of revolution grew more ominous. National journals began printing articles entitled "If the Revolution Comes" and "Are We Going to Have A Revolution?" In his article questioning the possibility of revolution, George Soule noted, it was not the workers in the mill towns and the unemployed in the bread lines who made revolutions for "those who suffer from the depression are, according to the best-informed reports, . . . stricken dumb by it." Soule pointed out that "if you want to hear talk of future revolution, go to Wall Street and to Park Avenue, and to the writings of young literary men." Archibald MacLeish agreed. In an open letter "To the Young Men of Wall Street," he challenged the nation's financiers to "create an idea of capitalism which men will support with their hope rather than their despair." If they could not, he asserted, "you

¹ William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 19, 18-40; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), 3, 248-269; Malcolm Cowley, The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), quote, 151. Cowley provides an excellent commentary on the early years of the Depression. See also, Frances Perkins, The Roosevelt I Knew (New York: Viking Press, 1946), 182-183.

and your children and ourselves with you will vanish from the West."²

As the Depression deepened, these "young literary men" openly debated radical solutions to capitalism's seeming demise. Feeling that it was their duty to bear witness to the political and social upheaval of the times, they penned scathing indictments of the capitalist system. Communism and socialism seemed viable alternatives to a system evidently on the verge of collapse and incapable of regeneration. In Tragic America, Theodore Dreiser reviewed the advantages of socialism, while in Puzzled America Sherwood Anderson did the same. Sinclair Lewis' novel, It Can't Happen Here, became a tract for the communist cause. Edmund Wilson in American Jitters questioned a governmental system which experienced starvation, misery, and hardship amid plenty. Malcolm Cowley, a vociferous member of the radical literary movement, pointed out that writers turned revolutionary because they felt that by "surrendering their middle-class identities, by joining the workers in an

² Soule, "Are We Going to Have A Revolution?" Harper's Magazine, CLXV (Aug. 1932), 277; MacLeish quote in Schlesinger, Crisis, 205; Richard Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 76. Pells stated that only writers and certain groups within the middle class seem to have been thoroughly radicalized by the Great Depression; Cowley, The Dream of the Golden Mountains, 156-57. Cowley argues that the revolution would not have been proletarian.

idealized army, writers might help to overthrow the 'system' and might go marching with comrades, shoulder to shoulder out of injustice and illogic into the golden mountains."³

Even seasoned politicians sensed that basic changes were needed. Theodore Bilbo, governor of Mississippi who had witnessed thousands of farm foreclosures in his home state, pointed out that in the deep South "some people are about ready to lead a mob. In fact, I'm getting a little pink myself." Hamilton Fish, chairman of the House of Representatives subcommittee investigating Communism, told his colleagues that unless they provided security for human beings under the existing order, "the people will change the system. Make no mistake about that."⁴

The heated debate concerning the future of capitalism which occupied the nation contrasted sharply with the lethargy and inactivity of the national government. President Herbert Hoover seemed oblivious to the crisis. Following the laissez-faire tenets of the Republican Party,

³ Theodore Dreiser, Tragic America (New York: Liveright, 1931); Sherwood Anderson, Puzzled America (Mamronech, N. Y.: P. P. Appel, 1935, 1970); Sinclair Lewis, It Can't Happen Here (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, & Co., 1935); Edmund Wilson, The American Jitters: A Year of the Slump (New York: Books For Libraries Press, Inc., 1932, 1968), 10-26, 13; Cowley, Remembering the 1930s, 156-57.

⁴ Quoted in Schlesinger, Crisis, 204-05, 217-19.

Hoover had been telling Americans that if they would be patient, the economy would soon straighten itself out.⁵

The Republicans' inability to deal with the depression and Hoover's lack of decisive leadership assured a Democratic victory in 1932. Franklin D. Roosevelt, the reform-minded governor of New York, captured his party's presidential nomination and won the election. Although he was relatively unknown and untried as a national leader, Roosevelt sensed, as did other perceptive observers, that despite negative reports and discussion of radical revolution, there was, just beneath the surface of American life, a "hopefulness and eagerness for change that had begun to appear in the midst of discouragement." Roosevelt believed that the nation still clung to its "indomitable spirit" which "would be strong enough to compel American capitalism to restrain and reform itself."⁶

During his campaign for the Presidency, Roosevelt demonstrated his desire to break with foolish tradition by being the first Democratic candidate to accept his party's

⁵ Robert Bendiner, Just Around the Corner (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 3-4, 25; Cowley, Dream of the Golden Mountains, 152; Perkins, Roosevelt, 183.

⁶ George Soule, "On Blaming Hoover," The New Republic (October 26, 1932), 276-279; "Roosevelt's Revolution," The New Republic (November 9, 1932), 340-41; "The Week," The New Republic, (November 16, 1932), 1-6; Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 5-8; Cowley, The Dream of the Golden Mountains, 156-57.

nomination as President of the United States in person. He flew to the national convention in Chicago and in a rousing acceptance speech outlined the country's need for structured change and bold, persistent action. Roosevelt stated emphatically, "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people." During the ensuing campaign he continued to urge "bold, persistent experimentation."⁷

After being sworn in as President on March 4, 1933, Roosevelt called Congress into special session. Within his first hundred days in office, he guided fifteen major pieces of legislation through Congress. One of these laws, the Federal Emergency Relief Appropriations Act (FERA) of 1933, demonstrated the federal government's commitment to aiding the unemployed. The FERA dispensed 500 million dollars in direct grants to the states to spend as they saw fit. Roosevelt appointed Harry Hopkins, a professional social worker who had served him in New York, as FERA administrator. Hopkins recalled the enormity of the task:

Almost overnight we were called on to feed fifteen million workless, hungry people, with the problem further complicated by the necessity for speed and the fact that we did not have a single chart to go by. It was

⁷ Leuchtenburg, The New Deal, 5-8, 41-62; Cowley, The Dream of the Golden Mountains, 156-57.

almost as if the Aztecs had been asked suddenly to build an airplane.⁸

Hopkins handled this unprecedented task efficiently, with a minimum of graft, and won over even skeptical state and local politicians. Within a year this once unknown harness maker's son had become one of the President's most loyal and trusted assistants and one of the most powerful men in the Roosevelt Administration. In February, 1934, his picture appeared on the cover of Time magazine.⁹

From the beginning of his experience as the New Deal relief administrator, Hopkins maintained that direct relief payments, or dole, demoralized able-bodied men and women who really wanted work. He approached the President with his idea for a federally directed work program that would create jobs to utilize the skills of those on the relief rolls. In November, 1933, Hopkins

⁸ Harry Hopkins, "Food for the Hungry, "Collier's (Dec. 7, 1935), 10.

⁹ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), 263-271, 277-81; Robert E. Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 31, 38-51. Sherwood provides the definitive biography of Hopkins and details his career as New Deal relief administrator; Leuchtenburg, The New Deal, 120-25; William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 27-31; Searle F. Charles, Minister of Relief: Harry Hopkins and the Depression (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963), 5-22; Hopkins, "Food For the Hungry," 10-11, 61-62; On February, 19, 1934, Hopkin's picture appeared on the front cover of Time magazine.

launched the experimental Civil Works Administration (CWA), which provided work-relief, rather than the dole. During the winter of 1933-34, four million unemployed Americans rebuilt and refurbished schools, constructed sidewalks and roads, built airports, and completed a host of other civic-oriented construction projects. At the same time, in keeping with its overall objective to provide jobs to match the skills of the unemployed, the CWA initiated a number of white-collar and professional projects. The public works of Art Project, financed with CWA funds, paid 3,800 artists in 48 states to paint murals in Post Offices and create art work for other public buildings. When first approached with the novel idea of using CWA funds to hire unemployed artists, Roosevelt answered, "Why not? They are human beings. They have to live. I guess the only thing they can do is paint and surely there must be some public place where paintings are wanted." This simple philosophy, which put people first, was the genesis of the New Deal's commitment to the arts.¹⁰

¹⁰ Charles, Minister of Relief, 2, 22, 24-28, 44-65, 237-248; Leuchtenburg, The New Deal, 121-22; Harry Hopkins, "Food for the Hungry," 10-11, 61-62; Harry Hopkins, Spending to Save: The Complete Story of Relief, (New York: W.W.Norton, 1936) relates Hopkin's basic relief philosophy; McDonald, Federal Relief, 35-36, 363-68. See the excellent background chapter: "The Beginning of White Collar Relief," 14-24; Frances Perkins, Roosevelt, quote 75, 76-77; Schlesinger, Coming of the

In addition to employing artists in the Public Works of Art Project, the CWA hired 50,000 teachers to keep bankrupt rural schools open and to instruct adult education classes. CWA-paid musicians gave free park concerts to audiences which had never before heard live music. In several states, CWA funds enabled unemployed journalists and writers to compile sociological studies, statistical reports, and guidebooks. Although the primary consideration was work relief, the federal government had taken the unprecedented step of subsidizing the arts.¹¹

Although it proved more costly than expected and was phased out within six months, the CWA experience was critical to the success and planning of the New Deal's soon-to-be launched permanent work relief program, the Works Progress Administration. Many of the CWA white collar projects continued for a time under the FERA work division, but they lacked the stability that a permanent program would have afforded. Professional organizations

New Deal, 268-81.

¹¹ Charles, Minister of Relief, 2, 22, 24-28, 44-65, 237-248; Leuchtenburg, The New Deal, 121-22; Harry Hopkins, "Food for the Hungry," 10-11, 61-62; McDonald, Federal Relief, 35-36, 363-68. Frances Perkins, Roosevelt, quote 75, 76-77; Schlesinger, Coming of the New Deal, 268-81; Kathleen O'Connor McKinzie, "Writers on Relief: 1935-1942," (Indiana University, Ph.D. diss., 1970), 6-9; Jerre Mangione, The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943, (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown & Co., 1972), 32-33; "Relief," Time (Feb. 19, 1934), 11-13.

lobbied intensely on behalf of their unemployed members. As a result, New Deal intensified its efforts to broaden the cultural work programs and extend aid to writers, musicians, and actors.¹²

The Writers' Union and the Unemployed Writers' Association, two radical groups based in New York City, had been agitating for the creation of a government project for writers similar to the one for artists. In February, 1934, Robert Whitcomb, the secretary of the Unemployed Writers' Association, wrote to the CWA and demanded help for unemployed writers in New York City who were living "under the semi-starvation conditions meted out to them . . . while the artists were receiving adequate treatment from the government" Whitcomb threatened that unless the government extended help, writers would organize and fight to better their conditions.¹³

¹² McKinzie, "Writers," 13-14; McDonald, Federal Relief, 654-55; Merle Colby, "Presenting America to the Americans," Publishers' Weekly, (May 3, 1941), 1815; Leuchtenburg, The New Deal, 122; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 32-33.

¹³ McKinzie, "Writers," 13-15; Monty Noam Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project: A Study of Governmental Patronage of the Arts, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 12-13; McDonald, Federal Relief, 649-56; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 34-36.

Influential members of the Authors' Guild and the Authors' League of America, both conservative craft guilds, pressured the New Deal as well. As the nation's economy grew worse, these groups spent considerable time and money to sustain their members. Their advocates knew first-hand the terrible sufferings that many of their colleagues had experienced. Heywood Broun, the president of the Newspaper Guild, and Hugh Harlan, an influential newspaperman and a personal friend of Harry Hopkins, joined in the demand for a governmental writers' program. Harlan called Hopkin's attention to a project in California financed with FERA funds that had put fifty unemployed newspaper editors, writers, photographers, and artists to work preparing reports on a variety of subjects. "Why can't this thing be established upon a national scale?" Harlan asked.¹⁴

The agitation of writers' groups, coupled with the New Dealers' desire for a permanent work-relief program modeled after the CWA, led to the creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the spring of 1935. In his annual message to Congress in January, 1935, Roosevelt outlined his plans to create a federally

¹⁴ McDonald, Federal Relief, 654-56, 649-656; McKinzie, "Writers," 13-15; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, quote 34, 34-36, 39.

controlled work relief program to replace the dole. The President declared:

The Federal government must and shall quit this business of relief. I am not willing that the vitality of our people be further sapped by the giving of cash, of market baskets, a few hours weekly of working cutting grass, raking leaves, or picking up papers in the public parks. We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution, but also their self-respect, their self-reliance, and courage and determination.¹⁵

Congress quickly translated the President's desire into action by passing the Emergency Relief Act (ERA) of 1935.

This five-billion-dollar relief measure amounted to the "greatest single appropriation in the history of the United States or any other nation." It empowered the President to create a federal work relief agency to disburse the funds. On May 6, 1935, in Executive Order 7034, Roosevelt set up the Works Progress Administration.¹⁶

A vaguely worded clause at the end of the 1935 ERA measure empowered the President to "recommend and carry on

¹⁵ Samuel Rosenman ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt 13 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938-50), V, 19-21; Leuchtenburg, The New Deal, 124.

¹⁶ Charles, Minister of Relief, 71-73, 94-127; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 4, 39; McKinzie, "Writers," 16-18; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 26-28; McDonald, Federal Relief, 103-06; Leuchtenburg, The New Deal, 125, 167-96.

small useful projects designed to assure a maximum employment in all localities." Interpreting this clause broadly, and using \$300 million of the ERA appropriation, Roosevelt authorized Hopkins to set up work projects for unemployed artists, musicians, actors, and writers. The four arts projects, collectively titled Federal One, began what one participant described as the New Deal's adventure in cultural collectivism.¹⁷

The New Deal subsidized the arts solely as a means of employing thousands of the nation's jobless artists, musicians, writers, and actors. As New Dealer Frances Perkins pointed out, "Roosevelt responded to the idea . . . because the people that practiced them were human beings and, like others, must earn a living." Yet Roosevelt's critics viewed the arts projects with suspicion, considering them a New Deal whim, another

¹⁷ Charles, Minister of Relief, 71-73, 94-127; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 4, 39; McKinzie, "Writers," 16-18; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 26-28; McDonald, Federal Relief, 103-06; Leuchtenburg, The New Deal, 125, 167-96. Leuchtenburg titles one of his chapters, "The New Deal at High Tide," indicating that Roosevelt's New Deal was at the height of its political power when the WPA began; Jerre Mangione, "The Federal Writers' Project: An Overview," paper delivered at "Rediscovering the 1930s: The WPA and the Federal Writers' Project," Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, November 8, 1986.

example of the extravagance and idiocy of the Roosevelt Administration.¹⁸

Harry Hopkins became WPA chief and put his assistant, Jacob Baker, head of the work division under FERA, in charge of the planning and implementation of the new cultural work programs. During the spring and summer of 1935, Baker recruited directors for each of the proposed cultural projects: Hallie Flanagan for theatre, Holger Cahill for art, Nikolai Sokaloff for music, and Henry Alsberg for writing. Unlike the WPA construction projects, which state WPA organizations proposed and directed, the WPA sponsored and guided the four arts projects from Washington. It was hoped that national coordination would ensure uniformity and keep professional standards high.¹⁹

In her autobiography Hallie Flanagan left a vivid description of the chaotic but exhilarating atmosphere that accompanied the planning and launching of the four cultural programs in the spring of 1935. Just as

¹⁸ Page Keeton, "How it All Began," in Wilbur Cohen, ed., The New Deal: Fifty Years After, A Historical Assessment (Austin, Texas: Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, 1984), 22-24; Perkins, Roosevelt, 76-77.

¹⁹ Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 27-29; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 53-59; McKinzie, "Writers," 17-19; McDonald, Federal Relief, 126-132.

Flanagan was about to decline directorship of the Federal Theatre Project, feeling that "a social worker and not a theatre person would be more qualified to run a relief project," Hopkins stalled her by saying, "Don't decide now. Come on out to Henry Alsberg's tonight--we're talking it over." At Alsberg's, the excitement of the other directors convinced Flanagan that she could make a lasting contribution to American culture as the director of the Federal Theatre Project. Flanagan described her feelings and why she changed her mind:

It was one of those evenings in which everything seemed possible. Holger Cahill was at the top of his form, imbuing us with his conviction that government subsidy was the next logical step in the development of American art, not an art which would be an occasional unrelated accompaniment to everyday existence, but a functioning part of our national life. If this sort of nationwide activity in music, painting, writing, and theatre was to come about, the people . . . must be made to believe that they had important work to do. It was the first job of the people chosen as national directors to decide what that work was to be.²⁰

Each of the four art project directors shared the basic belief that the arts were alive and experiment was still possible. Each program attempted to "revitalize the arts to an extent . . . unknown in America." As a result,

²⁰ Hallie Flanagan, Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre, (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1940), 18-19; McKinzie, "Writers," 18-19; McDonald, Federal Relief, 126-31.

Federal One produced some of the most creative work of the decade.²¹

The Index of American Design, intended to utilize the wide variety of artistic talent on the unemployment rolls, emerged as "the finest achievement of the Federal Art Project." Unemployed illustrators, draftsmen, and artists faithfully copied thousands of artifacts from American daily life for the Index. Wooden carvings on ships' bows, elaborate grillwork in the New Orleans historical district, the designs of American china and pottery, circus wagons, and cigar store Indians were among the subjects of their illustrations.²²

²¹ Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 28; James Wechsler, "Record of the Boondogglers," The Nation (July-Dec 1937), 715-17; See also, Jane De Hart Mathews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for Cultural Democracy," Journal of American History (Sept., 1975), 316-339. Mathews argues that the most lasting contribution of the federal art projects was to bring their work to the masses. Robert Bendiner in his article, "When Culture Came to Main Street," Saturday Review, (April, 1967), 19-21, takes the same position.

²² McDonald, Federal Relief, 453, 441-458; Richard D. McKinzie, The New Deal for Artists (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 134-145; Lincoln Rothschild, "The Index of American Design of the WPA Federal Art Project," in Francis V. O' Connor ed., The New Deal Art Projects: Anthology of Memoirs (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), pp. 177-196; Francis O'Connor, Art for the Millions, (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 42; George Biddle, "Art Under Five Years of Federal Patronage," The American Scholar 9 (1939-1940), 327-338, 331; Marshall B. Davidson, "The WPA's Amazing Artistic Record of American Design," American Heritage 23 (Feb., 1972), 65-77.

The Federal Theatre Project quickly established its reputation through its innovative and imaginative productions. Living Newspapers, low budget and highly controversial short plays, which derived their material from a variety of contemporary sources such as newspapers, the Congressional Record, and utility publications, dramatized the effects of unemployment, poor housing conditions, and racism. Thousands of Americans in small communities across the nation, many who had never before seen a live play, attended these and other FTP productions.²³

Like the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Music Project was both innovative and broad. Federal Music Project orchestras and bands brought live music to thousands of small communities in all forty-eight states. In many cities the FMP orchestras became so popular that they continued as permanent civic organizations. The FMP Composer's Forum gave composers a chance to present their

²³ William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 105-09; Lorraine Brown and Francis O'Connor, Free, Adult, and Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project (Washington: D.C.: New Republic Books, 1978) details the productions of the FWP; Lorraine Brown, et. al "50th Anniversary of the Federal Theatre Project," (Fairfax, Va.: George Mason Univ., 1985), 6-7.

new creations to live audiences and answer questions about the meaning and purpose of their work.²⁴

Although it remained the smallest and least known of the four arts projects, the Federal Writers' Project would have longer lasting consequences. Unlike the music, art, and theatre projects, which catered to popular audiences, the FWP conducted its work out of the limelight. Due to the nature of its discipline, the written word, and the length of time it took to produce a book, the FWP offered no visible results of its work during the program's first two years. The first FWP publication, the guidebook to Idaho, did not appear until January, 1937, and was followed shortly thereafter by a city guide to the nation's capitol. During the next five years the FWP produced a guidebook to each of the 48 states, a number of cities, countless localities, and several regions. By the time the project closed five years later, it had created a vast storehouse of Americana. Its published and unpublished works not only documented the rich variety and texture of American life,

²⁴ Jannell Warren-Findley, "Of Tears and Need: The Federal Music Project, 1935-43," (Ph.D. Thesis, George Washington University, 1973) provides an excellent overview of the FWP; McDonald, Federal Relief, 604-46; Nikolai Sokoloff, "America's Vast New Musical Awakening, Etude, LV (April, 1937), 221-22; Federal Works Agency, Final Report of the WPA Program, 1935-43 (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1946), 64.

but the American Guide project, the work of many hands and many minds, came to symbolize the collectivist overtone of the 1930s.²⁵

Henry Alsberg, the Federal Writers' Projects' first director, was responsible for much of the program's innovation and creativity. At the outset, his appointment as head of this huge governmental enterprise baffled many of his closest friends. Jerre Mangione recalled that insiders "privately marveled that someone who could barely administer himself, an assistant, and one secretary, should suddenly be placed in the position of bossing a project of some sixty-five hundred employees." Yet, in spite of his administrative ineptitude, Alsberg quickly became the creative, driving force behind the Federal Writers' Project programs.²⁶

Very little in Alsberg's strict, German-Jewish upbringing gave any indication of the strange, ironic twists his later life would take. Born in New York in

²⁵ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 351-374; Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern Prose Literature (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956, [1941]), 392.

²⁶ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 57; McDonald, Federal Relief, 665. Ben Botkin who wrote the section on the Federal Writers' Project in the Federal Relief and the Arts and worked closely with Alsberg and his successor John Newsom credits him with being the creative, driving force behind the project; Penkower, The Federal Writers Project, 50-51.

1881, the son of a prosperous chemist, Alsberg entered Columbia University at the age of fifteen and graduated from its law school by the time he was twenty. After working as a lawyer for three years, Alsberg quit the legal profession entirely, complaining that the law "was a dirty business." He entered Harvard University as a graduate student in English. Bored and restless after a year of graduate study, Alsberg moved back to New York, where he became a lead writer for the New York Evening Post. In 1917, after five years of editorial and newspaper work, Alsberg accepted a position for one year as the secretary to the United States Ambassador to Turkey. Critical developments in Europe that year, including the outbreak of the Russian and German revolutions, led to assignments as a roving foreign correspondent for the Nation, the London Daily Herald, and the New York World. For the next three years, Alsberg traveled through war-torn Europe and Russia, viewing the War's destruction and the devastation of the Russian countryside following the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. His experience in Europe led to the directorship of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), for which Alsberg traveled through Russia dispensing funds to Russian Jews suffering from famine. Alsberg proved both daring and resourceful as he escaped several brushes

with death and near-arrest by the Communist regime. The shocking conditions in the Soviet Union in 1922--hunger, displacement, anarchy, violence, and repression--turned Alsberg into a life-long critic of the Bolshevik regime. Upon returning to the United States in 1923, Alsberg edited Letters from Russian Prisoners, which documented the Bolsheviks' suppression of civil liberties. This criticism of Communism and the Bolshevik regime won him the enmity of the American Communist Party and persona non grata status from the Soviets.²⁷

After his return to the United States, Alsberg focused on a number of creative literary ventures. His adaptation of The Dybbuk played in an off-Broadway theatre for nearly two years and led to a directorship with the Provincetown Playhouse. His experiences as a playwright and producer underscored Alsberg's tremendous creativity, inventiveness, and adaptability.²⁸

As employment opportunities for writers disappeared with the onset of the Great Depression, Alsberg, like many of his colleagues, found himself in need of a job. In 1934, at the age of 53, this "tired radical" joined the

²⁷ Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 18-20; McKinzie, "Writers," 20-22; McDonald, Federal Relief, 663-665; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 53-56; H. G. Nicholas, "The Writer and the State," The Contemporary Review (April, 1938), 90-91.

²⁸ Ibid.

New Deal establishment as the head of the FERA Reporting project that churned out propaganda publications for the New Deal. One of his projects, a publication entitled The CWA Fights the Great Depression, informed the public of the positive effects New Deal pump-priming was having on local economies. Later, Alsberg and a group of FERA staffers helped Jake Baker design a governmental program for writers. During one of the early planning sessions as the discussion turned to possible directors for the new writers' project, Tex Goldberg, Baker's assistant, said to his boss, "Give it to Alsberg or he'll be disappointed." Baker agreed. Alsberg's broad range of experience and literary background fitted the needs of the new project. In addition, Baker felt Alsberg's humanitarianism and liberal outlook complemented that of other New Dealers.²⁹

Although Alsberg fit the project's need for an experienced literary director, he was a poor administrator. On the FERA Reporting Project, Alsberg amused his colleagues with his filing system: He threw the carbons of letters made by his secretary into the wastebasket. He made decisions reluctantly, had

²⁹ Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 27-29; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 56-59, quote, 57; McKinzie, "Writers," 17-19; McDonald, Federal Relief, 126-132; Henry Alsberg, ed. America Fights the Depression: A Photographic Record of the Civil Works Administration (New York: Coward-McCann, 1934).

difficulty delegating authority, was inattentive to detail, and often refused to promote staff members because he thought they were "boring." Yet as many of his contemporaries noted, "Nobody without his breadth of vision or with less than his gift for communicating enthusiasm to others could have gotten the Federal Writer's Project underway." Fortunately for the Writers' Project, Alsberg's creative genius flourished amid crisis and chaos.³⁰

In order to compensate for Alsberg's administrative shortcomings and give Alsberg the freedom he needed to function as an editor, Baker appointed Reed Harris as the assistant director of the project. Harris, a young man in his late twenties, had served as Alsberg's assistant on the FERA. He was a proven administrator who counterbalanced Alsberg's lack of order and absentmindedness with a diligence that kept the project running and shielded his boss from mundane project details. He deftly handled the most explosive situations with calmness. He was sensitive and perceptive and kept the FWP's Washington editors from appearing too dictatorial, arrogant, and superficial in their relations

³⁰ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 57-58. Mangione worked closely with Alsberg and provided the best account of his administrative ability; Malcolm Cowley, "The Federal Writers' Project," The New Republic (Dec. 21, 1972), quote 24, 23-26.

with state directors. On one occasion Harris intercepted an editorial report filled with "nasty cracks" about a manuscript that had been received from a Southern state. If the abrasive report had been forwarded, Harris noted, "It would have caused another Civil War."²⁹

While Harris bore the heavy load of administration, George Cronyn, the project's associate director, shouldered the project's editorial responsibilities. Cronyn brought to the Writers' Project a wide range of literary experience acquired while working as a journalist, magazine editor, college English professor, and novelist. A "demon for work," he forsook all social occasions to spend his evenings and weekends writing Mermaid Tavern, a novel about Christopher Marlowe. Using this same tireless dedication, Cronyn supervised the editorial staff, wrote the "American Guide Manual" that launched the state projects, and edited state copy with insight and diligence. His dedication and exacting editorial standards contributed in large measure to the success of the American Guide Series.³⁰

²⁹ McKinzie, Writers, 22-23; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 21, 28-29; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 58-61, quote 61; McDonald, Federal Relief, 667.

³⁰ McDonald, Federal Relief, 667-68; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 24; McKinzie, Writers, 22; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 59-60; "Personal File," Files of George Cronyn, Federal Writers' Project Files, Works Progress Administration Records, Record Group 69, National

Alsberg, Cronyn, and Harris formed the nucleus of the planning group that labored through the hot summer months of 1935 outlining the FWP's administrative organization, costs, and manpower needs. Their plans called for the employment of sixty-five hundred white collar workers would be employed for one year at a cost of \$6,285,220. The planning group's primary concern was the type of work that white collar workers could perform. Whatever the project was to be, it had to take into account the wide variety of skills that existed on the relief rolls. Published writers, journalists, editors, teachers, architects, lawyers, businessmen, and a variety of other white-collar and professional workers, thrown out of work through no fault of their own, eagerly sought work on the new project.³¹

Just at the time the planning group was considering a number of proposals for putting the "writers" to work, Arthur Goldschmidt, a planning group member, met

Archives, Washington, D.C.

³¹ McKinzie, "Writers," 23-28. McKinzie is the only source that details or even mentions the initial planning group. She notes that "the planning groups for the Federal Writers' Project kept no official records of its research or discussions, hence the documentation is very elusive." Her information was based upon interviews with Reed Harris, George Cronyn, Katherine Kellock and Nina Collier who participated in the sessions. Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 47; Ronald W. Taber, "The Federal Writers' Project," 15-16.

Katherine Kellock at a boisterous Washington cocktail party. Kellock, who was the wife of one of Alsberg's oldest friends, told Goldschmidt, "The thing you have to do for writers is to put them to work writing Baedekers."

While conducting a tour in Europe several years earlier, she had realized the need for American guidebooks similar to the European Baedekers. Although she had approached several publishers with the idea, nothing had come of it. Goldschmidt and the other members of the planning group liked Kellock's idea. The planning group was so impressed with her broad range of knowledge and her enthusiasm for a governmental project to write guidebooks that they asked her to help draw up a proposal. The blueprint for the American Guide Project, entitled "A Project for the Employment of White Collar Workers," contained the nucleus of Kellock's ideas.³²

³² Mangione, Dream and the Deal, quote 46, 63-68; McDonald, Federal Relief, 666, 675; McKinzie, "Writers," 25-26; Penkower, The Federal Writers Project, 22-23; "A Project for the Employment of White Collar Workers," Federal Writers' Project Records, Roll 1, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana. McKinzie's version of Katherine Kellock's part in planning the guides differs slightly from that of Jerre Mangione. McKinzie who interviewed Kellock in 1967, and had access to her private papers asserted that Henry Alsberg had dinner with Harold Kellock, an old Columbia classmate, and discovered that Katherine Kellock, his wife, "had an avid interest in guidebooks for the United States."

As early as January, 1934, the idea of producing national guidebooks had been discussed in and out of government circles. During the summer and autumn of 1934, Edward Bruce, who launched the Public Works of Art Project, considered setting up a permanent division of fine arts. His assistant Edward Rowan solicited advice from professionals about the type of work they thought writers on relief could perform. The poet Marianne Moore and the critic Ridgely Torrence suggested a program to write state histories and guidebooks.³³

While Rowan considered proposals for a permanent bureau of the arts and pondered ideas which could be used for a government writers' program, the FERA in Connecticut demonstrated what the collective efforts of eleven relief workers and 1,000 volunteers could accomplish. Sponsored by the State Planning Board, the Connecticut project published a 320-page guidebook to the state. The Connecticut guidebook convinced Alsberg that the project could succeed nationally.³⁴

³³ McKinzie, "Writers," 8-13, 12; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 10-11, see 12-13 for a discussion of the Unemployed Writer's Association and the Author's League's proposals.

³⁴ McDonald, Federal Relief, 658; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 11-12; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 46; McKinzie, "Writers," 7-8.

The adoption of the proposal to write guidebooks fit the needs of the FWP perfectly. In such a collective effort, Alsberg believed that writers "would not involve their souls too much" The American Guide Project conformed to the overall goals of WPA, to provide as much funding as possible for labor with a minimum for materials. Guides to the states would encourage travel within the United States, stimulate the depressed national economy, and stem the flow of the nearly \$600 million Americans had spent abroad in the previous decade. Both foreign and domestic travelers in America lacked adequate guidebooks. A German publisher, Karl Baedeker had published a series of European guides and a volume to the United States that had been reprinted until 1909. However, Baedeker found the vastness and diversity of the United States so overwhelming that he gave up any attempts to extend his American publication. An army of researchers would be needed to adequately document the far flung United States. The Federal Writers' Project would recruit just such an army.³⁵

On a deeper level, the American Guide Project promised to introduce Americans to their own native

³⁵ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 193-238; Undated memo in "Miscellaneous Folder #1," Files of H.G. Alsberg, FWP, R.G. 69; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, quote, 25, 23-26; McKinzie, "Writers," 25-27.

culture. In an article in 1938, just after the first guidebooks were published, H. G. Nicholas pointed out that just as "Roosevelt's public works were to prime the pump to prosperity, so the Federal Writers' Project would prime the pump to national self-awareness, both of the past and of the present." At a time when fascism, communism, and nazism threatened democracy in Europe, state and regional guides would underscore the nation's multinational origins and cultural diversity as the basis of America's democratic unity.³⁶

The original plans for the American Guide Series called for a set of five regional volumes. However, during the summer planning sessions, George Cronyn argued persuasively that bickering over state groupings, definitions of what states constituted a region, and the added difficulty of editing regional guides would make them more difficult to produce. State guides could be produced with greater ease. The planning group realized also that state WPA organizations could bear some of the administrative costs and that work done on a state-by-

³⁶ Undated memo in "Miscellaneous Folder #1," undated memo, Miscellaneous Folder #4, Files of H. G. Alsberg, FWP, R. G. 69; McDonald, Federal Relief, 647-48, 658-661, 693-695; McKinzie, "Writers," 25-26; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 49; O'Connor, Art For the Millions, 21; H. G. Nicholas, "The Writer and the State," The Contemporary Review (April, 1938), quote 90, 89-94; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 21-26.

state basis would engender greater political support. For all of these reasons, the planning group recommended that state guide books be compiled first.³⁷

Once the initial plans for the Writers' Project had been completed, Alsberg set up the national office that would act as a central review board and edit the reams of copy sent in by the FWP offices in the states. By September, 1935, Alsberg had recruited sixty staffers, drawn from a wide variety of journalistic, literary, research, advertising, and teaching backgrounds. Despite tremendous dedication and resolve, the editorial staff in the central office was not large enough to efficiently handle millions of words of often substandard copy that crossed their desks. The lack of trained writers on most of the state projects placed an enormous burden on FWP editors in Washington. Essays that should have taken weeks took months to edit. Many were lost altogether in the editorial mill. Alsberg and Cronyn, who reviewed all the editorial comments sent to the state directors, created yet another log jam.³⁸

³⁷ McKinzie, "Writers," 26-27; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 47; Taber, "The Federal Writers Project," 15-16; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 30.

³⁸ The creation of regional directorships in 1938 did little to ease the work load of the central office. In the southeast region, William T. Couch, a sociologist well grounded in the regional literature of the South and director of the North Carolina Press, began handling many

As Alsberg launched the Federal Writers' Project in the states in late September, 1935, the national office groped almost blindly and without precedent to establish the first governmental program for writers. Although each state program provided a different set of administrative challenges, they were similar in many ways. Each had to strike a balance between the need to provide white collar relief and the challenge of turning out publishable works. Washington's central challenge remained the same during the entire program, directing an army of amateur writers to produce publishable guidebooks. The success of the national Federal Writers' Project program depended upon the quality of publications that could be prodded from the individual state projects.³⁹

of the administrative problems in his area and editing some of the state copy. Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 35-37, 44-45; Billington, "Government and the Arts," 472; McDonald, Federal Relief, 668-70.

³⁹ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 145; Penkower, Federal Writers' Project, 36-7, 49; McKinzie, "Writers," 28-30; "The 1939 Publication Program and Accomplishments of the Project," Publicity Folder, Files of H. G. Alsberg, FWP, R.G. 69.

CHAPTER TWO: FLORIDA AND THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT

Florida was an ideal setting for a Federal Writers' Project travel guide. By the 1930s, the state had boomed as a winter haven for the wealthy and a popular vacation destination for tourists. Growing national prosperity, paid vacations for workers, the introduction of the Model T Ford, and new railroad connections between the Northeast and southern Florida swelled the state's annual vacation population to one and one-half million visitors. Realizing that a FWP guide to Florida would be an instant best-seller and bring favorable publicity to the national program, Alsberg focused his attention on organizing the Florida project and producing a first-rate state guidebook.¹

In addition to its tourist appeal, Florida had a large, unemployed white-collar population from which the Writers' Project program could draw. The state's economy began experiencing hard times several years

¹ Gary R. Mormino, "Roadsides and Broad sides: A History of Florida Tourism" FEH Florida Forum (Fall, 1987), 9-12. Mormino notes that tourism figured highly in this crazy quilt decade of hero worship and biographical debunking, bathtub gin and evangelical fundamentalism, the "new" woman and immigration restriction."

before the stock market crashed in 1929. In 1926, the real estate boom which had sparked a speculative mania in southern Florida collapsed. Land prices fell rapidly. Bank failures, triggered by poorly secured real estate loans, followed at an alarming rate. By spring 1926, the boom turned into a bust, bringing financial disaster to thousands of residents, speculators, and real estate developers. Millionaires became paupers overnight. One journalist who visited Florida after the collapse of the boom noted "desperate cases of unemployment" and reported "many people were starving." He observed giant hotels where halted construction left huge, unfinished structures looming over a depressed landscape.²

A succession of natural disasters further depressed the state's economy. In September, 1926, a hurricane struck Miami, killing hundreds of persons and causing \$50 million in damage. A second hurricane hit two years later, leaving in its wake 1,800 dead, 15,000 homeless, and 35,000 destroyed buildings. In the fall

² Charlton W. Tebeau, A History of Florida (Coral Gables: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971.), 392-401; Stetson Kennedy, Palmetto Country. ed. Erskine Caldwell (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1942), 111; Merlin G. Cox and J. E. Dovell, Florida from Secession to Space Age. (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors Publishing Co., 1974), 154-162, 173, 176-200; Henry S. Villard, "Florida Aftermath," The Nation, (June 6, 1928), 635-36.

of 1929, the Mediterranean fruit fly was discovered in central Florida. The ensuing quarantine of the state's citrus and vegetable crop meant a loss of over \$40 million dollars in revenue to Florida agriculture. Thus, before the national depression began, the state's economy was in deep trouble.³

As the economic crisis deepened between 1929 and 1932, the state's unemployment rate rose dramatically while tax revenues dipped sharply. Tourism declined and out-of-state agricultural markets dried up. Bank closures grew rapidly, and the state's property values plummeted by one-third. By 1932, one out of every five families in Florida was on relief. In nine of Florida's sixty-seven counties, more than 40 percent of the population was unemployed; more than one-half of these counties were bankrupt, unable even to pay teachers their salaries. Per-capita income dropped from \$510 annually in 1929 to \$289 in 1932. By September, 1933, Florida listed the highest percentage of people on relief in the nation.⁴

³ Tebeau, A History of Florida, 392-394; Stetson Kennedy, Palmetto Country, 111; Cox, Florida, 154-162, 173, 176-200; Robert Francis Mardis, "Federal Theatre in Florida," (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1972), 63-65.

⁴ Mardis, "Federal Theatre," 67-69; Tebeau, History of Florida, 392-401; Cox and Dovell, Florida, 176-200.

The state government, restricted by its constitution from incurring debt, could do nothing. Therefore, the burden of unemployment relief fell upon Florida's municipal and county governments, which sank into even deeper debt as they attempted to cope with the state's staggering relief needs.⁵

By the winter of 1933-34, Florida's relief rolls swelled as middle-class families and professionals applied for relief for the first time. "The feeling seems to be generally that Florida is going to be in a bad way this coming summer," Lorena Hickok reported. "The LAST people to come on relief are the best, because they've made one damned noble effort to keep off," Hickok added. Many of them, who during the early years of the depression had managed to stave off crisis by surviving on their savings, extending their credit, or getting help from relatives, were now forced to go on relief. "Florida has such a large white-collar problem," Katherine Kellock wrote Alsberg, and "so many people . . . who are on the fringe of relief that the situation is difficult."⁷

⁵ Tebeau, History of Florida, 399-401; Mardis, "Federal Theatre," 67-70.

⁷ Tebeau, Florida, 394-411; Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley, eds. One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1981), 161-170; Katherine Kellock to

Some of the people "on the fringe of relief" were free-lance writers who had migrated to Florida during the flush times of the 1920s to earn lucrative incomes writing local stories and promotional articles for real estate developers. With the collapse of the land boom, these opportunities vanished, leaving many publicists desperate and without any hope of employment. Others had migrated to Florida where they could live more cheaply than in the Northeast.⁸

The announcement of the American Guide Project in the fall of 1935 sparked intense interest among Florida's unemployed writers, newspapermen, and white-collar population. Many who were desperate wrote directly to Harry Hopkins or Henry Alsberg and begged for jobs. The letter of an unemployed banker with a master's degree in business administration from Harvard and fifteen years experience working with oil companies expressed the feelings of many: "I need this work badly, as five years of depression have about exhausted my

Henry Alsberg, January 23, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

⁸ Philip Coan to Henry Alsberg, June 22, 1936, Admin. Corresp. Fl. FWP, R.G. 69. Coan wrote Alsberg on behalf of friends who had worked on the WPA music project in New York, and whose "husband had not been able to earn enough lately in N.Y. to justify their renewing a lease for their apartment in Ninth Street and buying grub besides"; "Final Report of the Florida Federal Writers' Project," 1, Final Reports, FWP, R. G. 69.

savings. The fact that I have not asked for any assistance up to the present, should be considered in my favor. . . . I would like to start work as soon as possible." An experienced college librarian found it "exceedingly difficult to make ends meet," and asked for a full-time job on the project. A free-lance writer with a sick mother to care for lamented, "I lost everything in the depression, and must have work."⁹

A semi-retired business executive found himself without any means of support. A hurricane that swept through south Florida in September, 1935, had destroyed his charter boat. Finding little relief and no likelihood for employment, he appealed directly to Harry Hopkins in Washington:

I have been endeavoring without success to secure some necessary aid in the rehabilitation of the boat and living for myself and my wife. [The] FERA and other local agencies, while admitting my necessity, could do nothing beyond several weekly checks for \$1.30 and a small amount of food every two weeks. Even this has ceased.¹⁰

Many others, frustrated by their repeated attempts to obtain local relief, turned to the New Deal as their last

⁹ McDonald, Federal Relief, 681; John Levy to FWP, September 6, 1938, Box 1107, WPA, R. G. 69; Emily Raymond Mc Bride to Reed Harris, Jan. 7, 1936. Admin. Corresp. Fl., FWP, R.G. 69; "Final Report," 2.

¹⁰ Gerard O. Smith to Harry Hopkins, Dec. 24, 1935, Admin. Corresp., Fl., FWP, R.G. 69.

resort. Stanley Snowden, a writer and poet, wrote, "Doubt my situation? . . . YES; Chosen brother; I am, indeed, IMPOVERISHED! Long have I known the only clasp of the DRAGON DESPERATION." Snowden enclosed a poem dedicated to Henry Alsberg, no doubt hoping that Alsberg would be flattered and give him a job.¹¹

A large number of Florida's unemployed newspapermen eagerly sought work on the FWP. By 1935, hundreds of Florida newspapers, mostly rural weeklies, had ceased publication, and those remaining in business operated with reduced staffs. B. L. Kerce, who had five years experience on local weeklies, wrote to Washington hoping to secure a position on the American Guide Project. He pointed out that his experience as a newspaperman "acquaints any writer with the country in which he resides and enables him to gather data, as I would suppose, the Guide desires."¹²

Florida had an unusually large number of unemployed African-American journalists and college instructors who

¹¹ Stanley Snowden to Henry Alsberg, Oct. 19, 1935, Admin. Corresp., Fl., FWP, R. G. 69. The files in the state series, Florida, 351.317 are filled with inquiries by persons desiring employment on the Florida Writers' Project. Included also are copies of the replies sent from Washington to those seeking employment on the FWP.

¹² B. L. Kerce to the manager, American Guide Project, January 20, 1936, R. A. Green, to Harry Hopkins, Jan. 21, 1936, Admin. Corresp., J. Mack Williams to Bruce McClure, Sept. 18, 1935, Raymond Larsson to Alsberg, August 31, 1938, Admin. Corresp., Fl., FWP, R.G. 69; Alsberg wrote several letters to the Florida Project trying to get Larsson hired.

also wanted work on the Guide Project. In late 1935, Aloysius King, who described himself as the "Colored editor" of Jacksonville's Journal, found himself without work. "I have been employed on newspapers in this vicinity," he wrote to Alsberg, "for the past seven years, holding positions ranging from reporter to managing editor of the sports department on one weekly." King wanted work on the FWP and so did Alfred Farrell, a magna cum laude graduate of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. The financial condition of Edward Waters College in Jacksonville forced Farrell to resign his position as an English instructor in January, 1936, and to seek other employment. Farrell wrote to the Federal Writers' Project office in Washington asking for work, stressing that his background in English and experience as associate editor of the college newspaper enabled him "to do just the type of work that the new project will call for."¹³

Lack of adequate state relief and the critical unemployment situation among Florida's white-collar population made speedy organization of the state's writers' project imperative. In late September, 1935, Alsberg wrote to Floridians in the writing, publishing, and educational fields and asked them to suggest names for FWP state

¹³ Aloysius King to FWP, Nov. 30, 1935, Box 1107, WPA, R.G. 69; Alfred Farrell, Jan. 8, 1936, Box 1107, WPA, R.G. 69.

director. Alsberg sought an experienced writer, a trained historian, or anyone with publishing experience and knowledge of Florida. The state director needed administrative acumen to supervise a field force of amateur researchers and to organize and direct the writing of the state guide. Above all, Washington wanted a good director who got results. Ineffective ones placed a heavy burden on the national office. Yet finding a state director with both administrative ability and writing experience was almost impossible. Through trial and error, the national office learned to divide the duties of the state director among several people. In states where the FWP director was a good writer and a poor administrator, an assistant usually ran the project. In Louisiana, for example, where one of the most effective Federal Writers' Projects operated, Lyle Saxon, a well known author of Creole and southern books, found an able assistant who administered the project.¹⁴

In Florida, Carita Doggett Corse, who had been "highly recommended by literary people and strongly endorsed politically," became the director of the Florida Writers'

¹⁴ McDonald, Federal Relief, 671-681; Blair Bolles, "The Federal Writers' Project," Saturday Review of Literature (July 9, 1938), 3-4; E. Current-Garcia, "Writers in the 'Sticks,'" The Prairie Schooner, XI (1937), 294-308; Eleanor Touhey, "The American Baedekers," The Library Journal (April 15, 1941), 339, 339-341.

Project. The national FWP office felt that Corse, as a trained historian and as the author of several books on Florida, had the background and experience needed to produce the Florida guide. In addition, her contacts in Florida's state government would prove invaluable in enlisting sponsors and consultants for the project.¹⁵

Corse, a member of the politically and socially prominent Doggett family, was born in Jacksonville in 1891. She received her early education locally, graduated from Vassar College in 1913, and earned a master's degree from Columbia in 1916. Her master's thesis was published in 1919 as Dr. Andrew Turnbull and the New Smyrna Colony of Florida. While teaching for a number of years in a private Jacksonville high school, Corse had authored several other books and articles on early Florida history, including Florida--Empire of the Sun and Key to the Golden Islands. In recognition of this work in early Spanish history and her contribution to literature, the University of the South awarded Corse an honorary doctorate in 1932. From that time

¹⁵ Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; Jacob Baker to C. B. Treadway, Oct. 5, 1935, Cronyn to Treadway, Oct. 7, 1935, Cronyn Files, Aadmin. Corresp., Fl. WPA, R. G. 69; Nancy Williams, "Interview with Dr. Carita Doggett Corse, the State Director of the Writers' Project in Florida," New Smyrna Beach Florida, March 18, 1976, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville, Florida; "Final Report," 4; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 38-41.

on Corse added the title "Doctor" to her name, and in FWP circles her nickname became "Doctor."¹⁶

As Florida's FWP director, Corse received \$191.00 a month, which she later noted in an interview was "a good deal more than my salary as a teacher." Although Corse found the salary generous, many male candidates declined the position because they found the pay low and the project's uncertain future a drawback. Some of the males who accepted state directorships balanced their FWP jobs with other employment. Ray Allen Billington, a young history professor, divided his responsibilities as director of the Massachusetts project with his teaching duties, while Lisle Reese combined his job running a news service with his directorship of the Montana project.¹⁷

¹⁶ "Corse File," Files of Henry G. Alsberg, FWP, R. G. 69; Henry Alsberg to Bernice Babcock, Jan. 13, 1936, "State Directors Who's Who" file, Federal Writers' Project Papers, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, La. (Hereafter cited as HNC); Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; Florida Hotel Commission. Florida, Empire of the Sun (Tallahassee: State Hotel Commission, 1930); Carita Doggett Corse, Dr. Andrew Turnbull and the New Smyrna Colony of Florida (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1919).

¹⁷ Williams, "Interview with Dr. Carita Doggett Corse"; McDonald, Federal Relief Policy, 680; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 38-41; Taber, "The Federal Writers' Project," 40-41, 93, 211; McKinzie, "Writers", 38; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 88-89; Ray Allen Billington, "Government and the Arts: The WPA Experience," American Quarterly 13 (Winter, 1961), 466-79.

Women filled nearly one-fourth of the FWP state directorships. In the South, women directed Federal Writers' Projects in Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Virginia. In Florida, women also headed the state's WPA Professional and Service Division that managed the employment and finances of the cultural projects and the Florida Federal Art Project. Although the New Deal provided women with a rare opportunity to fill jobs which would have been reserved for men in the private sector, being a woman in a man's world often meant not being taken seriously. On one occasion, Corse, a petite, attractive brunette, said she spent the better part of a meeting with a high-ranking state official being chased around his locked office while his secretary was at lunch. Corse resisted his amorous overtures and, as a result, the manuscript she so badly wanted published did not see print.¹⁸

Upon learning that she had been offered the Florida directorship, Corse telegraphed her immediate consent. Once her appointment was official, she began hiring qualified personnel and building a state organization. All applicants for the Florida Writers' Project had to be "certified" before they could get a position. This meant that they had to swear that they had no job, income, or

¹⁸ Evanell Brandt Powell to Pam Bordelon, Jan. 21, 1989.

property and no hope of obtaining any of these. After the United States Employment Service verified their claims, they were "certified" as being eligible for relief and their names were placed on the WPA rolls. Only after they had completed this long and humiliating procedure could they get an FWP position.¹⁹

Not everyone with writing experience who was in need could get FWP jobs. Applicants who applied after November 1, 1935, were ineligible. Bureaucratic restrictions such as these kept otherwise competent writers from obtaining FWP employment. Some of the professional writers who could not be certified obtained supervisory jobs in the state and district offices. These non-relief positions, which fluctuated from 25% of project employment in the beginning of the program to 5% when the federal sponsorship ended, enabled the FWP to hire talented professionals to supervise the project and rewrite field copy. Admittedly the non-relief quota contradicted the program's relief goals, but without their expertise, the state guides in Florida and elsewhere could not have been produced.²⁰

¹⁹ Alsberg to Corse, Oct. 1, 1935, Oct. 9, 1935; Corse to Alsberg, Oct. 5, 1935, Corse folder, Files of HGA, FWP, R. G. 69; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 41; Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; "Final Report," 1.

²⁰ Stetson Kennedy Interview, Jan. 6, 1989; Elmer Lazone to Alsberg, Jan. 14, 1936, 1935-36 file, Box 1107, WPA, R. G. 69; Billington, "Government and the Arts," 470; Williams,

The political situation in Florida and the scarcity of FWP jobs led many applicants to get political references from their Congressmen. Stetson Kennedy got Florida's Senator Claude Pepper to write a letter to Corse in his behalf. Other members of the Florida Congressional delegation and the state Democratic committee endorsed friends and constituents who were seeking federal relief employment. Although political influence played a role in selecting state personnel, the state director reserved final authority for hiring and firing workers. Those who did not perform were dismissed.²¹

From the WPA list of certified persons, Corse selected the names of those whom she believed could do the simple research and writing tasks that the state FWP required. Many persons who claimed that they could write were so incompetent that Corse could only put them to work typing. By mid-November, 1935, Corse had hired ninety-three relief workers and seventeen non-relief supervisors, bringing the

"Interview with Carita Doggett Corse"; Telephone interview with Evanell Powell, Mar. 31, 1990; Telegrams, Corse to Alsberg Nov. 11, 14, Dec. 16, 1935; Alsberg to Baker, Feb. 26, 1936, Corse to Alsberg, Oct. 24, 1935, Employment files, Florida, WPA, R. G. 69; Report, "Composition of Personnel," Nov. 15, 1935, Employment Files, Florida, WPA, R.G. 69.

²¹ Interview with Stetson Kennedy, Jan. 6, 1989; The WPA employment folders are bulging with letters from the state's congressional delegation, the Democratic National Committee, and other influential persons, recommending persons for FWP employment. These may be found in Box 1107, WPA, R.G. 69.

total project enrollment to 110. By early December, Florida's quota had been filled and 138 project staff were at work in local and district offices in Tampa, Miami, Jacksonville, Gainesville, Orlando, Pensacola, St. Augustine, Lakeland, and St. Petersburg. These offices ranged in size from only a few to two dozen workers. The Jacksonville district office, housed adjacent to the state office, employed 30 workers and was the largest and most important.²²

Most of the field workers hired on the Florida FWP were white-collar workers, including court reporters, librarians, architects, lawyers, advertising copy writers, teachers, and businessmen, who had generally been through hard times for a year or more before securing their FWP positions. Many had exhausted their savings, experienced the frustrations of months of unemployment, and turned to government relief as their last resort. Meaningful work and bi-monthly paychecks quickly transformed their defeatist attitudes and physical appearances. One FWP check of \$37.50 bi-weekly often supported an entire family, enabling them to buy basic necessities which they had been doing without.

²² Alsberg to Corse, Oct. 9, 1935, Admin. Corresp., Fl., FWP, R. G. 69; Alsberg to C. S. Rardin, Oct. 14, 1935, Box 1107, WPA, R.G. 69; telegrams, Corse to Alsberg, Nov. 11, 14, Dec. 16, 1935; Corse to Alsberg, Oct. 24, 1935, Employment files, Florida, WPA, R. G. 69; Report, "Composition of Personnel," Nov. 15, 1935, Employment Files, Fl., WPA, R. G. 69.

Stetson Kennedy, who had been subsisting on \$5.00 a week and free mangos, remembered that after he got his first paycheck, he went window-shopping with his wife, wondering, "What in the world are we going to do with all this money?"²³

Women filled over one-half the positions on the Florida FWP. Most had worked as teachers or stringers on defunct rural weeklies. The men on the project came from a wide variety of professional, technical, and journalistic backgrounds. Only a small percentage of those who worked on the Florida project were experienced professional writers and editors. Initially, the only well-known authors on the project were Carita Corse and a troublesome young writer by the name of Carl Lester Liddle. Liddle, who had co-authored a well-reviewed adventure novel about a remote South American tribe of head-hunting Indians, was quickly put to work in Manatee County documenting the lives of the Seminoles. Rolland Phillips, a professional writer with 25 years' experience writing for national magazines, became the Tampa district director. Phillips had turned to the FWP

²³ Mabel Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture," 659, 654; Billington, "Government and the Arts," 471; Stetson Kennedy, "The Florida Writers Project I Knew," paper presented at the symposium "In the Nick of Time: Folklore Collecting by the WPA Florida Writers' Project, Miami, Florida, Feb. 4, 1989; Williams, "Interview with Carita Doggett Corse"; McDonald, Federal Relief, 681-683; See Jerre Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 97-152, for a lively discussion of the "Writers and Would-be Writers."

after personal illness and the loss of literary markets made it impossible for him to earn a living.²⁴

Stetson Kennedy, an aspiring young writer of twenty-one, joined the project in December, 1937, as a "junior interviewer," and within a year headed the folklore, social-ethnic, and life history programs. The experience he gained on the Florida project and the support of his FWP salary enabled him to write his first book while he worked on the project. Zora Neale Hurston, a Florida native from Eatonville and a trained anthropologist, joined the Florida Federal Writers' Project in April, 1938, just after finishing Tell My Horse, her second book on folklore. Her FWP paycheck enabled her to support herself while writing her fifth book, which she published shortly after she left the Florida project in 1939.²⁵

Once Corse had hired the project personnel and set up the local and district offices, she turned to the challenging task of administering a relief organization

²⁴ "Biographical Information," Florida File, Files of Henry Alsberg, FWP, R. G. 69.

²⁵ "Final Report, 8; Stetson Kennedy interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; Stetson Kennedy, "The Federal Writers Project I Knew," 9, 11; Robert E. Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 251-52; Robert Hemenway, "Zora Neale Hurston" a paper presented at the symposium "Remembering the 1930s: The WPA Federal Writers' Project," Nov. 8, 1986, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

staffed largely by non-professionals. The chaotic conditions of the central office in Washington made her task more difficult. New and untried themselves, the central staff failed to provide state directors with adequate written guidelines on the size of project staffs, salaries, budgets, and funding. At the end of November, 1935, Corse telegraphed Alsberg that funds for the Florida project were exhausted. "We must have additional funds immediately if we are to continue to pay guide workers," Corse asserted. She asked how much money would be allocated in the future. Alsberg informed her that part of the funding problem derived from overemployment. Unknowingly, Corse had exceeded her quota of 117 by 21 workers. He instructed her to reduce her labor costs, and "perhaps make it possible to carry the 138 workers already employed." Without scaling down expenses, Alsberg warned, "it will be necessary to taper off employment in the spring months."²⁶

National field representatives sent out in the early months of the program helped to bring project costs into line and to straighten out administrative problems. In late January, Katherine Kellock, the field representative for the

²⁶ Alsberg to Corse, Dec. 9, 1935; Alsberg to Corse, Jan. 20, 1936; Telegram, Corse to Alsberg, Nov. 29, 1935; Corse to Alsberg Nov. 18, 1935, Box 1107, WPA. R.G. 69. This file details of every aspect of the administrative costs of the Florida project and Corse's failure to follow Washington's instructions.

southeastern states, arrived in Florida to assist Corse in straightening out the administrative tangles in her program. When Kellock reached the state office in Jacksonville, she was horrified to learn that the Florida director was "off in the state driving with her secretary . . . [on a] 10 day swing around the circle with stenog. receiving \$5 per diem, etc." Seeing this trip as a needless expense and a flagrant misuse of project funds, Kellock invited a state staffer to cocktails "to try to get the truth" and learn the real purpose of Corse's trip. In confidence, the state editor told Kellock that Corse's trip was "just a joy ride . . . a nice trip to the sunny South to look up old friends." Horrified at the waste of project funds, Kellock wrote to Alsberg asking for "Permission to refuse further travel advances for secretaries"27

Upon her return the next day, Carita Corse explained to Kellock that she had been enlisting volunteers and consultants for the guide project and that her "assistant" had been checking local offices. Unconvinced, Kellock reported to Alsberg that the Florida director had "delusions

²⁷ Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 21, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G.69.

of grandeur." She added, "Mrs. Corse is a Florida 'lady,' with no idea of arithmetic or expenses."²⁸

Kellock immediately took charge of Florida's administration. An investigation of its finances revealed that the Florida WPA organization was forcing the Writers' Project to pay unauthorized expenses. With Alsberg's permission, Kellock ordered the WPA finance office to stop authorizing travel expenses for secretaries and called a meeting with the assistant director of the state WPA.²⁹

Incensed at the Florida WPA's flagrant abridgement of the rules and armed with procedural bulletins and authorizations from Washington, Kellock told Lawrence Rickard, the state's assistant WPA director, that the WPA was to stop charging the salary of one auditor and one secretary to the Florida Writers' Project. The WPA should pay these administrative costs. Rickard complained that the federally-run cultural projects were a needless expense and that the Florida WPA could make better use of the money. Kellock replied tactfully that "the Federal Guide had to be

²⁸ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 63-68; McDonald, Federal Relief, 675-676; Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 22, 1936, Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 20-26, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R. G. 69; These field reports provide detailed descriptions of the chaotic conditions that existed in the states during the early months of the projects.

²⁹ Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 21, 23, 25, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

a Federal Project, and that it would really bring money to Florida in time." No state had to have a Writers' Project if it did not want one, Kellock reminded him. By exercising great finesse and diplomatic skill, Kellock finally convinced Rickard to stop charging the Florida Writers' Project for unauthorized administrative costs. Kellock succeeded in her task without generating bad feelings between the state WPA organization and the Florida Writers' Project.³⁰

Florida was not the only state where conflict developed between the federally-sponsored Writers' Project and the state WPA organizations. Most state WPA directors resented the special status that the cultural projects enjoyed by being sponsored and directed from Washington. The WPA administrator in Idaho purposely ignored Vardis Fisher, the Writers' Project state director, hoping that the Project would collapse. He refused to provide him with a desk, office space, or workers. In most states, WPA directors viewed their Writers' Project as "a gesture of political patronage" and believed, like Florida, "that the money will be unwisely spent." William Couch, who as southeastern regional director became acquainted with all the projects in his area, noted that most WPA directors regarded the FWP "as

³⁰ Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 22, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R. G. 69.

a New Deal whim--something that a few crackpots in Washington wanted, but that didn't amount to anything." Most believed that the whole idea of the FWP would be "dropped at the first opportunity, and the people employed on it put to work on jobs not quite so useless."³¹

The friction between state WPA administrations and the FWP convinced Jake Baker that federal sponsorship was a mistake. Fearing dire consequences to the cultural projects if they were turned over to state WPA administrations, Hallie Flanagan, director of the Theatre Project, and Holger Cahill, director of the Art Project, protested vehemently against Baker's proposal. They enlisted the aid of Eleanor Roosevelt, who on more than one occasion had been called the godmother of the federal arts projects. With the help of the First Lady, they circumvented Baker's recommendation and forced his removal as the head of Federal One.

If Baker's recommendation had been approved and the Florida WPA had taken charge of the state's Writers' Project, the Florida FWP probably would have been abolished and the money used for other purposes. At the very least, the Florida FWP would have been nothing more than a booster organization turning out publications extolling Florida's

³¹ McDonald, Federal Relief, 673; Taber, "The Federal Writers' Project," 37-38, 124-5; Williams, "Interview with Carita Doggett Corse."

virtues. The Florida guide as we know it today and a host of other important works would not have been produced. As Florence Kerr, assistant administrator of the WPA, appropriately summed the situation up: "Federalization saved the arts projects."³²

During the first year of that the Federal Writers' Project operated in Florida, Carita Corse administered the Historical Records Survey (HRS). The HRS, which at first seemed similar in character and purpose to the FWP, was implemented in the states in January, 1936. Federal writers and historical records survey workers surveyed, catalogued, and preserved the contents of state and local archives. During the first year, workers from the two agencies created the first cross-index of Florida materials, catalogued state archives and uncovered new sources which proved invaluable aids to the state guide project.³³

³² Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 47-53, 50; Monty Penkower interviewed Florence Kerr several times in July, 1968; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 8; McDonald, Federal Relief, 666-67.

³³ McDonald, Federal Relief, 751-828, provides a summary of the institution, goals, purpose, and function of the HRS; Burl Noggle, Working With History: The Historical Records Survey in Louisiana and the Nation, 1936-1942 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), provides the best survey of the type of work the HRS did and details how the project worked in the states.

On her January field trip, Katherine Kellock helped Corse set up the Florida Historical Records Survey and interviewed Gertrude Shelby, whose name had been suggested as technical director of the new project. The central office in Washington pushed for her appointment despite the disapproval of several local politicians. Kellock smoothed the way for Shelby's final appointment, noting that she worked well with Carita Corse and shared her interest in early Spanish history. Both women wanted Florida HRS workers to catalogue and translate previously inaccessible documents in the Library of Congress pertaining to the Spanish phase of Florida's early history. However, national HRS director, Luther Evans, refused to substitute the Corse-Shelby project for the national archival survey which he had outlined. Nevertheless, Corse and Shelby used FWP workers to accomplish some of their goals. Shelby reported to Jake Baker, "I have been neck deep in the Spanish history, ever since I came aboard" ³⁴

Although Katherine Kellock and field representatives in other states ironed out the states Writers' Projects' early organizational problems, a number of built-in hindrances kept them from running smoothly. Like Carita

³⁴ Gertrude Shelby to Jake Baker, Dec. 18, 1935, Box 1107, WPA, R.G. 69. Florida's Senator Copeland, who was a friend and neighbor, met with Jake Baker personally "to see that her project went through and has good effect."

Corse, few state directors had both literary and administrative skills. Corse found that guiding a large New Deal relief project was nearly an impossible task. She regretted that the "excellent training courses for supervisors given just before the liquidation of the WPA were not available earlier." When the program began, Carita Corse described herself as "green and innocent." She had to learn through trial-and-error how to deal with difficult situations, derive finished copy from a field army of non-writers, make controversial decisions and stand by them, and deflect the displeasure of the central office in Washington.³⁵

Corse had many positive qualities that offset administrative inexperience. Her political ties, her knowledge of Florida and its history, and her wide acquaintance with state leaders proved assets for the Florida FWP. The Florida director was energetic and dedicated. Stetson Kennedy, who worked closely with Corse from 1937 to 1941, remembered her as being "vivacious," "enthusiastic," and "a joy to work with." He noted that "she was beaming upon arrival, beaming each time she popped

³⁵ Evanell K. Brandt Powell, "WPA Federal Writers' Project," (Lake Panasoffkee, Florida: Evanell K Powell-Brandt, 1990), 2: "Final Report," 8.

out of her office with some newly-arrived Florida fact in hand, and still beaming at the day's end."³⁶

The Writers' Project's year-to-year existence precluded long-range planning and efficiency and created a host of administrative nightmares. Yearly Congressional appropriations decided the program's longevity, financing, and staffing. Corse never knew in advance how much funding would be available or how long the project would last. When the New Deal came under increasing political fire in 1937, Congress cut the program's yearly appropriation. Reduced funding meant across-the-board cuts in all state programs. As a result, the Florida FWP staff was cut to 55 workers. These staff reductions came just as work on the state guide peaked, severely limiting the project's efficiency. Corse had to turn out the state guide with a staff only one-half its former size.³⁷

The 1937 reductions eliminated two non-relief positions in the state office. Fortunately Max Hunter and Rolland Phillips were certified for relief and Florida's editorial staff remained intact. Cuts in 1939 again jeopardized the positions of several non-relief editors who

³⁶ Brandt, "WPA," 6; Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989.

³⁷ See "Miscellaneous Projects Proposal, Cost Analysis Sheets," folder, Files of H. G. Alsberg, FWP, R.G. 69.

were preparing the Florida guide for publication. Only Corse's direct appeal to WPA administrators in Washington saved these editorial positions.³⁸

Directing a staff whose jobs could be cut at any moment made Corse's job challenging. In Florida, where state relief did not exist, getting a "pink slip" meant losing one's only source of income. In January, 1937, FWP field supervisor Frank Wells visited the state and reported that "the majority of the forty-seven people laid off are still without employment and destitute [Some] of these people have been reduced to absolute pauperism." He pointed out, "it is next to impossible for anyone out of work . . . to get a job [here] . . . and it is literally impossible for them to get work elsewhere."³⁹

Rumors of quota cuts kept local offices tense and unsettled. Fearing the loss of his desperately needed FWP job and hearing rumors that nearly all of the "staff will be

³⁸ Corse to Alsberg, Dec. 30, 1936. Admin. Corresp., Florida, FWP, R.G. 69; "Final Report," 6; "Cost Analysis Sheets" Folder, Files of Henry G. Alsberg, FWP, R.G. 69; "Employment Files," Florida, WPA, R.G. 69. The letters and reports in these two administrative folders detailed employment figures for Florida an the relief and non-relief percentages allowed; Corse to Kerr, Sept. 25, 1939, Employment Files, Florida, WPA, R.G. 69.

³⁹ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 152; Stetson Kennedy Interview, Jan. 6. 1989; Frank Wells to H. G. Alsberg, January 13-23, 1937, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

discharged Saturday," Jules Frost wrote Director Corse several emotionally charged letters in December, 1936:

I hope you will understand my situation, and do something, quickly, to keep me at work. I have no other income whatever. Doctors say that I can live for years and do efficient work with a weak heart, but that I must not worry. . . . My motherless boys need me more than ever now than at any other time in their lives. It will be nothing short of a tragedy if I am deprived of this income.⁴⁰

His appeal was effective. Frost kept his much-needed relief position and became one of the project's best editors.⁴¹

The hasty departure of workers who found private employment created havoc, often severely compromising the progress and efficiency of FWP publications. Field workers who left the project often failed to turn in their assignments, necessitating a time consuming rewriting of tours and guide topics. New writers who replaced seasoned ones took time to learn their jobs. Even experienced editors took a year to learn the requirements of the Federal Writers' Project.⁴²

Personnel problems kept the program in almost constant turmoil, slowing down production on the state

⁴⁰ Jules Frost to Carita Corse, Dec. 7, 1936, Box 1107, WPA, R.G. 69.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Corse to Florence Kerr, Sept. 25, 1939, Admin. Corresp., Fl., WPA, R. G. 69.

guide, and diverting the Florida director's attention from pressing problems. Liddle, an influential and respected author with more than 16 years experience in writing and promotional work, had joined the Florida project in 1936. After a promising start, Liddle's work began to falter and he failed to turn in his weekly quota of copy. After more than a year of repeated promises "to produce copy for the State Guide were never fulfilled," Carita Corse dismissed him. Liddle, who was somewhat unbalanced, wrote so many letters to Washington questioning his dismissal that his file was soon an inch thick. Liddle vehemently protested Corse's action, citing his dire need with a wife and two small children to support. Both Harris and Alsberg questioned Corse's action because Liddle was one of the few bona fide writers on the Florida project and he was in desperate need. Reed Harris wrote to Corse, "Are you not aware that dismissals are supposed to be both on the basis of need and ability? It would seem to me that Mr. Liddle would be one of the last persons dropped." The Authors' League jumped into the fray and wrote several letters on his behalf, citing Liddle's outstanding record as an author. Despite these protests, Corse remained firm and there was little Harris or Alsberg could do to reverse her decision. Harris did ask Corse to help him find a job on another federal relief

project because Liddle threatened that unless someone helped him soon, he and his family would "starve to the size of salted herrings." Harris found the idea "appalling."⁴³

Local WPA administrators on occasion interfered with Writer's Project workers. Richard Greenleaf, a writer hired on the Orlando project, was dismissed unjustly by O. P. Swope, the WPA district director. One day Mr. Swope had called Mr. Greenleaf into his office for no other reason than to question him about his political beliefs, despite the fact that such an action was against WPA regulations. He asked Greenleaf if he was a member of the Communist Party. Mr. Greenleaf replied that he was not, but he admitted he was a communist in his sympathies. One week later, and for no other apparent reason, Swope reassigned Mr. Greenleaf to a WPA construction project. Greenleaf's repeated protestations that he had been fired because of his political beliefs failed to secure his reinstatement. The national office knew Swope was a "red baiter" and had several cases such as this one "hanging

⁴³ Liddle was indeed an eccentric character who wrote newsy, noseey, and irate letters to Washington. The one-inch thick file is in the "Carl Liddle" folder, Employment, Florida, Box 1107, WPA, R.G.69; Correspondence begins, September 10, 1935 with Liddle seeking employment on the Florida Writers' Project, and continues to March 30, 1937.

around his door," but did not want to attract negative publicity by openly defending a communist sympathizer.⁴⁴

Perhaps Corse's greatest problem was the rapid turnover of project personnel, especially editors in the state office. During the program's first two years, two state editors came and went in rapid succession. Carey Thomas, the first state editor, left the project in December, 1936, to accept private employment. Thomas, a valued assistant, had helped Corse set up the Florida project and worked well with the Florida director. Darel McConkey on his field visit to Florida in September, 1936, complimented Thomas' editorial expertise and "wholesome influence" on the project.⁴⁵

Thomas's departure left an editorial void which was not filled permanently for nearly a year. The appointment of a new Florida WPA director delayed the appointment of a replacement for several months. For a short time, Maristan Chapman, a novelist of local renown, filled the position while Carita Corse pushed for the appointment of Monroe Campbell to replace Thomas. Finally in April,

⁴⁴ Richard Greenleaf to Henry Alsberg, Sept. 9, 1936; Reed Harris to Agnes Cronin, Sept. 12, 1936, "A-L folder," Employment Files, WPA, R.G.69.

⁴⁵ Katherine Kellock, Jan. 21, 1936, Darel McConkey, Sept. 19, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69; Corse to Alsberg, Dec. 30, 1936, Admin. Corresp., Florida. WPA. R.G. 69.

1937, Monroe Campbell's appointment was made. The new state editor spent two weeks in the central office in Washington learning what the FWP required and cementing his relationship with the national administrators. Alsberg liked Campbell, a friend of his roommate and confident, Clair Laning. Upon his return to Florida, Campbell corresponded frequently with Alsberg and members of the national staff about Florida affairs. In August, 1937, Campbell wrote to the national office requesting a quota increase for the Florida Writers' Project. When Carita Corse and Rolla Southworth, the head of the WPA Professional and Service Division through whom such requests were directed, learned of Campbell's action, which they believed was uncalled for, they were irate. Alsberg, who considered Campbell "a friend" and "the type of editor the FWP needed," wrote Corse a carefully worded letter explaining that the Washington office considered this request "as merely a suggestion." "I hope," Alsberg wrote, "you will not regard Mr. Campbell's action as in any way going over your head or intentionally violating administrative procedure."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Corse to Alsberg, Dec. 30, 1936, Admin. Corresp. Florida, FWP, R. G. 69; Corse to Alsberg, Aug. 24, 1937, Alsberg to Corse, Aug. 27, 1937; see also Campbell's letter to Katherine Kellock, May 15, 1937, Admin. Corresp., WPA, R. G. 69.

Despite Alsberg's attempt to smooth the women's ruffled feathers, the Florida project fired Campbell. The Florida hierarchy believed Campbell was too close to Alsberg and had been too frank in his criticism of the Florida FWP. A few months earlier Campbell had written Katherine Kellock:

The situation here is far worse than I believed it could be--but I don't mean that as any criticism of Carita. Her only fault (if it can be called a fault) is that she has too much faith in these half-baked newspaper reporters, and has allowed them to run things their own way. They have actually deleted sections of copy after she had gone over it, had written her insertions and specifically ordered that her comments be added to the final copy. I think that accounts for much of our copy being so bare and colorless. But I think we will do better in the future.⁴⁷

Corse defended her action despite Washington's protest. "Mr. Campbell was released," she wrote Alsberg, "because his editorial contribution (3250 words only), and his record as an executive were both unsatisfactory." The state WPA organization stood behind Corse, upholding Campbell's dismissal. There was little Washington could do.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Monroe Campbell to Mrs. Kellock, May 15, 1937, Admin. Corresp. Fl. FWP. R. G. 69.

⁴⁸ Corse to Alsberg, Aug. 24, 1937, Alsberg to Corse, Aug. 27, 1937, Corse to Honorable Joe Hendricks, Congressman, Oct. 8, 1937, Florida, Admin. Corresp., Fl., FWP, WPA, R.G. 69.

Campbell's firing and hasty departure created major organizational problems in Florida that Washington had to straighten out. In October, 1937, Reed Harris made a special trip to Florida, reorganized the state office, and set up guidelines for the editorial supervision of copy. Harris promoted Rolland Phillips, the director of the St. Petersburg district office, as Florida's new state editor. Phillips was a proven administrator and a good editor, who Rolla Southworth believed "far surpasses any other person on the project for editorial experience." She pointed out that he was a good organizer with abilities which the state director did not have. Darel McConkey, who spent more time in Florida than any other field representative and knew the project personnel better than anyone else, agreed. He noted that Phillips "has a great knack for smoothing out poorly written copy and for filling in gaps the previous writers have left."⁴⁹

By late December, 1937, the final reorganization of the Florida office had been completed and the editorial team which would write the state guide was in place. Robert Cornwall became assistant state editor. Charles Ward served as tour editor. Evelyn Werner, Hilton Crowe,

⁴⁹ Rolla Southworth to Blanche M. Ralston, Regional Director, Dec. 30, 1937, Box 1107 WPA; quote in "Editorial Report," Darell McConkey, Apr. 22, 1938, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R. G. 69; Stetson Kennedy Interview, Jan. 6, 1989; "Final Report," 3.

and Bill Duncan edited field copy. Together the state editors formed an editorial review board which read all copy going to Washington.⁵⁰

Despite a number of endless administrative challenges, personality clashes, organizational difficulties, and built-in problems which were never solved, the Florida project turned out a number of credible publications. The capstone of the program, the state guidebook, demonstrated not only the viability of the state's writers project, but also the persistence and creativity of the national office.

⁵⁰ Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1987, Jan. 6, 1988; "Final Report," 7-8; "Coordinating Project Editors," Dec. 31, 1935, Admin. Corresp., Fl., "Misc. Project Files," Alsberg to Baker, Feb. 26, 1936, Files of HGA, FWP, R.G. 69.

CHAPTER THREE: "DO NOT BE CONCERNED ABOUT STYLE":

WRITING THE FLORIDA GUIDE

Henry Alsberg had foreseen early in the program that "One person of writing and editorial ability will be worth 50 people without writing experience." In 1935, as Federal Writers' Project administrators faced the challenge of directing an army of untrained writers to produce publishable state guides, Henry Alsberg's words would prove prophetic. Supervising the production of the Florida guide was an excruciating process which took four years and underscored the basic weakness of the entire project: an inadequate number of personnel who could actually write. Only in states such as Idaho, where Vardis Fisher virtually wrote the guide himself, and in Louisiana, where Lyle Saxon, a gifted writer, played a central part, did Washington's editors take a secondary role.¹

¹ Henry Alsberg to Katherine Kellock, Jan. 22, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, WPA, R.G. 69; Jerre Mangione, "The Federal Writers' Project," The New York Times Book Review, May 18, 1969, 2.

Washington's administrators contributed to the confusion by not making up their mind as to what the guidebooks should contain. Henry Alsberg believed that the state guides should be more than mere tour books and wanted each state volume to provide introductory essays that would provide the reader or traveler with a look at each state's physical features, culture, history, government, transportation, industry, and recreation. Katherine Kellock, whose opinion, expertise, and experience on other issues Alsberg valued highly, believed that the guides' central purpose was "the stimulation of travel by the average American." In contrast, Kellock argued that if historians, architects, builders, or businessmen needed more detailed information about an area, they would search for more specialized material than the essays could offer. She pointed out that the average tourist did not care to know anything more than, "What places of interest am I passing?" and "Why are they interesting?" On a tour of Europe several years earlier, Kellock recalled that not one member of the tour group she conducted had ever read the introductory essays in the Baedekers they carried.²

² Katherine Kellock to Henry Alsberg, Jan. 20, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R. G. 69.

Producing the essay section of the state guides required intensive research and long-distance editing. Architecture, geology, paleontology, and other special subjects required the technical assistance of experts. Submitting the essays to consultants for technical advice only added to the editorial burden. Inadequate library facilities in Florida posed additional problems. On her first field visit to Florida in October, 1935, Katherine Kellock pointed out the problem to Alsberg. "There are almost no libraries of any account in the state," she wrote. Yet despite these hindrances, Alsberg remained firm. He believed that only the essay section of the guides could provide interested travelers with comprehensive information about the area through which they were traveling. The essays were central to the drive to chart America and to explain the nation's multi-national roots. With the tour and city descriptions, the essays would mirror the American scene in words.³

This debate over the content of the state guides continued for several months, compounding the confusion. The first set of guide instructions, which arrived in the states in late October, 1935, proved so

³ "Memo" n.d. Miscellaneous Files of Henry G. Alsberg, FWP, R.G. 69.

confusing they had to be revised. Within months, procedures had been changed so many times that few, if any, state directors knew what was expected of them. Ray Allen Billington in Massachusetts recalled that "each day's mail brought orders that contradicted those of the day before." Likewise, Mabel Ulrich in Minnesota found the task of reading the guide instructions so time-consuming that she stopped reading them herself, handed them to a secretary to digest, and said, "If they have changed anything today, tell me."⁴

Kellock's experiences as a field representative in the southern states during the early months of the program reinforced her fears "that the essay approach is all wrong." She found that guide instructions generated too much duplication. In Florida, writers in each district were turning in assignments on technical subjects such as architecture and geology.

⁴ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 193-238, 89; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 32-34; McKinzie, "Writers," 32-60 outlines general problems Washington encountered in trying to set up the state projects. Individual accounts of how confusion abounded: Mabel Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture for the WPA," 655, 653-664; Billington, "Government and the Arts," 470, 471-479; Rudolph Umland, "On Editing WPA Guide Books," The Prairie Schooner, XIII (1939), 160-169 detailed the problems encountered in organizing and editing the state guidebook in Nebraska. For example, rules one to eleven in the Guide Manual were reissued as rules 11b to 24.

Realizing that this was counterproductive, Kellock and Corse decided technical subjects should be handled for the state as a whole and they enlisted professors at the University of Florida to write them.⁵

Few state directors could understand guide instructions and had little, if any, comprehension of how to begin work on their state books. Kellock found that in Florida very little productive work had been done on the guide project. Lining up consultants and sponsors, hiring workers, and setting up local offices had consumed most of Corse's time. No copy had been forwarded to Washington because Corse "did not realize that it was wanted." The field copy that trickled into the state office was "a mess--nothing original, all out of proportion and so on."⁶ Henry Alsberg must have groaned when he received this example of unedited field copy Kellock sent him from the Florida office:

The background of virgin forest with its canopy of native trees, is nature's own experimental garden where odd and peculiar species are originated, and where fields that have endured through years are ornamented with gorgeous flowers, lilies,

⁵ Alsberg to Kellock, Jan. 20, 1936 (telegram), Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 21, Jan. 25, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

⁶ Katherine Kellock to Henry Alsberg, Jan. 21, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

lotus, hyacinths the precious heritage of
seemingly unappreciative people.

Broken bluffs beribboned with many colored
clays, semiphore their challenge to the
restless waves, laving their banks with
rainbow and sunset colors. From the bluff
look up and behold the heaven above, then
look down and see the same heaven reflected
in the woodland and in the waters below
. . . .⁷

Kellock found that few state projects had devised
efficient editorial procedures to handle guide copy.
After studying the organization of the Florida state
office, Kellock outlined what she "thought would be a
proper change in editorial policy" and presented it to
Corse. Kellock, Corse, and the two state editors amended,
refined, and implemented Kellock's suggestions. "We're
going to run this as though we were running a newspaper
with state coverage," Carey Thomas observed.⁸

Once new editorial procedures were implemented, the
staff began work on the outline for the Florida guide.
Under Kellock's careful tutelage, the Florida staff
amended Washington's master outline, adding and deleting
material to fit Florida conditions. Information that
seemed inappropriate for a tourist guide, such as the

⁷ Katherine Kellock to Henry Alsberg, Jan.
22, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

⁸ Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 25, 1936, Field Reports,
Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

location of venereal disease clinics and relief stations, was omitted. Likewise, material which was too detailed or could be readily found elsewhere, such as the prices and location of hotels, was not included. Kellock emphasized that the Florida guide should present "colorful material uncovered by anything already written." With the guide outlined, Kellock confided to Alsberg, "I am more than satisfied."⁹

Although Florida had more seasoned writers than many other states, training them in the techniques of the Writers' Project was difficult. Once writers joined the project, their district directors assigned them a special topic to research. A guide writer attached to the Daytona office might be asked to write reports on the area's recreation facilities, flora and fauna, history, or religion. A concise state guide which simplified the instructions sent to the states in the abstruse "American Guide Manual" guided Florida field writers through each step of their research. The directives instructed field workers first to compile an extensive bibliography on their topic. Before the actual writing began, district directors checked the worker's bibliographies and suggested additional sources of information if necessary.

⁹ Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 25, Jan. 26. 1936, Field Report, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

Chambers of Commerce, business pamphlets, local libraries, historical societies, newspapers, and state bulletins provided a wide variety of useful information. In addition, field workers sought out and interviewed pioneer residents or specialists in a particular field. First-person interviews, conducted with people from diverse backgrounds provided startling information. Old timers told tales of Thomas Edison's arrival in Ft. Myers. Fannie Mastenbrook in Miami interviewed W. S. Dunn who explained how he invented a light weight diving helmet and launched a world-wide business. Gertrude Wilson gathered information about the old plantation on Ft. George Island from a descendant of the original owner, while Rose Shepherd learned of the bombardment of Mandarin, Florida, during the Civil War. A cannon ball was still lodged in a tree on the grounds of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Mandarin home. The odd bits of information culled from the interviews accounted for the detail and color found in the state guide.¹⁰

Once the field workers completed their bibliographies, they prepared detailed notes from which

¹⁰ "Instructions for Field Workers," Manual, 4, Federal Writers Project Collection, Florida Historical Society Library, University of South Florida, Tampa; Federal Writers Program. Florida, "Dade County History," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville) 166-173; FWP. Fl. "Duval County History," 16-17, 46-69.

they wrote their reports or "field continuities." The Florida manual directed the researcher to "write down everything of importance pertaining to your subject. Do not be concerned about style. Your local editor will revise your copy."¹¹

Field copy was forwarded to the state office, where editors either rewrote it or combined it with other reports. In the end, thousands of words of raw field copy became essays, tours, and city descriptions. The original reports seldom resembled finished essays. In the published guide, a field writer might see only a sentence or two of his or her writing.¹²

State copy underwent intense editorial revision in the central office in Washington. Detailed instructions, written for the most part by George Cronyn, guided the Washington staff through each step of the editing process. Special editors read and reviewed each essay's structure, content, and organization. They checked to see if the state office had used consultants to verify technical data? Every guide fact was checked and rechecked. Any information which was not strongly supported by bibliographic citations was deleted.

¹¹ "Instructions for Field Workers," Manual 4, ; "A Page A Day," New York Tribune, October 28, 1936, clipping Florida Historical Society Library, USF.

¹² Stetson Kennedy Interview, Jan. 6, 1989.

If an editor did not "get a clear picture of the place," the essay was returned to the state office for rewriting. Cronyn wanted essays which suggested vivid mental images and were not merely a collection of facts. "The state guides are not a temporary display of talents on relief," Cronyn stressed, "but permanent printed records of work done, which will be exposed to critical scrutiny." He added that the "judgement of the future will take no account of the circumstances under which they were produced, but only of their accuracy and excellence."¹³

State copy rarely passed Washington's intense editorial review unaltered. The essay section of the Florida guide, submitted in May, 1936, underwent three years of editorial revision and rewriting. The first drafts of Florida's essays were filled with stylistic and grammatical errors. Most were "verbose," "loose in construction," and "poorly organized." The essay on religion consisted of "short jerky paragraphs" "occasional colloquialisms and unnecessary flippancies." Cronyn noted that the "essay gives us the impression of having been compiled from field notes without any attempt to revise them properly." Although the "Industry and

¹³ "Editorial Report," Oct., 1935, Files of George Cronyn, FWP, R.G. 69.

Commerce" essay was factually correct and complete, Cronyn noted that the "running story is jerky and somewhat disconnected." He advised a careful editorial revision.¹⁴

The first draft of the architecture essay bore the comment, "very badly done." Katherine Kellock forthrightly wrote Corse, "Objections are that the style is cheap, the material badly organized, and the facts are inaccurate. The whole approach is amateurish." In the end, Rudolph Weaver, the director of the School of Architecture at the University of Florida and a recognized expert in the field, contributed an authoritative essay on Florida architecture for the guide.¹⁵

The Florida project was especially guilty of the chamber-of-commerce style or "the overstatement school of writing." "Florid" and Florida soon became synonymous in the minds of the Washington editors. They urged the Florida project to "build the book on the basis of understatement Readers who find the place better

¹⁴ Cronyn to Corse, Apr. 20, 1937, Dec. 29, 1936, Dec 23, 1936, Abott to Cronyn, Jan. 22, 1937, Cronyn to Corse, Jan. 28, 1937, Ed. Corresp. Florida. WPA. R. G. 69.

¹⁵ Kellock to Corse, Apr. 10, 1936, Ed. Corresp., Florida, WPA, R.G.69.

than the book says, will be pleased both with the place and the book."¹⁶

Florida, like many other state projects, constantly boasted of "firsts." The state asserted that Florida was the first name applied to the continental United States; Florida had the first theatre stock company in the U.S.; Florida was the "first to attract natural staging production," and the state was the site of the first "all-outdoor, all-talking picture." On all counts, the Washington editors replied "not true" and cited the corrections.¹⁷

Unfounded statements, not only in Florida's copy, but also in the manuscripts of over forty other states, induced the national editors to request "a minute, intensive recheck of all factual statements . . . in the essays." All essays had to be checked and every allegation substantiated. Statements which could not be fully documented, sometimes by several sources, were deleted. Corse maintained that during the Spanish phase of Florida's history an overland trail led eastward from Florida to California. Alsberg replied that "there was no such thing as a pre-motor age, transcontinental

¹⁶ McConkey to Corse, Aug. 23, 1938, WPA, R.G. 69.

¹⁷ "Ed. Comments," Mar 11, 1937, April 21, 1937, Files of George Cronyn, WPA, R. G. 69.

highway for even half the way for the reason that the topography of the country was against it." He pointed out that "between East Florida and central Texas, there were innumerable bodies of water to be crossed . . . [and] the large number of swamps and bayous made land travel exceedingly difficult, if not almost impossible" Corse bowed to Washington's logic.¹⁸

In addition to complaining about inaccuracies, the chamber-of-commerce style, and the boasting of firsts, Washington often asked for more detailed information. Florida's editors added details to the "Physical Description Essay" such as the height of bluffs, the origins of subterranean channels, and the unique nature of the Everglades. Are these not "characteristic of Florida's geography?" one editor asked. Suggestions such as these and the demand for factual and comparative data inspired some of the best writing in the Guide.¹⁹

¹⁸ Cronyn to Corse, May 23, 1936, Feb. 13, 1936, Alsberg to Corse, Apr. 14, 1938, Corse to Alsberg, Apr. 18, 1938, Admin. Corresp. Florida, WPA, R.G. 39. Corse wrote Alsberg, "I do not wish to assert anything, but merely to furnish what data I have from which you and your staff might reach a conclusion. Whatever that may be, you may be assured that the Florida Writers' Project will cheerfully abide by it."

¹⁹ Cronyn to Corse, Sept. 7, 1937, Apr. 14, 1937, June 14, 1937, Alsberg to Corse, Feb. 26, 1936, Ed. Corresp., Florida., FWP, R. G. 69.

Alsberg often chided the Florida project for devoting too much coverage to a particular topic and not enough to another. Corse had submitted a long account on "The Boom at Venice" but had neglected Florida's flora and fauna. "The flora and fauna of Florida are so varied and so different from what is found in most of the rest of the country that it seems to me they deserve quite a lot of space in the State Guide," Alsberg wrote. Corse reluctantly rewrote the essays to comply with Washington's editorial suggestions.²⁰

Although they often seemed like literary tyrants who prodded, cajoled, and insisted upon absolute accuracy, detail, balance, and completeness, Washington's editors were for the most part caring, dedicated, and creative. They kept literary standards high, enforced uniformity, and kept Florida copy from deteriorating into boosterism. George Cronyn, who personally supervised the editing of the Florida essays, reviewed the comments of each editor and added suggestions of his own. Without Cronyn and his staff's tireless work, the Florida guide would have been mediocre at best.²¹

²⁰ Alsberg to Corse, Feb. 26, 1936, Ed. Corresp. Florida. FWP, R. G. 69.

²¹ McDonald, Federal Relief, 666-67; McKinzie, "Writers," 63; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 82; Most of these conclusions are drawn from extensive examination of the "Editorial Reports" in "Criticism and

Once Washington approved the general content of an essay, it was given "pre-final" clearance. However, most of the Florida essays, which were in pre-final form by August, 1938, were stylistically dull, unbalanced, and "not sufficiently highlighted to make good reading." Few persons on the Florida project could write with an easy, flowing style. In Florida, nearly all of the experienced writers were ex-newspapermen, accustomed to writing "advertising blurbs, and dry, factual statements." Producing accurate, vivid copy on a variety of highly specialized and technical subjects confounded most of them. A Washington editor lamented that he could do little about "a heavy treatment of abstruse subjects" even though reader's interest would be "dulled by the repeated hammering of abbreviated facts unsweetened by any trace of style." Despite all the editors could do, several of the completed essays remained stylistically dull and amateurish. The "Industry and Commerce" essay in the published guide contained a hodgepodge of information, poorly organized and lacking a unifying theme. The essay jumped from a discussion of commercial fishing to a

Editorial Comments," Folder, Florida Guide, Files of George Cronyn, FWP, R.G. 69.

description of cigar making and then to an account of sponge fishing.²²

In several instances, Washington personnel suggested points of departure and leads for essays. After visiting Florida on several field trips, Darel McConkey noted that "Florida seems to have been settled mostly by northerners and in some aspects though geographically most southern, seems not to be a southern state at all." His observation served as the theme for the "Contemporary Setting" essay.²³

On occasion, Washington sent essays from other states to help Florida's editors "enliven the material." The Connecticut essay on geology, which the Washington office thought was "one of the best we have read thus far," served as a model for re-writing Florida's essay.²⁴

²² Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 91-92, 149; Penkower, Federal Writers' Project, 75-95; Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture," 656-67; McDonald, Federal Relief, 669, 686; Kellock to Corse, Apr. 10, 1936, Admin. Corresp., FWP, R. G. 69; "Editorial Report," July 16, 1937, Alsberg to Corse, Sep. 1, 1937, McConkey to Corse, Aug. 23, 1937, Ed. Corresp, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69; "Editorial Report," Dec. 28, 1936, Cronyn to Corse, Dec. 29, 1936, "Criticism and Editorial Comments," Florida, Files of George Cronyn, FWP, R. G. 69; Federal Writers Project, Florida, Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 90-91.

²³ McConkey to Corse, Aug. 23, 1938, Admin. Corresp., Fl. R.G. 69.

²⁴ Cronyn to Corse, Sept., 3, 1937, Feb. 26, 1936, Nov. 4, 1937, Admin. Corresp., Fl., WPA, R. G. 69.

Not until late 1937, when Rolland Phillips became state editor, did Florida copy begin to show marked improvement. An experienced magazine writer and editor who had worked on the project since it began, Phillips smoothed out poorly written copy, filling in gaps left by previous writers. Max Hunter, the Tampa district director, worked also as an editor in the state office polishing and improving the Florida essays. As Darel McConkey reported to Alsberg, "The attitude we have been trying to encourage on guide work is natural to Mr. Hunter, and he has no patience with the chamber of commerce type of writing that is done so much in Florida." In April, 1938, McConkey put Hunter in charge of all Florida copy before it went to Washington.²⁵

The city and tour sections were by far the most lively and captivating sections of the Florida guide. The twenty-two Florida tours captured the essence and meaning of Florida life as it was being lived in the 1930s. Even today they make fascinating reading. Here was the tone and flavor of grass roots America. Here could be found the genius of the American guide series.²⁶

²⁵ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 149; Darel McConkey to Henry Alsberg, Apr. 22, 1938, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

²⁶ Bernard De Voto, "New England Via WPA," The Saturday Review of Literature XVIII (May 14, 1938), 3-4; De Voto praised the tours as the best part of the guides.

Florida's tours catered specifically to the state's vacation population, which by the time the guide appeared, had swelled to two million annual visitors. Before the publication of Florida, many of these tourists, who motored through the state, relied upon chamber-of-commerce handouts and booster literature from the American Automobile Association. The FWP guide served as an exhaustive compendium of Floridiana and its carefully mapped tours invited adventurous travelers to leave the beaten path and explore out of the way places. In this way, the state guide helped boost sagging local economies.²⁷

In early 1936, Henry Alsberg appointed Katherine Kellock national tour director. Kellock tackled a task which no one else really wanted with an energy and enthusiasm that quickly infected the entire staff. She convinced Alsberg and Cronyn that the tours could absorb colorful local material which did not fit into the essays. She refashioned dull material sent in from the state projects into fascinating descriptions of unknown places, intriguing profiles of eccentric personalities, and absorbing depictions of seemingly lonely highways.

²⁷ Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 22, 1936 Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69; Corse to Kellock, Jan. 31, 1936, Admin. Corresp., Fl., WPA, R.G.69; For all practical purposes, the city descriptions, listed in a separate section for ready reference, were part of the tours.

Her vitality energized all those who came in contact with her. One national staffer, interviewed years later, noted that although she was often "tactless to a grating degree," she "added more than we liked to concede at the time to the guidebooks."²⁸

At Kellock's suggestion in January, 1936, the Florida staff began working on the state's tours by compiling index cards of all points of interest along the state's highways. By mid-year, work on Florida's tours was well underway. Charles Ward, Florida's tour editor, sent each district director a simple map outlining the proposed tour routes and a questionnaire, which "when properly and amply completed" provided enough detail to compile tour descriptions.²⁹ Ward stressed:

Absolute accuracy must be combined with a sense of values. A feeling for landscapes and their description is essential. Keep an eye open for oddities and the unusual, and try to grasp local community characteristics.³⁰

²⁸ quote in Mangione, Dream and Deal, 65-66; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 85-86; McKinzie, "Writers," 83; Corse to Kellock, Feb. 2, 1936, Admin. Corresp., Fl., WPA, R. G. 69.

²⁹ Kellock to Alsberg, Jan. 25, 26, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69; Corse to Kellock, Jan. 31, 1936, Admin. Corresp. Florida, WPA, R.G. 69.

³⁰ Charles Ward to Gordon Adams, August 13, 1936, Federal Writers' Project Collection, Florida Historical Society Library, USF.

Ward fully expected that his efforts would elicit enough material to "create a running story" that would "stimulate and inform the tourist." However, his careful instruction on the elements of tour writing did not elicit colorful, vivid tour copy. The average field writer lacked the insight and imagination required to provide a "fresh first-hand viewpoint" of highway scenery, flora and fauna, regional variations, local history and lore.³³

FWP workers were not entirely to blame. Lack of travel funds prevented them from traveling the routes about which they were writing. Florida's early tour copy was compiled from travel brochures and atlases. If a field worker traveled the route, he did so at his own expense. Paul de Kruif, director of the Michigan project, noted in the introduction to his state's guide that the "ordinary WPA employee . . . toured on his thumb." One Florida worker "was so interested in his job that he hitchhiked several hundred miles to gather necessary information."³⁴

³³ Charles Ward to Gordon Adams, Aug. 13, 1936, FWP Collection, FHS, USF.

³⁴ Bernard De Voto, "The Writers' Project," Harper's Magazine, (Jan. 1942), 221; "Radio Script," Paul Kruse interviewing Dr. Carita Doggett Corse, Dec. 19, 1939, Div. of Information Files, Box 83, WPA, R. G. 69; Darel McConkey to Henry Alsberg, Sept. 19, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

Travel limitations meant most of Florida's early tour copy was trite, bland, and dull. The following piece submitted as a description of Dixie County was typical:

Some of the most beautiful natural scenery in Florida can be observed in this county. The Suwannee River follows a winding course on its western edge, and one of the principal highways in the county follows this river along a bluff overlooking the stream for some distance.

There are two excellent beaches on the Gulf of Mexico, and sportsmen come from long distances to enjoy the splendid fishing opportunities here. There are also numerous oyster beds.³⁵

In September, 1936, Darel McConkey judged Florida's tour copy "incurably dull." He wrote Washington that the Florida office had been "overawed by weighty instructions." Pointing out that Florida was a colorful state which lent itself to colorful writing, he encouraged the state staff "to let themselves go."³⁶

By early 1938, Washington realized that the Florida project lacked the funding to enable its personnel to complete the tour section of the guide. Lack of funding, field workers who could not write tour copy, and 6,000 miles of primary and secondary roads presented serious problems. In April, Alsberg dispatched Darel McConkey,

³⁵ FWP. FL. "Dixie Country History," (unpublished manuscript, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville), 2.

³⁶ Darel McConkey to Henry Alsberg, Sept. 19, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

who served as national cities editor, to Florida to assist in checking and writing city and tour copy.

After driving many of the tours, McConkey reported to Alsberg that most of the tour mileage figures were incorrect. Effective tour writing required two persons--one to do the driving and the other to make notes about highway scenery. Washington ordered a recheck all of them. Inaccuracies aside, McConkey noted that Florida tour copy lacked vivid descriptions and recent historical material. Some of the tour copy was missing entirely. A field worker responsible for considerable tour mileage had taken a private job and failed to turn in his completed copy. Although McConkey extended his stay in Florida to six weeks and drove over 1,200 miles of tours, he could not complete the task. When he left, he assigned the remainder to Max Hunter and Rolland Phillips.³⁷

Despite the difficulties encountered in writing the tours, they emerged as the best part of the Florida and other state guides. Their vivid and forceful writing set them apart from the more ponderous essays. As Bernard DeVoto pointed out in one of his reviews of the American Guide Series, the tours were "the justification of this

³⁷ Darel McConkey to Henry Alsberg, Mar. 1, 1938, Kellock to Reed Harris, Mar. 8, 1938, Darel McConkey to Henry Alsberg, Apr. 22, 1938, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

unwieldy labor, intelligent, packed, and enormously usable." Like other states' tours, those in Florida succeeded because they were imaginative, lively, and concise. They presented little known facts, local history, and folklore in one paragraph descriptions. Tourists learned about Florida's geography, physical features, history, and life as they drove any of the state's twenty-two primary and secondary tours.³⁸

As the Florida guide neared completion in 1938, the editorial battle over its content, which had been smoldering in the state office, intensified. The so-called "Palm Tree and Bathing Beauty group," consisting primarily of Dr. Corse, her office manager and confidant, Moselle Dubose, and the project's two primary editors, Max Hunter and Rolland Phillips, insisted that the guide was a tourist book and must emphasize only Florida's positive features. They deleted every political, racial, or controversial statement.³⁹

The "Realists," a younger and more liberal set, headed by Robert Cornwall and assisted by Stetson Kennedy, wanted to hold a mirror to Florida and make the state book a faithful reflection of the contemporary scene. They

³⁸ De Voto, "New England Via WPA," The Saturday Review of Literature XVIII (May 14, 1938), 4.

³⁹ Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989.

believed that the guide should present an uncensored picture of state problems such as labor strikes, KKK rallies and lynchings, the rigid Jim Crow system, and the migrant labor problem.⁴⁰

The editorial battle between the two groups raged in the state office as the "realists" added their point of view to final copy only to have the "Palm Tree and Bathing Beauty" group delete the controversial material the next day. Realizing that the constant adding and deleting of material was counterproductive, the liberals decided to wait until Corse was ready to mail the finished copy to Washington before surreptitiously adding their controversial material.⁴¹ Robert Cornwall described his plan and the last battle in the state office to his friend and accomplice Stetson Kennedy:

a few hours before the essays, which were in final and untouchable form, went to Washington, Dr. [Corse] secretly deleted matter on our supplement of the history essay. I didn't have a chance to fight back; it was a case of Duby being in cahoots with her. I may fox her, though. I edited the chronology today, and put some of the deleted stuff in it, which might get by. There is

⁴⁰ Nancy Williams, "Interview with Carita Doggett Corse," March 18, 1976, New Smyrna Beach, Florida; Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989.

⁴¹ Monroe Campbell to Henry Alsberg, Aug. 23, 1937, Ed. Corresp. Fl., WPA, R.G. 69; Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989.

still a chance that . . . the militantly liberal guy in Washington, may replace some of the essay material⁴²

In the end, the "Palm Tree and Bathing Beauty" group's censored portrait of Florida prevailed. An uproar in August, 1937, in the national press over the liberalism of the Massachusetts Guide created a cautionary mood in the national office. Ellen Woodward, deputy administrator of the WPA, put an official censor in the national FWP office to "spot and delete material in the state guidebooks that seemed politically biased." In addition, in August, 1938, Congressman Martin Dies of Texas, an arch-conservative and rabid anti-New Dealer, began committee hearings to investigate the charges of radicalism on some of the big city Writers' Projects. The Dies Committee hearings on Capitol Hill and the adverse publicity they generated reinforced the conservatism of the national office.

In the fall of 1938, Henry Alsberg desperately needed a best-selling guide. A well-received guide to a popular vacation state like Florida would buoy the Project's image and offset some of Martin Dies' charges which the anti-New Deal press reported almost daily. In August, 1938,

⁴² Cornwall to Kennedy, Mar. 22, 1939, private papers in possession of Mr. Kennedy. Hereafter cited, Kennedy papers.

Washington bent every effort to get the Florida book ready for the winter trade. The national office hoped that the Florida book would be "good, accurate, and unbiased" and the "most-read and most talked about guide yet published."⁴³

Not wanting to add fuel to already heated fires, Washington proceeded cautiously with the yet-to-be published Florida guide. Max Hunter and Rolland Phillips, conservative "Palm Tree and Bathing Beauty" editors, were sent to Washington along with Zora Neale Hurston, who shared many of their conservative views, to do the final editing of the Florida guide. As Hunter arrived in Washington, he found the national office was in a tailspin. The WPA had decided to let Henry Alsberg testify before the Dies Committee. Instead of editing guide book copy, national editors were preparing a defense for Alsberg to use before the Committee. Max Hunter described the situation to Carita Corse:

The situation is really shaky. The boys were working here till last midnight getting stuff together for the Dies committee to offset some of the charges that are kicking about in the papers. A handful of damn fool crackpot radicals are responsible for the whole mess⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Max Hunter to Carita Corse, Dec. 1, 1938, Zora Hurston Papers, Special Collections, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

A few days later, Hunter reported to Corse that officers from the Dies Committee had completely shut down the work in the national office, advising everyone "that they could not leave the building. Nobody at the time could figure out what it was about, but we soon found out," Hunter wrote. The Committee seized the galleys of the soon-to-be published New Jersey and Tennessee guides which they charged were "loaded with C.I.O. and communist propaganda." The fight in Congress between Martin Dies and the FWP delayed publication of the Florida guide and made it more conservative than it might have been.⁴⁵

By the time the Florida guide was ready for press, the publication process had been streamlined. The marked contrast between the first two volumes of the American Guide Series, Washington: City and Capitol, done by the Government Printing Office, and Idaho: A Guide in Word and Picture, done by a commercial publisher, quickly convinced Alsberg that all of the state guides should be published commercially. The bulky, five-pound Washington city guide could not be carried easily on a trip and could

⁴⁵ Max Hunter to Carita Corse, "Saturday night" Dec. 3, 1938, Zora Hurston Papers, Special Collections, P.K. Yonge Library, Gainesville; The best account of the Dies Committee and how it foreshadowed the McCarthy Era can be found in Walter Goodman, The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1968).

only be purchased from the Government Printing Office. In contrast, the trim Idaho guide could be distributed nationally through trade book stores.⁴⁶

Recognizing that the Florida guide "would be snapped up by any one of a dozen publishing houses," Alsberg used it as a magnet to attract a publisher for the guides to less glamorous states. In December, 1937, he sent a letter containing the FWP proposal for the "the Southern Books," as they were termed, to a number of suitable bidders so they might submit a proposal. Oxford University Press, which had published a group of western guides, submitted an acceptable bid. It agreed to absorb all publication costs, pay royalties to the sponsoring agency, and promote the Florida book nationally through trade book stores.⁴⁷

The commercial publishing houses such as Oxford depended upon the steady work that the FWP guides offered. "It means gainful employment for hundreds of workers," noted one trade representative. Although none of the American Guide publishers reaped large profits due to the

⁴⁶ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 209, 220; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 117-135; McKinzie, "Writers," 89.

⁴⁷ Publishers' Weekly, May 11, 1940, 1838-9; McKinzie, "Writers," 91-97; Alsberg to Corse, Dec. 7, 1936; J. B. Orrick to Henry Alsberg, Jan. 21, 1939, Admin. Corresp. Fl., WPA, R.G. 69; Final Report, 2.

low list price of the guides and costly galley changes which the FWP often demanded, the books were steady sellers. Most of them went through several printings within a few years.⁴⁸

The Florida Department of Public Instruction, which sponsored the state guide, copyrighted the book, bought part of the first printing, and helped to promote the guide statewide. The Florida FWP mounted its own publicity campaign and placed hundreds of hand-made silk-screened posters done by the Federal Art Project in Chamber of Commerce offices, tourist agencies, and railroad and airline terminals. Radio programs discussed information the guide contained and how the federal writers had collected it. In addition, short radio programs dramatized historical events which the guide featured. Weekly press releases, distributed to 126 Florida daily and weekly newspapers, announced its publication and excerpted some of its contents. As predicted, the Florida guide, which had appeared in time for the winter tourist season, was an immediate success.

⁴⁸ The best explanation of the publishing of the American Guide Series is found in Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 91-209; Mangione worked as liaison with the publishers for the FWP; Blair Bolles, "The Federal Writers' Project," Saturday Review of Literature (July 9, 1938), 4, 18; "Southern Books" Folder, Admin. Corresp. Fl., WPA, R.G. 69; "Final Report," 2.

Within the first eighteen months, 9,000 copies had been sold and Florida went into its second printing.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Some of the guide material found in the Cities' Section was used in historical pageants in Key West, St. Augustine, and Fernandina. Howard Greene to Carita Corse, May 25, 1936, details the suggestion that the project write radio scripts on historical subjects to publicize FWP efforts; Corse to Alsberg, June 21, 1937, Aug. 3, 1937, Aug. 18, 1937, Sept. 23, 1937, Apr. 17, 1938, Mar. 7, 1939, Feb. 8, 1939, Dec. 28, 1939, Corse to Cronyn, Aug. 30, 1937, Box 1107, WPA, R. G.; "Final Report," 2.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE FLORIDA GUIDE

The Florida guide was much more than a tourist manual written to direct visitors through a popular vacation state. It was not a history in the academic sense. Indeed it was closer to cultural anthropology and sociology than to history. What the Florida guide presented, more imaginatively and creatively than any other single source produced in the 1930s, was a documentary portrait of the state's history, life in its communities, and the long-forgotten individuals who shaped and were shaped by those communities. From the vantage point of each Florida town and from the perspective of the common man, the federal writers delineated the broad outlines of the state's cultural life.¹

The American Guide Project exemplified the central drive by artists of the 1930s, the quest, as Alfred Kazin expressed it, "to chart America and to possess it." The idea of charting America meant traveling the back roads of

¹ William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford, 1973), 110-118. Stott explores these themes throughout his entire work.

the state, as the Florida guide writers did, observing and recording what they saw. They searched out unusual, largely forgotten, and often hidden sources of information. Local newspaper files, libraries, and archives revealed odd bits of the nation's long-forgotten history. Garrulous old-timers welcomed the opportunity to tell what they knew about the land and people. The result was the state's first self-portrait.²

The guide project was intended to educate ordinary Americans, inform them of their cultural heritage, and highlight "America's potentialities for the future."³

Alsberg wrote:

Until recently, when technological unemployment created the problem and the opportunity, we have not thought it worth while to spare the time to chart our cultural, scenic, archeological, or even industrial and commercial facilities.⁴

² Alfred Kazin, "America! America!" in On Native Grounds: A Study of American Prose Literature from 1890 to the Present (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1940, 1956), quote, 392; Robert Cantwell, "America and the Writers' Project," New Republic (April 26, 1939), 323; Stott, Documentary Expression, 51, 256.

³ "Pen Project--America, the WPA, and 20,000,000 Words," The Pathfinder, Dec. 17, 1938, 2; Henry G. Alsberg, "The American Guide," Miscellaneous Folder #2, Files of HGA, FWP, R.G. 69.

⁴ "Memo," Misc. File #4, Files HGA, FWP, R.G. 69.

Each state book was a part of this overall quest which invited Americans to follow the guide writers' paths and to experience the nation for themselves.

The guide project grew out of the same reforming impulses that characterized other New Deal programs. As New Deal writers fanned across America, observing national life and recording what they saw, so too the photographers of the New Deal's Farm Security Administration traveled through Florida using their cameras to document American life and culture. Together these New Deal agencies left a vital record of life in thousands of communities across the nation. Here was something new: History from the perspective of America's small towns. As one reviewer of the guides pointed out:

American history has never before been written in terms of communities--it has been written in terms of its leading actors, and of its dominant economic movements, but never in terms of the ups and downs of the towns from which the actors emerged and in which the economic movements had their play.⁵

The Florida guide captured each localities vividness and color.⁶

⁵ Robert Cantwell, "America and the Writers' Project," New Republic 98 (April 26, 1939), 323-325, quote, 323.

⁶ Kazin, On Native Grounds, 392; Lewis Mumford, "Writers Project," New Republic, Oct. 20, 1937, 306-07; Katherine Kellock, "The WPA Writers: Portraitists of the United States," American Scholar (Aut. 1940), 474.

The guide's focus upon the community was linked to the transformation of the meaning of culture that took place in the 1930s. No longer synonymous with art, culture took on a deeper, anthropological meaning. The focus was upon "all the things that a group of people inhabiting a common geographical area do, the ways they do things and the ways they think and feel about things, their material tools and their values and symbols."⁷

The Florida guide revealed the cultural context of each community. It pointed out how each locality differed socially, culturally, and economically from its neighbor down the road. The guide writers gave each Florida principality a flavor of its own. No two were alike.⁸

Jacksonville, a leading port on the south Atlantic seaboard and the state's largest city, was cast as the "working son in the Florida family of playboys." Underscoring its work ethic, the guide writers pointed out the presence of "Big Jim, a stentorian whistle atop the waterworks" which awakened the city each morning at seven

⁷ Warren Susman, "The Culture of the Thirties," in The Development of An American Culture, ed. Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentiss Hall, 1970), 179-218, especially pages 153-56; Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959, [1934]) xvi, quote, 3.

⁸ Kellock, "The WPA Writers," 474; Stott, Documentary Expression, 112.

o'clock, proclaimed the noonday respite, and sounded again at five o'clock.⁹

The guide pointed out that Jacksonville's customs differed markedly from those of resort centers further south. Jacksoninans, for example, did not wear whites in winter, even though "as near as St. Augustine, 40 miles south, this is the custom."¹⁰

Florida reminded the thousands of northern tourists who drove through the city on their way to resorts further south that the city had been occupied during the "War Between the States." (Florida, like the other southern guides, refused to call it the Civil War.) During the War's course, the guide writers noted:

Jacksonville was occupied for brief intervals by Union forces. Upon withdrawal . . . refugees returning to the city found their homes burned, trenches instead of streets, and outlying farms desolate. All ferry and dock facilities were destroyed; there was no commerce, no currency, no river transportation. At one time . . . the town had less than two dozen inhabitants.¹¹

In sharp contrast to working Jacksonville, Miami in the 1930s was a "devil-may-care" tourist town. The guide captured this atmosphere, describing the city's "miles of rainbow-hued dwellings, bizarre estates, ornate hotels,

⁹ Florida, 184-85, quote, 184-192.

¹⁰ Florida, 186.

¹¹ Florida, 187-88.

and office buildings." The newcomer on "Miami's show street," in the heart of the tourist district, could expect to find a variety of distinctive sights.

Theater doormen, resplendent as admirals on dress parade, advertise orally the current screen attraction; policemen in sky-blue uniforms with white belts and pith helmets direct traffic. Adult newsboys hawk their papers and racing forms like sideshow barkers, and stroll between cars held up by lights Pedestrians wear what they please.¹²

The guide offered not only a description of Miami's contemporary life, but also explained how Miami developed from a sleepy coastal town of 1,500 near the turn of the century into a metropolis of nearly 200,000 by the 1930s. In 1895, Julia S. Tuttle, a large landowner in the Miami area, sent Henry M. Flagler, the Florida railroad developer and builder, a bouquet of orange blossoms untouched by the severe freeze in central Florida that year. Impressed by the area's tropical climate, Flagler extended the East Coast Railway to Miami, bought land, built hotels, and developed the town into a tourist center. Within three decades, Miami had become a posh winter resort hosting two million visitors a year.¹³

Differing markedly from cosmopolitan Miami and commercial Jacksonville, Tallahassee was a strictly

¹² Florida, 209, 208-221.

¹³ Florida, 208, 209, 212, 208-221.

southern town. Since antebellum days, when the area's wealthy cotton planters had made the city the state capitol, the guide noted that Tallahassee established a society "similar to that in other sections of the storied South." Its character and customs derived directly from its pre-Civil War, southern heritage.¹⁴

Following traditional southern custom, in the 1930s the area's rural residents still came to town on Saturday afternoons to socialize and to trade. The guide vividly recreated a street scene on a typical Saturday afternoon.

Adams Street is a noisy, crowded trading center on Saturdays when rural families attend to their weekly shopping. Store windows are plastered with signs, banners advertise bargain sales, and radios blare. Lunch counters and soft-drink stands do a brisk business. Parked along the high curbs are shinning motors with liveried chauffeurs and rickety farm wagons acting as carry-alls for produce, groceries, and brown-faced children.¹⁵

The guide pointed out that Key West, like Tallahassee, derived its character from its early history. Key West, located off the mainland coast of Florida's tip, for many years had been a base for marauding pirates, shady adventurers, and Spanish and Cuban exiles.

¹⁴ Florida, 274-282, quote 275.

¹⁵ Florida, 275.

The guide captured the city's unusual mixture of cultures and inhabitants in its description of "Saturday Night:"

The downtown section comes to life on Saturday nights. Towns people throng the streets and mingle with the fishermen who have come in for supplies and amusement. Inspired Negro Saints carry on revival meetings at corners, and there is more than a hint of the Spanish promenade as men gather along the walks, their eyes following the ladies as they pass. Open-front cafes, coffee houses, and bars, nearly all erupting music, invite patrons. Many of these places have rear swinging doors labeled Club in Rear, and embellished with an ace of clubs or a pair of dice.¹⁶

Passages such as these, which created clear visual images, imparted the flavor of community life in Florida in the 1930s.

Florida profiled towns that tourists rarely entered and that even few Floridians saw the need to visit. Life in Kissimmee, a rugged pioneer cow town located in central Florida's plains area, stepped back into the nineteenth century. The guide noted that little had changed there since the 1870s when Frederick Remington found the place "lawless and forlorn." In the 1930s farm wives still boiled the family wash in large, blackened kettles and bleached cotton flour sacks from which they made dresses and house linens. On Saturday night "high-booted

¹⁶ Florida, 196, quote, 195-205. Stetson Kennedy, who spent a great deal of time in the city and knew its life and lore well, contributed much of the material on Key West.

cowhands" came to town to shop and look at the store's display of "saddles, spurs, 16-foot cow whips and broad-brimmed hats." They drank at bars that had been built in Kissimmee about 1870 so that these "horsemen could take a drink without dismounting."¹⁷

Life was similar in La Belle, another primitive farming town located in central Florida's interior. In this "last stronghold of the native Floridian," townspeople lived in "primitive, one-story cabins with palm thatched roofs . . . perched high on stilts to provide dry quarters in the rainy season." As in Kissimmee, little had changed here since the nineteenth century, despite the fact that the town had been linked recently with a highway to the "gay resorts on both coasts."

Kerosene lamps light these houses, and home-cured hides are sometimes used as bed 'kivers.' Often ragged tow-headed children are seen following a stoop-shouldered mother riding her youngest on her hip; grannies sit in the shade smoking pipes or dipping snuff, watching the road from under their sun bonnets.¹⁸

The Guide's writers included a description of every town along the tour route no matter how small and insignificant it seemed to the passing motorist. Sometimes, small hamlets proved more fascinating than

¹⁷ Florida, 364-65.

¹⁸ Florida, 480.

their larger neighbors. Masaryktown, a small Czechoslovakian settlement of but fifty inhabitants resembled a nineteenth century European village. The inhabitants spoke their native language and employed the farming methods of the mother country, using windmills to pump their water. The entire village turned out in native costumes for festivals, drank native wines, and danced to Bohemian music.¹⁹

Besides describing the character of each Florida town, the state guides detailed their economic life, as well. Indeed, the most insightful description of the state's economy was found in the tour section under the town commentaries. From the vantage point of the community, Florida's economic life took on a new importance. First person interviews and other novel sources provided the lively documentation that the essay section lacked. The dull commentary on citrus production in the agriculture essay paled in comparison to the short, concise account for the small town of Lake Alfred. The town history included several paragraphs on citrus production. From the guide, the traveler learned how long it took for an orchard to become productive, which fruit varieties flourished best in central Florida, and how much acreage was needed to make an orchard productive. John C.

¹⁹ Florida, 391.

Hamilton, the fastest citrus picker in Maitland, described the harvest: "Oranges are not actually picked, but cut with medium-sized curved clippers," he explained. Then the "oranges fall into bags strapped around the cutter's shoulders." In the field, he pointed out, "Negroes and whites generally work in separate groups," but both received the same wages, six cents a box.²⁰

Like citrus cultivation, cane production was an important economic enterprise in many Florida towns. The guide included a graphic description of its cultivation and harvesting under the town history of Belle Glade:

The first step in the preparation of sugar-cane fields is provision for adequate drainage and water control. Ditches, laterals, and subsidiary canals are dug; pumps are installed to force the flow into the main arterial canals; . . . soil is aerated by rotary plowing . . . Seed is not used; long segments of cane are planted, and out of each node, or eye, a 'stool' sprouts. In 12 months the crop is ready for harvest. Cut by hand, topped, and stripped, the cane is loaded in wagons and conveyed to railroads cars for transportation to the mills.²¹

²⁰ Florida, 513-14; "Citrus Industry, Personal Interview: John C. Hamilton, (Colored) Maitland, Florida," June, 22, 1938, Citrus Industry Folder, Trade Jargon, Central Files, Florida, WPA, R. G. 69. It is unusual to find a copy of the interviews used in the guide. This one had been saved to be in an extended study of trade jargon in Florida's citrus industry.

²¹ Florida, 476-77.

Peanut cultivation was another economic mainstay to small towns such as Chiefland, an important agricultural shipping point. Recounting the town's history, the guide documented the methods small farmers used to plant, cultivate, and harvest the crop. Again, on-sight observation and first-person interviews yielded rich detail. The peanut, or goober, "is planted about 2 inches deep and lightly covered. When ready for harvest, it is dug up by workers, usually Negroes, who use a 3-pronged potato hoe. On larger plantations a digging machine, a plow-like contraption drawn by mules, is used." The peanuts were roasted, shelled, and packed, or sold raw in 150 pound sacks.²²

Wholesale produce markets provided a ready outlet for both small farmers and large growers. The essay on Tampa's history includes a graphic description of the Tampa Wholesale Produce Market, one of the state's largest. Using a technique known as "word pictures," the guide writers imparted a feeling of being there:

Traders from northern states bring in apples, grapes, peaches, pecans, and cheese, and return with truckloads of Florida fruit. The clamor and tumult of buyers and sellers blend with music and sound from near-by jooks, patronized by truck drivers and growers. The highway here is a popular gathering place for hitch-hikers seeking rides on north bound trucks.²³

²² Florida, 419,.

²³ Florida, 519-20.

The short commentaries describing Florida's small towns often indicated broad economic changes that were taking place in the 1930s. For example, in Fernandina, a sleepy coastal town on the Atlantic, shrimping had developed into an important local industry which rivaled the older lumber industry in economic importance. New designs for nets and high-powered diesel craft had made shrimping more profitable.²⁴

A favored position on the state's transportation network proved a boon to many of Florida's small towns such as Lakeland. As the guide indicated, "the mid-State position of the city early made it an important railroad center. Many railroad employees bought houses and settled here." The town's fortunes experienced a temporary setback with the removal of the railroad yards in 1926-27, but the popularization of automobile travel and Lakeland's strategic location on the state's highway route restored its fortunes one again.²⁵

With the coming of the railroad, Cedar Key, a small fishing village off Florida's northwest coast, grew into a prosperous tourist resort. However, in 1884 the completion of a railroad further south into Tampa

²⁴ Florida, 372-375.

²⁵ Florida, quote, 516, 515-16.

"brought an end to Cedar Key's prosperity. No longer an important port on the southern terminus of the state's railway system, it dwindled rapidly in population."²⁶

Sudden twists of misfortune, such as the collapse of the Florida Boom in 1926, turned boom towns into ghost towns, leaving lofty ten-story hotels and office buildings in three-story towns. One of these unfinished hotels just outside Miami, "left stranded in grand and startling isolation," became a poultry ranch, where "thousands of chickens perched in the lofty guest chambers."²⁷

In keeping with the objective of the American Guide Series to describe "All towns and countryside, attractive and unattractive," Florida documented the scenery and vistas along the state's 6,000 miles of paved roads. This commentary revealed a great deal about the culture of the times. Roadside billboards, an important part of the highway scene in the thirties, did more than advertise an area's offerings. Billboards were a form of cultural iconography which reflected subtle differences between northern and southern regions of the state. The Florida guide pointed out that in the "staid plantation territory of northern Florida, placards on gate posts chastely

²⁶ Florida, 383-84, 170-171.

²⁷ Florida, 170-1.

admit, 'Guests Accepted,' and tourist camps offer 'Cabins for Travelers Only.'" Yet, hotel advertisements in the more frivolous and licentious southern part of the state, which catered primarily to the tourist, seldom posted these types of signs.²⁸

In agricultural and fundamentalist northern Florida, the tourists frequently saw signs advertising "Mules for Sale," and "crudely daubed warnings announcing, "Jesus is coming" and warning the traveller to "Prepare to meet thy God." By contrast, the tourist routes in southern Florida had a carnival atmosphere and "more and more resemble[d] midways." Signs advertised 'Whiskey,' and 'dance and dine.' There were few religious warnings. Roadside stands lining the route offered carved coconuts, polished conch shells, marine birds, . . . cypress' knees,' pottery . . . and an endless assortment of other native and imported handicraft[s]."²⁹

As automobile travel and tourism increased in Florida during the 1930s, highway billboards took on new economic importance. The guide described the variety of visual and mechanical methods used on these signs to get the tourists' attention:

²⁸ Florida, 5, 299.

²⁹ Ibid.

There are signs that turn like windmills;
startling signs that resembled crashed
airplanes; signs with glass lettering which
blaze forth at night when automobile
headlight beams strike them; flashing neon
signs; signs painted with professional touch;
signs crudely lettered and misspelled³⁰

The mile-by-mile treatment which the state guides offered highlighted the changes taking place along the state's highways. The automobile, rapidly becoming the most popular form of tourist travel, transformed the state's highway vistas. For example, as travelers approached Jacksonville, the gateway to southern Florida's tourist centers, they saw "the increasing number of filling stations, tourist camps" and hitchhikers "of all ages and both sexes, with baggage and without, [standing] along the road, hoping to thumb a lift south in fall and winter, or a ride north in spring."³¹

Florida also indicated that little change was taking place in the agricultural interior, far from the tourist meccas and routes. Along a rural stretch between Waldo and Campville, guide writers noted motorists could see:

Negro women and children, with crude poles,
fish for perch and bream in small ponds and
in trickling roadside streams so narrow that
they can be stepped across. In clearings are
pine slab cabins surrounded by beds of
collards, cabbages, and corn, all tightly

³⁰ Florida, 297-99.

³¹ Florida, 299.

fenced to keep out wandering hogs and the family mule.³²

As the guide indicated, much of the state in the 1930s remained a primitive wilderness. Along the highway route from Miami to Tampa through the Everglades, the traveler saw on the canal side of the road birds, reptiles and fishes. The "surface of the water is constantly broken by fish snapping at insects; sometimes a minnow bobs up; turtles bask in the sun; occasionally a poisonous cottonmouth moccasin twists across the surface" ³³

One observed the grisly results of mixing contemporary civilization with the primitive wilderness:

On the highway, especially in the early morning after night traffic has taken its toll, lie the mangled corpses of snakes, which in large numbers crawl out of the swamps to sleep on the warm road, and the bodies of raccoons and other small animals crushed when blinded by headlights. These provide breakfasts for flocks of yellow-headed red-checked buzzards which look like turkeys from a distance and remain on the road until a car is almost on them.³⁴

Seen from the vantage point of the community, the lives of great men became quite ordinary and the deeds of ordinary Americans quite extraordinary. The heroes of the state guides were common men, good neighbors, or great

³² Florida, 533.

³³ Florida, 407.

³⁴ Ibid.

entertainers. "Whatever America's failure to practice democracy in life," noted William Stott, "the America of the Guide Series has a phenomenal democracy of retrospection." Anyone who had a remarkable influence, either positively or negatively, on the fate of the community appeared in the guide.³⁵

The town history of Daytona Beach recounted the story of a penniless Henry Ford, who at the turn of the century had entered a race on the famous beach roadway there. At the time, Ford was "perfecting his car which he drove himself." In a race with "John Jacob Astor, William K. Vanderbilt, Henry M. Flagler, Rollin White and other car racing enthusiasts," Ford's car broke down and he was forced to "withdraw . . . owing to lack of funds for necessary repairs." The town history mentioned nothing about Ford's later triumphs.³⁶

Thomas Edison was mentioned as a civic-minded resident of Ft. Myers and not as the inventor of the incandescent light. Edison offered to supply the town with free street lights, but the city fathers refused his

³⁵ Stott, Documentary Expression, 110-114.

³⁶ Florida, 180.

proposal because they feared that "the lights might keep the cattle awake."³⁷

The guide played down John D. Rockefeller's past as "a ruthless exponent of Big Business," stressing instead his later life in Ormond Beach. To local residents he was "known merely as 'Neighbor John,' interested in local enterprises and institutions." The town history noted that until his ninth decade he could be seen on local golf courses:

He was usually accompanied by a servant with an umbrella to protect him from the sun. When younger, he had bicycled from stroke to stroke, followed by two valets, one with milk and crackers, the other with his golf clubs and a blanket to be spread on the ground when he wished to rest. For golf, as for church and for ordinary wear, he wore a special wig. He usually wore a vest of Japanese paper, to keep out the wind, and a straw hat, held securely in place by a large shawl-like handkerchief tied under his chin.³⁸

Local, unsung heroes and villians appeared often in the town histories. Many of these profiles, based upon legend rather than fact, were included because they were important to the community. If local residents still recounted a tale, the guide writers included it. In the town descriptions history and legend coexisted. For example, the residents of Brooksville still remembered the

³⁷ Florida, 399.

³⁸ Florida, 341-42.

tale of a coach driver who entertained his passengers on the long trip from Gainesville to Tampa in the 1870s with his uncanny ability to spit through the front wheel of the coach without touching a spoke. Old-timers recalled that he also "enlivened the trip by gopher (turtle) grabbing, explaining that he would "leap from his seat, pick up a turtle from the road, and toss it on the baggage rack without halting his team." ³⁹

The legend of Gasparilla, the pirate, fascinated the residents of Key West, who believed that his treasure still lay buried in the area. Using Gasparilla's diary, accounts from his victims recorded in the American state papers, the personal files of his brother-in-law, and interviews with other people who knew those acquainted with Gasparilla, the guide writers reconstructed the pirate's lively past. Gasparilla, once a Spanish gentleman named Jose Gaspar, had been "a man of polished manners, . . . faultless attire, and well read in the classics." For unknown reasons, Gaspar had stolen a ship from the Spanish navy and embarked upon a life of piracy. Changing his name to Gasparilla, he preyed upon shipping off the Florida coast. Tales abounded of his treachery, fearlessness, and ruthlessness. Legend held that he had beheaded a Spanish princess who "spurned his advances."

³⁹ Florida, 390.

After several decades of piracy, "Gasparilla gave chase to what appeared to be a large British merchantman."

However, the vessel turned out to be a disguised American warship. Knowing he had been outsmarted, Gasparilla leaped into the sea and thus ended his life.⁴⁰

In what it included and excluded, the Florida guide revealed the popular biases and ethnic stereotyping typical of the times. Florida was foremost a tourist book. In keeping with the "Palm Tree and Bathing Beauty" image which the state wished to project, the guide glossed over or deleted entirely the state's less positive features. The book, for example, made little mention of the frequency and destruction of Florida hurricanes.

Three major hurricanes had ripped through the state between 1926 and 1935. Yet the guide chose, for the most part, to gloss over the loss of life and property damage these hurricanes caused. The "Natural Setting and Conservation" essay coyly explained to tourists:

Florida and other South Atlantic States lie in the general path of tropical hurricanes, arising mostly in the Caribbean Sea in the fall of the year; but many of these storms blow themselves out before reaching land, or they come ashore with their destructive forces greatly spent.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Florida, 396-97.

⁴¹ Florida, 13.

The "History" essay mentioned the hurricanes of the 1926, 1928, and 1935, but dismissed their casualties and damage in a few sentences. The town history of Key West made no reference to the 435 workers who lost their lives in the hurricane of 1935 while working on the Overseas Highway. One eye-stopping sentence under the town history of Belle Glade described the impact of the hurricane of 1928 on the town. "Belle Glade was hastily built in 1925 and virtually wiped out by the hurricane three years later in which hundreds of its citizens perished."³⁶

The longest guide account dealing with hurricanes emphasized the how Floridan's prepared for a storm:

Radio programs are interrupted by announcements from the weather bureau. . . . If the hurricane shows no signs of shifting its course or diminishing in volume, police and welfare agencies prepare for action. Trucks and busses are sent to evacuate people in outlying sections Merchants remove signs and board up shop windows. Home owners brace their weaker trees, trim off limbs that might fall on roofs. Chimneys are capped and window and door crevices plugged, for torrential rain does more damage than the wind. Bathtubs and all available receptacles are filled with water for drinking purposes oil lamps and stoves are brought out and filled; stores sell candles by the dozens.³⁷

³⁶ Florida, 61-62, 195-200, 474.

³⁷ Florida, 311.

The contradictory treatment of hurricanes in Florida reflected the piecemeal editing that the guides received. Both in the state and Washington offices, each essay and guide section was edited separately. As Katherine Kellock conceded, "the staffs often had no conception of what they were building until the last piece was in place." Final polishing revealed redundancy and contradiction, such as those sections dealing with hurricanes, only after it was too late. "Unlike Proust and Flaubert," noted Kellock, "the WPA writers have had to show results quickly if they were to continue to eat."³⁸

The Florida guide also glossed over the state's harsh penal system. Tourists motoring through the state in the 1930s frequently saw gangs of convicts laboring on the state's highways and secondary roads. Many of these prisoners were blacks who had been locked up for minor offenses, such as vagrancy. A ninety-day term meant hard labor on the state roads. Rather than call attention to the convicts' plight, the guide turned the visitor's attention to their song. Motorists were told that they could "catch snatches of their work chants sung with a characteristic ugh! on the downswing of a sledge or ax or

³⁸ Florida, 13-14, 200, 311, 61-62, 125, 238, 474, 477, 330. Many of these statements about hurricanes in the guide clearly contradict one other; Kellock, "The WPA Writers," 475.

the heave of a shovel." The guide reprinted only the first stanza of the frequently sung chant, "Louise," making no reference to the stanzas which were considered pornographic in the 1930s:

Lou-u-ise--UGH!--sweetest gal I know---UGH!
 She made me walk from Chi--ca-go--UGH!
 To the Gulf--UGH!--of Mexico--UGH!

If I had a million dollars,
 And she asked me for a dime,
 I'd give her all my money,
 Every dog-gone time.

I had a dozen women,
 I had 'em big and small,
 but when I met this Mama,
 Right then I quit 'em all!

Somebody's been a-fishin,
 Where I fished before;
 If I can ever catch 'em
 They ain't gonna fish no more!³⁹

Other references to the state prison system were carefully sanitized. A description of the state prison at Stark noted: "On entering its walls, each male prisoner serves 90 days at hard labor in a field squad during which time he is not allowed to speak to anyone in working hours." The final version of Florida deleted the reference in the proofing galleys that mentioned the harsh punishment accorded prisoners who approached the new

³⁹ Stetson Kennedy, "The Federal Writers' Project I Knew," paper presented at the symposium, "In the Nick of Time," February 5, 1989, Miami, Florida. Florida, 415. This song that convicts and others sang frequently was recorded by the Library of Congress' Folksong recording expedition in 1939.

inmate. The unsanitized version noted that "guards are under instruction to shoot any prisoner approaching within 30 feet of him."⁴⁰

In the same fashion, the state book glossed over Florida's migratory labor problem. The opening essay of the guide told the first-time visitor that Florida was

at once a pageant of extravagance and a land of pastoral simplicity, a flood-lighted stage of frivolity and a behind-the-scenes struggle for existence. . . . For the Palm Beach patron it is a wintertime Newport made up of the same society, servants, and pastimes. For migratory agricultural labor it means several months of winter employment in the open under pleasant skies.⁴¹

The guide added that these transients "move in from the adjoining states and from the North, and many of them accept low wages for the sake of living temporarily in a pleasant climate." Marion Post Wolcott, who traveled through Florida in 1939 working as a photographer for the historical section of the Farm Security Administration, reported a different side of migrant life. Her mission was to document the squalor, low wages, and poverty of these migrants as they followed the harvesting of Florida's citrus and vegetable crops. In a letter to her boss, Roy Stryker, she detailed the horrible working

⁴⁰ Florida, 379. The deleted phrase may be found in the final proofing galley, Special Collections, P. K. Yonge Library, University of Florida.

⁴¹ Florida, 4.

conditions in the packing houses, where "mostly women worked until two and three a.m. during the height of the harvest." She detailed the migrants' "lousy existence," sporadic work schedules, and their "hanging around" and "messaging around gambling" while waiting for the beans and other crops to be harvested. She concluded that in Homestead, Florida, and in the citrus area, "conditions are awful at all times." Although she had grown accustomed to the most appalling conditions in the Deep South, after seeing migrant conditions in Florida, Post wrote, "I continue to be startled and shocked and amazed, no matter what I've expected."⁴²

The Florida guide made only one realistic reference to the migrant problem. In the tour section, the town history of Pahokee included an excerpt gleaned from Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. The passage described the migrants' arrival at the beginning of the winter vegetable harvest season in southern Florida:

Day by day now the hordes of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and

⁴² Florida, 4; Marion Post to Roy Stryker, January, n.d., 1939, Series I, Correspondence Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972 (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1982) see also, David G. Horvath, Guide to the Microfilm Edition Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-72 (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1982); The photographs of Florida's migrant camps may be seen in the microfiche edition, "America, 1936-1946": The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration and the Office of War Information," (Cambridge, England: Chadwyck-Healy, Ltd., 1981).

sore feet from walking They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north, and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired-looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers. . . . Skillets, beds, patched-up bare inner tubes, all hanging and dangling from the ancient cars on the outside, and hopeful humanity, herded and hovering on the inside, hurrying on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor.⁴³

There was a rich collection of New Deal Farm Security Administration photographs detailing the migrant's existence from which the guide's editors might have selected illustrations. Instead they chose only a few prosaic ones which pictured migrant families with noble or smiling faces or women cleaning their neat, modest cabins. Photographs of child labor, migrants' dejected faces, filthy living conditions, and inadequate housing were deliberately excluded.⁴⁴

The Florida guide glossed over other labor problems including the appalling conditions found in Florida's turpentine industry. In the 1930s, an estimated 14,000 workers, most of whom were African-Americans, labored as turpentine chippers deep in Florida's isolated pine woods.

⁴³ Florida, 475-6; Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1937), 125.

⁴⁴ Florida, see the photographs included between pages 422-23: a "Migratory Worker's Family," a "Migratory Workers' Camp, Near Belle Glade," and a "Street Scene, Belle Glade."

Working far from the nearest highway or town, the turpentiners had to buy their food and supplies at the company store, at grossly inflated prices. At the end of the year, their debt at the company store almost always exceeded their wages. In order to survive, the workers continued buying on credit, perpetuating their indebtedness. If turpentiners who were in debt tried to leave without paying their bill at the company store, they were hunted down and returned to the camps at gunpoint. The guide in one dry sentence alluded to this exploitative system, which kept thousands of Florida turpentine workers in virtual bondage: "The operator advances cash to his white and Negro workers throughout the season, deducting these loans at the end of the year."⁴⁵

Stetson Kennedy gathered information on peonage and other labor abuses in the turpentine industry as he collected folk songs. While the turpentiners shared their stories, a sentry was posted to watch out for the

⁴⁵ Florida, 377-78; Pete Daniel, In the Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 184-85, 187; Daniel documents case after case of peonage in the Florida turpentine industry; Stetson Kennedy Interview, Jan. 6, 1989; Daniel mentioned Kennedy's testimony before the United Nations Forced Labor Committee in Geneva, Switzerland, reported in the New York Times, Nov. 8, 1952, 3; Peonage, strongly entrenched in Florida in the 1930s, lingered for two more decades. As late as the 1940s, Reverend Leroy Hacker, a Florida native, testified that "peonage still pervaded the turpentine areas of his home state."

"boss." Upon hearing, "Here come de boss" from the African-American sentry, the worker immediately stopped talking and broke into song. Kennedy carefully stored his notes. If he had published them, he would have lost his job.⁴⁶

The guide reported only the frivolous, or sometimes violent side of the turpentiners' lives:

On Saturday nights many Negroes congregate in jooks. . . to sing and dance. Some of the merry makers prefer to gamble; others attend to meet women from other camps. Occasionally the music is broken by the crack of a pistol; at the other times differences are settled with knives, notwithstanding signs reading, No Guns or Knives Aloud.⁴⁷

The sparse treatment accorded the African-American in Florida remained the most glaring example of the sanitization of the state guide. Despite a wealth of authoritative, ground-breaking research gathered by the African-American unit, Florida made only token mention of the African-American experience. Corse deleted the proposed "Racial Elements" essay, putting some of the ethnic material in the folklore essay, and sprinkling the rest through the tour and city sections. The History

⁴⁶ Stetson Kennedy Interview, January 6, 1989. Daniel also mentions Kennedy's testimony before the United Nations Forced Labor Committee in Geneva, Switzerland, reported in the New York Times Nov. 8, 1952, 3.

⁴⁷ Florida, 356.

essay, written in large part by Carita Corse, ignored the slaves' experience entirely. It did not deal with major themes in Florida history such as the freeing of the slaves, their adaptation to freedom, or their gradual disenfranchisement. No mention was made of the Ku Klux Klan tactics and other terrorist groups which intimidated African-Americans.⁴⁸

At Washington's insistence, the Florida project included a brief paragraph describing the African-American population in each city history. These token entries ranged from one to several superficial sentences. The paragraph in Jacksonville's history was the most extensive in the guide, but it too fell miserably short:

Although the majority of local Negroes, 30 per cent of the total population, are engaged in domestic service or supply the unskilled labor market, others operate businesses that include restaurants, theaters, funeral establishments, and three insurance companies, one with assets of a million dollars. Their many churches range from the store-front type, with a few dozen worshipers, to a substantial edifice with a congregation of nearly 2,000. The Stanton High School has an average enrollment of 1,500 Negroes and the Edward Waters College for Negroes provides advanced educational facilities. Brewster Hospital serves the city's Negro population.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Florida, 414, 48-59;

⁴⁹ Florida, 185.

A careful reading of the Florida book disclosed the racial climate and attitudes of the 1930s. For example, the seven-page Palm Beach description included a one sentence paragraph, "Palm Beach has no Negro settlement, and Negroes are not allowed on the streets after dark unless actively employed in the city." Elsewhere in the guide, African-Americans appeared as happy-go-lucky darkies. Under the description of Jacksonville's municipal docks and terminals, the guide noted, "The place hums with the cheerful movements and shouts of scores of Negro stevedores."⁵⁰

In describing El Destino Plantation in the tour section, Florida reported that "Relations between master and slaves were friendly." This characterization directly contradicted the testimony of countless ex-slaves interviewed by project workers in Florida. These former bondsmen, many of whom had lived in the area of El Destino Plantation in northern Florida, for the most part described cruelty, exploitation, and deprivation.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Florida, 229, 189.

⁵¹ Florida, 59, 103, 181, 59, 414, 192, 67, 57; The most controversial material on the intimidation of the blacks by the KKK is found under the Ocoee riot, 457; Chapter five discusses the work of African-Americans working for the FWP in Florida and their unpublished manuscripts.

The Florida guidebook stands today as a revealing resource on Florida life in the 1930s. Its deletions and sanitized presentation reveal the biases and stereotypes of the times. The guide presents a wealth of authoritative data which documented Florida life as it was being lived by a majority of the state's people.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN

In late November, 1935, Henry Alsberg and George Cronyn attended a banquet at Howard University. There they discussed with fifteen black leaders and intellectuals plans to organize a unit for black writers to write a chapter entitled "Negro Culture in America" for the American Guide Series. Sterling Brown and several other Howard professors, who attended the banquet and were interested in the program, offered to advise and assist the writers. National Youth Administration students already working at Howard would help them with the research. These plans for the Howard unit of black writers never materialized but Sterling Brown became national Negro Affairs Editor in the national Federal Writers' Project office in early 1936. Under intense pressure from black leaders, Brown consented to balance his duties as an English professor at Howard with his part-time editorial responsibilities in the central office. He planned a national study tentatively titled, "The Portrait of the Negro as an American," which would

chronicle the African-America experience as a broad part of American history.¹

Although Brown worked in the national office to insure inclusion of African-American history in the state guides and other Federal Writers' Project publications, few state programs sponsored African-American units. Black leaders complained of the paucity of African-Americans on FWP payrolls. In Florida, Mary McCleod Bethune, the founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, worked behind the scenes to see that blacks in her state received their fair share of New Deal relief positions. By 1935, when the arts projects got underway in the states, Mrs. Bethune had become an influential advisor in the Roosevelt administration. She was a personal friend of Eleanor Roosevelt and a driving force in Roosevelt's informal "black cabinet." Her ideas counted and the President listened carefully to what this unusual black woman had to say. At a National Youth Administration advisory meeting at the White House in 1935, Mrs. Bethune met President Roosevelt for the first time. Her moving description of the tremendous difference NYA checks made in the lives of black youth brought tears

¹ Cronyn to Baker, "Negro Cultural Project of American Guide," November 30, 1935, Files of George Cronyn, FWP, R.G. 69; McKinzie, "Writers," 136-42, 149; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 210-11, 258-59, 262-63; Penkower, The Federal Writers Project, 140-47.

to the President's eyes. She urged Roosevelt's continued support for the African-American cause:

Now I speak, Mr. President, not as Mrs. Bethune but as the voice of fourteen million Americans who seek to achieve full citizenship. We have been taking the crumbs for a long time. We have been eating the feet and head of the chicken long enough. The time has come when we want some white meat. . . . The further an individual is down, the more chance he may have to come up. But the Negro cannot find his way to the opportunities that are opening unless he has someone to guide him.²

Visibly moved, Roosevelt thanked her "for the informal knowledge you have placed at our disposal in these important days of beginnings in a new field" and assured his support to "contribute something to help make a better life for your people."³

When the Writers' Project began in Florida in October, 1935, white-collar blacks applied for jobs only to be told "it is too late to receive the aid." Aware of their plight, Mrs. Bethune pressured the New Deal to do more for Florida's unemployed black college instructors and newspaper reporters thrown out of work through no fault of their own. Edward Rodriques, assistant director

² Rackham Holt, Mary McCleod Bethune: A Biography (Garden City, Doubleday, 1964), 193.

³ Ibid.

of the Florida NYA and special advisor on African-American affairs, appealed directly to Henry Alsberg:

I am asking that you in your wisdom and knowledge of the situation . . . put forth every effort to see that our people receive their portion of such projects. We have an enormous amount of native and skilled talent in the state along these lines and four colleges through which some of these projects might be conducted adequately.⁴

Alsberg assured Rodrigues, "I shall do everything to see that there is no discrimination whatsoever." However, Alsberg had no power over state WPA organizations, which controlled the hiring of personnel for the state Writers' Project organizations and discriminated freely against white-collar blacks. By December, 1935, Florida's quota for the Writers' Project had been filled, yet not one African-American had been hired. Katherine Kellock observed black Ph.D.'s digging ditches and urged that something more be done to help Florida's white-collar blacks. As she summed up the situation, "There is a whole world within a world in each state. One cannot leave out whole sections of the population in making up a national guide."⁵

⁴ Edward Rodrigues to Henry Alsberg, Oct. 7, 1935, Admin. Corresp., Fl., WPA, R. G. 69.

⁵ Alsberg to Edward Rodrigues, Oct. 14, 1935, Admin. Corresp. Fl., FWP, R. G. 69.; Katherine Kellock to Henry Alsberg, Jan. 23, 26, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R.G. 69.

White-collar blacks had been shut out of the Writers' Projects in other states as well. In Louisiana, Lyle Saxon, one of the most open-minded FWP directors, had only one black writer on his staff. Although he sympathized with qualified African-American writers who wanted FWP jobs, he bemoaned the fact he could do little without an increase in the state's quota. He suggested that Alsberg create separate black units to insure equal employment and guard against discrimination. African-American units could contribute research for state guides and write separate histories of the African-American experience in each state.⁶

Responding to these diverse pressures and desiring to help unemployed white-collar blacks, the New Deal appropriated extra funds to create "Negro units" in Louisiana, Florida, and Virginia. In late February, 1936, the Florida Writers' Project received a \$2,000 appropriation and a quota increase to set up a unit for black writers. Mary Bethune served as volunteer supervisor and placed the library of Bethune-Cookman College at their disposal. Beginning officially on March 5, 1936, the Florida black unit included Martin

⁶ Ronnie Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers Project in Louisiana," (Ph. D. diss., Louisiana State Univ., 1974), 86-97.

Richardson, J. M. Johnson, Alfred Farrell, Wilson Rice, Rebecca Baker, Viola Muse, Rachel Austin, Pearl Randolph, and Grace Thompson. In keeping with the rigid Jim Crow system of the South in the 1930s, black writers unit was housed in separate facilities in the Clara White Mission in the black section of Jacksonville. Black and white writers rarely came in contact with each other. "About all we ever saw of them," Stetson Kennedy remembered, "was twice a month they sent over a runner to get their checks."⁷

In late January, a similar unit had been set up in Louisiana under the experienced supervision of Lawrence Reddick, a young history professor at Dillard University in New Orleans. Reddick, who had participated in a FERA project to record testimony of ex-slaves was aware of contributions that Louisiana's fifteen black writers could make in African-American history. Using the research

⁷ Alsberg to Corse, Feb. 20, 1936; Corse to Alsberg, Mar. 5, 1936, Admin. Corresp., Florida, WPA, R.G. 69. The names of the members of the Florida black unit can be derived only from the raw manuscripts that they produced during their first year. There is very little official correspondence on their activities or work. See also, Gary R. Mormino, "Florida Slave Narratives," The Florida Historical Quarterly (April, 1988), 403, 399-419; Stetson Kennedy Interview, Jan. 6, 1989.

facilities at Dillard, where five of the unit members were based, work began on "The Negro in Louisiana."⁸

In November, 1936, a third unit was set up in Virginia where fifteen African-American writers began working in a special unit based at the Hampton Institute which sponsored and housed the group. Roscoe E. Lewis, a chemistry professor at the Institute, served as its director. Lewis' intense interest in African-American history and his capable leadership produced the FWP's only major black history publication. Eudora Ramsey Richardson, the director of the Virginia Writers' Project, contributed to the black unit's efforts by handling the final editing of The Negro in Virginia. She noted that in order to complete the editing of the manuscript, "I just went away, took all the material with me, went down to a cottage, shut the door, and stayed down there two weeks without even telephone and rewrote the material." Now regarded as a classic, The Negro in Virginia served as an example of what African-American writers in other states might have accomplished.⁹

⁸ Clayton, "The Federal Writers' Project" 86-97; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 140-47.

⁹ Charles Perdue, Jr., Thomas Barden, Robert Phillips, eds. Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), xi-xiv. Their introduction provides an insightful account of the history and work of the Virginia Negro Unit.

In most other southern states, the racial biases of provincial state directors and the lack of strong leadership by the black community precluded establishment of viable black units. In Alabama, where the renowned Tuskegee Institute was located, FWP director Mary Miles claimed "no eligible Negroes could be found in the state." She insisted that "members of the race who are fortunate enough to have Institute training are not on relief" and believed it was "unwise to give a Negro this job" Only after the national office applied intense pressure did she manage to find one suitable black worker.¹⁰

The North Carolina FWP did not hire black workers, explaining that "the resources of the Writers' Project have not permitted setting up separate establishments, which would be required for such employment." When the Writers' Project began in South Carolina, the director hired six black workers but terminated all of them after the first major quota reduction in 1936. The Tennessee project reported "no Negroes being employed on the Writers' Project" ¹¹

¹⁰ Office on Negro Affairs to Mr. Couch, "Memorandum," October 19, 1938, p. 1, Box 200, WPA, R. G. 69; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 140-44; McKinzie, "Writers," 140-2.

¹¹ Ibid.

The brief four-year history of the Florida Writers' Project demonstrated the type of work that black federal writers accomplished and many of the types of problems that they encountered. The Florida unit began with ten writers, but by the end of the first year, quota reductions reduced the number to eight. More often the unit employed only three or four writers. Despite its small staff, the black writers unit amassed an impressive body of research and writing that in most instances surpassed the quantity and quality of the white writers. Because so positions were opened to blacks, a black writer demonstrated better than average acumen and ability in research and writing. Although biographical information on the black Florida writers is almost non-existent, internal evidence points to the fact most of the male writers were former newspapermen. Alfred Farrell, a magnum cum laude graduate of Lincoln University, was an English major and former college instructor.¹²

Segregated facilities in the South in the 1930s meant black writers could not enter most of the state's libraries and county records offices. If they were allowed to use library facilities, they most often worked in rooms separate from white patrons. Often white

¹² Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; Alfred Farrell to FWP, Jan. 8, 1936, Box 1107, WPA, R.G. 69.

librarians refused to help black writers. One writer on the Dillard project in New Orleans recalled, "he had to know the holding of the libraries because librarians would provide only the materials specifically requested."¹³

In Florida, the black writers could use only the libraries of the black colleges, Florida A & M College in Tallahassee, the Edward Waters College in Jacksonville, and the Bethune-Cookman library in Daytona Beach. Although adequate, these libraries did not have the resources that the better equipped white libraries possessed. For this reason, the black writers relied heavily on first-person interviews.¹⁴

During the first year the black writers unit operated, the writers compiled a history of the African-American experience in each Florida city. Like their white counterparts, the black writers interviewed long-time residents and local leaders. Using these first-person interviews, Martin Richardson and J. M. Johnson gathered a great deal of unusual information on black history and life in Jacksonville and Fernandina. Eartha

¹³ Ronnie W. Clayton, "The Federal Writers' Project for Blacks in Louisiana," Louisiana History (Fall, 1978), 330, 327-335.

¹⁴ Katherine Kellock to Henry Alsberg, Jan. 26, 1936, Field Reports, Florida, FWP, R. G. 69; Frances Reed to Carita Corse, Feb. 5, 1936, Ed. Corresp, Misc. File, 1935-1939, FWP, R.G. 69.

White, a well-know civic leader in Jacksonville whose mother had been a slave on Amelia Island, told Johnson about "the old slave market, on Forsyth Street about 100 feet east of Ocean," where on a "little crude platform were auctioned off at regular intervals slaves from all over the area." White remembered the "white-haired old auctioneer, for years a resident of nearby Mandarin," and explained how he auctioned slaves. She described how the old slave auctioneer would "hold the slaves on the platform with him, open wide their eyelids to show that their eyes were good, show their tongues, punch the chest and ribs to show that they were solid and wind up his narrative of their qualities in the case of a female with and she's a good breeder too." Personal interviews provided background information for biographical profiles of "Prominent Post-War Negroes," the history of African-American businesses, and the development of black social life.¹⁵

¹⁵ FWP. Florida, "Negro History in Florida," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville), 45-76, quote 48. This manuscript indicates not only who worked on this early history, but when each town history was completed. The first twenty-six pages of the manuscript, written by Martin Richardson, summarize the early ex-slave interviews done in the state in 1936 as "Slave Days in Florida. The remainder of the manuscript consists of unedited histories of Florida's major cities and ethnic studies of Pensacola, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine.

While researching the African-American history of Tampa, Viola Muse interviewed several ex-slaves and noted that "interesting tales of the days of slavery may be had for the asking from some of Tampa's oldest Negro citizens." Many of these older informants, like Evelyn Beasley, still lived near the vicinity of their enslavement and talked freely with their black interviewers about their experiences as bondsmen. Beasley spoke of her mother who had been "forced into companionship with a white slave owner." Muse wrote that even though the white slave owner "appeared to have developed a real affection for her that lasted even after the slaves had been freed, she always hated him." When freed, Beasley told Muse that her mother immediately left the plantation and refused to let Evelyn's father help her. Although seven decades had passed, Beasley still would not divulge the name of her white father.¹⁶

Martin Richardson had a similar experience while researching the early history of Pensacola. Four former slaves still living in the area told Richardson of a "reign of brutality and cruelty that in some cases defies description." Richardson noted that "One ex-slave in the telling of it, had to pause many times in his emotional

¹⁶ "The History of the Negro in Florida," 106-7; This ex-slave's testimony does not appear in the more formal Florida ex-slave narrative collection.

recital of things he himself had witnessed." He told of "having seen his mother strung up by her thumbs to a tree limb, stripped to her waist, and beaten until she was unconscious because she refused to answer a summons to appear at the house in her night clothes" Richardson related, "This man said that after witnessing this savage brutality he carried in his mind a firm determination to kill his slave master." He was deterred "only when riotous living and dissipation caused his death while the ex-slave was still in his childhood."¹⁷

While researching the African-American history of Live Oak, Alfred Farrell interviewed a number of former slaves still living in the area. Bolden Hall spoke kindly of his master who permitted his slaves to attend his church and occasionally found an "itinerant colored minister to preach." Charlotte Martin recalled an abusive master who whipped her eldest brother to death for taking part in a secret religious ceremony, while Sarah Ross remembered an owner as cruel and abusive as Charlotte Martin's. "No kind of punishment, " Farrell wrote, "was

¹⁷ "The History of the Negro in Florida," 92, 94-95; Richardson interviewed Thomas Polk, Robert Dugan, Solomon Grimes, and Rev. E. C. Wingate, all former slaves still living in Pensacola.

too cruel or severe to be inflicted upon these souls in bondage."¹⁸

The town histories, begun as a part of the research for "The Negro in Florida," had uncovered a wealth of information on slavery in Florida. Carita Corse remembered the important information an ex-slave living on Ft. George Island had supplied for her book, Key to the Golden Islands (1932) and encouraged the black writers to record these former slaves stories.¹⁹

In March, 1937, Corse forwarded a number of these slave stories to the national office for editorial comment. George Cronyn wrote back immediately, "Mr. Lomax and I found the stories of the ex-slaves fascinating reading. We feel that these will be valuable for future reference and possible publication." Although federal writers in Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Virginia were also conducting interviews with ex-slaves,

¹⁸ FWP. Florida "Slave Interviews," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Univ. of Florida, Gainesville), 197-200, quotes 197, 200. The Virginia project, like Florida's, began collecting interviews with ex-slaves in conjunction with their African-American history research.

¹⁹ For an insightful description of these early ex-slave interviews see Norman Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," American Quarterly, XIX (Fall, 1967), 534-53. Yetman interviewed Carita Corse, who provided valuable information on the beginning of the interviews in Florida.

Lomax falsely credited Corse with initiating the studies. The Florida project had, in fact, demonstrated to the national office the wealth of primary material in Florida and the desirability of implementing a national program.²⁰

In April, 1937, George Cronyn wrote to the directors of the North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Oklahoma projects:

We have received from Florida a remarkably interesting collection of autobiographical stories by ex-slaves. Such documentary records by the survivors of a historic period in America are invaluable, both to the student of history and to creative writers.

If a volume of such importance can be assembled we will endeavor to secure its publication. There undoubtedly is material of this sort to be found in your State by making the proper contact through tasteful interviewers. While it is desirable to give a running story of the life of each subject the color and human interest will be greatly enhanced if it is told largely in the words of the person interviewed. The peculiar idiom is often more expressive than a literary account.²¹

Lomax drafted nineteen interview questions "to get the Negro to thinking and talking about the days of slavery." Ideally, Lomax hoped the ex-slave would begin to talk

²⁰ McKinzie, "Writers," 151-2; Yetman, "Background," 248-50; Gary R. Mormino, "The Florida Slave Narratives," Florida Historical Quarterly, LXVI (April, 1988), 399-419.

²¹ Cronyn to Directors... April 1, 1937, Admin. Corresp, FWP, R.G. 69.

freely, "to say what he pleases without reference to the questions."²²

Lomax suggested that FWP workers "concentrate on one or two of the more interesting subjects, establish a rapport with them, and draw from them over several visits worthwhile recollections" He cautioned the interviewer not to influence the informant and "not to let his own opinion on the subject of slavery become obvious." The stories were to be recorded "as nearly word-for-word as is possible."²³

Working before the common use of tape recorders, federal writers took detailed notes during interviews and rewrote them later. Interviewers often recorded the informants' testimony during several visits. At Lomax's insistence, J. M. Johnson returned to get more information from William Sherman, a slave of Jefferson Davis' nephew,

²² John Lomax, "Questionnaire, Stories From Ex-Slaves," Ex-Slave Studies Folder, Box 200, WPA, R.G. 69. The questionnaire included such queries as: Where were you born? What were the names of your father and mother? Where did they come from? What work did you do in slavery days? What did you eat and how was it cooked? What clothing did you wear . . . ? Tell about your master, mistress, their children.

²³ Henry G. Alsberg, "Memorandum," July 30, 1937, Ex-Slave Studies Folder, Box 200, WPA, R.G. 69; In addition to first-person interviews, state directors were asked also to collect source materials on slave codes, the African and domestic slave trade, advertisements of slave auctions, published offers of rewards for the return of fugitive slaves, and related documents dealing with slavery.

which Lomax believed "increased the interest in his story."²⁴

The national office was also interested in the ex-slaves' experiences after freedom. The interviewers asked questions such as, "Now that slavery is ended what do you think of it?" and "What did you get after freedom?" The resulting accounts of slavery were moving. Margaret Nickerson, crippled by the cruelty of her ex-master, told Rachel Austin her story.

Now ef you jest lis'en, I wanna tell you all
I kin, but I wants to tell it right; wait
now, I don' wanna make no mistakes and I don'
wanna lie on nobody. I ain' mad now and I
know tain' no use to lie, I'm takin' my time.
I done prayed an' got all de malice out o' my
heart and I ain' gonna tell no lie on um.²⁵

Seventy years after he had been freed, Squires Jackson remarked, "no storm lasts forever . . . even the best masters in slavery couldn't be as good as the worst

²⁴ Lomax to Corse, April 6, 1937, Box 191, WPA, R.G. 69; The notes of J. M. Johnson's interview with "Mary Biddis" have survived and may be found in the Ex-Slave Interviews, Folder, Florida Historical Society Library, USF, Tampa.

²⁵ George P Rawick, ed. The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Florida Narratives, XVII (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), 252. Internal evidence points to the fact that the interviewer was either a close friend of the family or a relative.

person in freedom. Oh, God, it is good to be free, and I am thankful."²⁶

The Florida narratives, collected almost exclusively by the black writers, comprised some of the best in the entire FWP collection of over 2,000 interviews. Blacks spoke differently to members of their own race about their lives, their bondage, their disappointments, and their aspirations.²⁷

White writers conducted several interviews with former slaves. Their accounts, which contrasted sharply with those done by the blacks, proved the superiority of black interviewers. Modeste Hargis, a young white woman who conducted a number of interviews among the older blacks of Pensacola, wrote at the beginning of her interview of Richard Lindsay that "Richard Lindsay and his wife are typical old time darkies. They do not talk "nigger" dialect, but express themselves very nicely." The deferential attitude of blacks toward southern whites was obvious. Hargis noted, "They were very polite to me, offering me a chair in the tiny front hall. After I was

²⁶ Ibid., 182.

²⁷ C. Vann Woodward noted that in a few states, particularly Florida, . . . the distinctiveness of the interviews where the interviewers and the interviewed were of the same race is readily apparent." These former bondsmen spoke freely to members of their own race

seated the old man sat down near the table and his wife sat just behind him." ²⁸

Joe Youder told Miss Hargis of cruelty, noting that some masters "wuz mean" but refused to give any details. He added, "All the slaves worked hard, even the chillun, but most of de slaves wuz treated right."²⁹

In addition to the ex-slave narratives and town histories, the black writers in Florida compiled a mass of raw data detailing labor conditions, education, and religion. Intended as background material for chapters in the proposed study, "The Negro in Florida," the field reports contained a mass of raw data which amply described contemporary black life.³⁰

²⁸ Miss Modeste Hargis, "Interview with old Colored Man: Interview with Richard Lindsay," July 6, 1937, Slave Interview Folder, Florida Historical Society Library, USF.

²⁹ Miss Modeste Hargis, "Interview with Old Colored Man: Interview with Richard Lindsay," July 6, 1937, Slave Interview Folder, Florida Historical Society Library, USF; Modeste Hargis, "Interviews with Colored People Who live in West Florida: Joe Youder - 86 years," May 27, 1937, Florida Historical Society Library, USF.

³⁰ FWP. Florida, "Negro Occupations," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Univ. of Florida, Gainesville); FWP. Florida. "The Negro in Florida Cities," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Univ. of Florida, Gainesville) FWP. Florida, "Negro Education in Florida Cities," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Univ. of Florida, Gainesville).

In the spring of 1937, Martin Richardson compiled a 51- page documentary on the condition of black labor in Florida. A seasoned newspaper journalist, Richardson had an inquisitive mind and an eye for detail. Based largely on his personal observations and his interviews with union leaders, hotel employees, and tobacco, citrus, and celery workers, Richardson painted a bleak picture of labor conditions in Florida for African-Americans. Out of 459,000 black workers, only half that number were employed, even seasonally. Richardson noted, "In the past seven years this number of gainful workers, as in the rest of the country, has suffered a sharp reduction." But he added, "Relief work, odd jobs, small businesses, and part-time employment, however, have partially made up for the lowered total of normal workers."³¹

Richardson began his report with the simple observation, "unskilled laborers . . . comprised the vast majority of Florida Negro workers." Working as domestics, agricultural laborers, and in tourist service industries, few made a decent living. Most work was seasonal and job security was rare.³²

³¹ Martin D. Richardson, "What the Florida Negro Does," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Univ. of Florida, Gainesville), 1-51, quote, 1; See his comprehensive bibliography, p 50-51.

³² Martin D. Richardson, "What the Florida Negro Does," 1.

Although cyclical, work in the tourist industry was lucrative. Salaries were almost non-existent, but, Richardson noted, "tips averaged from three dollars a day in modest establishments to ten and fifteen dollars a day in the deluxe hotels." Richardson observed, that in addition to tips, bellmen, doormen, and elevator operators reaped large returns running "social contact agencies for lonesome guests," "bootlegging after legal closing hours for the hotel bar," and "similar thoughtful enterprises."³³

As Richardson indicated, the most highly paid black hotel workers were the chefs. In the larger establishments they ran the entire food service operation even though, as he observed, "many of them could not read the menus that they had planned." As employment opportunities disappeared in the Great Depression, black chefs were squeezed out by whites, who demanded their high paying jobs. Richardson reported that by 1937 their numbers had been reduced considerably, although "there are still several major hotels with Negro chef cooks, bakers, and other kitchen personnel."³⁴

³³ Richardson, "What the Florida Negro Does," 5-7, quote 7.

³⁴ Richardson, "What the Florida Negro Does," 5-6.

Legions of blacks worked as domestics and service workers during Florida's peak tourist season that began in November and ended in May. Richardson noted:

As a general rule, domestic work for the tourist population is regarded by the workers as being less tedious, although usually less lucrative, than the hotel work. Hours are long but periods during which the employers are away from the home for protracted periods are frequent. The employment of couples permits a normal family life for the employees that is almost totally lacking in the hotel, road house or restaurant types of domestic employment.³⁵

In comparison with the tourist industry, conditions in Florida agriculture, especially in citrus and vegetable farming, were grueling, and exploitative. The citrus industry, "the greatest consumer of labor," employed thousands of black workers who were, as Richardson observed, "neither among the happiest nor the most prosperous of Florida's working population."

Wages are unusually bad in the citrus belt, according to several exhaustive investigations. Labor in the groves is partly migratory, partly permanent. The grove owners in many cases use the two forms of labor, pitted against one another, to force wages down to subsistence levels. An age old conflict between white and Negro workers in citrus, too, makes the citrus wage low.³⁶

³⁵ Richardson, "What he Florida Negro Does," 7.

³⁶ Richardson, "What the Florida Negro Does," 10.

As the labor report indicated, on the average citrus workers were employed for only eight weeks a year and the remainder of the time they lived as they could on welfare and odd jobs.³⁷

Conditions in the state's truck farming region in south Florida were by far the most appalling in agriculture. Strawberries, lettuce, celery, beans, and tomatoes required back-breaking stoop labor to harvest. One picker told Richardson the people on one farm worked "so hard they look like African wild men." Few blacks would work on these farms at low wages. Labor became so difficult to secure that in 1936 and 1937, truck farm owners sought the assistance of city and county police who staged clean ups in the black communities. Every worker who was not visibly employed was arrested and given "the alternative of work on the truck farms or sentences on the chain gang."³⁸

In northwest Florida conditions among sharecroppers and tenant farmers were equally exploitative, although not as abusive. Many of these black farmers were "living on the identical cotton-fields that they or their fathers tended as slaves before Emancipation." In most cases

³⁷ Richardson, "What the Florida Negro Does," 9-12.

³⁸ Richardson, "What the Florida Negro Does," 20, 19-22.

Richardson observed, "the farms are usually only small scale imitations of the hundreds of acres they once had devoted entirely to production of the valuable, fluffy white bolls." They labored as hard as they had as slaves. Children had to labor in the fields from the age of six or eight so that the family could "break even on the year's work." Despite back-breaking work, intensive labor, and long hours, sharecroppers told Richardson they had "handled no cash money . . . in years."³⁹

Richardson observed child labor not only among sharecroppers, but also all over Florida. The vegetable farms in south Florida were especially abusive. Although children 11 and 12 years worked as hard as adults, they received only one or two dollars a week, less than one-half the adult rate. Laboring in the strawberry, bean, and tomato fields with their parents from January through May, these children were unable to attend school only a few months a year. By remaining uneducated, they perpetuated the cycle of poverty and exploitation.⁴⁰

Although abuses in truck farming, sharecropping, and tenant farming abounded, conditions among turpentine and phosphate workers were even worse. As Richardson asserted, "To the evil of low wages in the state must be

³⁹ Richardson, "What the Florida Negro Does," 13-15.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

added forced labor" In the turpentine camps he uncovered evidence of "the infamous Commissary System, which forced camp workers to purchase all of their food and commodities at the company store at highly inflated prices." He noted that in turpentine camps in Baker, Duval and Clay counties where forced labor had been reported, the commissary system was used to keep the turpentiners in debt and on their jobs. While researching labor conditions in the turpentine camps, Richardson encountered workers "so terrorized that they refused pointblank to be seen talking to field workers engaged on The American Guide."⁴¹

Although not compiled into an extensive formal report as was labor, the black writers field copy on African-American education and religion contained valuable documentation on contemporary conditions. They detailed educational conditions, documented the founding of black churches after the Civil War, and delineate broad trends in contemporary religion.

The black writers documented educational conditions in African-American schools in Florida's major cities. Each field report described the school's location,

⁴¹ Richardson, "What the Florida Negro Does," 44; Richardson noted in his report he had obtained "several verbal reports . . . on the Commissary system." No workers' names were given.

physical appearance, and history. Rebecca Baker's description of the Campbell Street High School in Daytona Beach, detailing "the inadequacy of the building and overcrowded conditions" that kept the school from being accredited, were symptomatic of most black schools.⁴² As Alfred Farrell pointed out in his summary of "Negro Education" in Tallahassee, the high school division of Florida A & M college was necessary "because the secondary school system of the state was regrettably retarded." Only after 1930 did college enrollment exceed that of the high school division. Farrell noted that as graduates from Florida A & M took jobs in local school systems conditions were improving slowly.⁴³

Only one of the black writers' field reports mentioned a public library for African-Americans. Viola Muse in her summary of "Negro Education" in Tampa wrote, "Since 1923 Tampa's colored adults and school children have had access to one valuable adjunct to education; a branch public library." The discovery of a small cache of books started the library. Tampa's progressive Urban League contributed a building and a librarian. Later, the

⁴² L. Rebecca Baker, "Negro Education, Daytona Beach, Florida" Sept. 21, 1936, "Negro Education in Florida Cities," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville, Fl.), 5-6.

⁴³ "Negro Education in Florida Cities," 42-48, quote, 45.

city of Tampa assumed financial responsibility for the black library facility.⁴⁴

The spirited reports on "Negro Churches" documented the rise of black churches in Florida's cities. Based largely on interviews with black preachers and founding church members, the field reports described how the churches became the nucleus of black community life. One of the most revealing of these field reports, Rachel Austin's account of the origin of a black Protestant church in St. Augustine, described the process. Basing her report largely on an interview with Mrs. Hamie Williams Jordan, "a lithe figure of about eighty pounds and almost eighty years of age," Austin described how Mrs. Williams overcame the ire of the city's predominantly Catholic population. Deciding that the first step should be the formation of a morning Sunday school, Mrs. Williams tramped "house to house asking for children." The first mother told her, "Niggers don't know about conducting Sunday School, only the whites know." Mrs. Jordan persisted, the mother relented, and the Sunday school was established. Adult services soon followed and blacks joined in droves. They preferred the lively singing and piano playing that accompanied the Protestants' meetings rather than the staid Catholic

⁴⁴ "Negro Education in Florida Cities," 53.

meetings. Despite threats of black Catholics, the Protestant church flourished.⁴⁵

Although in most cases, local black leaders organized the new churches, in many instances sympathetic local whites and northern protestants helped the former slaves form their own churches. As the black writers' field reports indicated, African Methodist churches were extremely popular with the newly freed slaves. But by the 1930s, black churches represented every denomination found in Florida.⁴⁶

The most unusual black churches in the 1930s were the "storefront" or "sanctified" churches. In most cases, a few members of Churches of God in Christ or the Saints of God in Christ split from the mother group and formed a small mission. The founding of the Constance Street Mission in Tampa, described in detail in Viola Muse's field report, provided a typical example. Basing her report on an interview with the church's secretary, who had been a charter member, Muse described its founding, beliefs, and services. The preacher, John Brown,

⁴⁵ FWP. Florida. "Negro Churches" (Unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville), 39-40, quote, 40.

⁴⁶ "Negro Churches," 21-30, describes Martin Richardson's report on Negro Churches in Pensacola, Florida and 79-86, details Wilson Rice's report on Negro Churches in Jacksonville.

"claimed to have received a call from God to preach." He heeded the call, rented a deserted store, bought lumber and built benches, and procured a pulpit and chairs. With three founding "saints," he opened the doors of his new church. Like other storefront churches, the Constance Street Mission used piano music and lively singing to attract members. As Hattie Jones, the church secretary, explained, "Very often folk won't come into God's house to hear the word of God. Music and noise often make them stop and listen and then they decide to come in They get in, hear the word of God and often are saved."⁴⁷ Muse left a vivid account of the service.

Elder Brown talked and explained the Bible according to his understanding. Words of praise . . . were frequently uttered by members of the congregation. Finally a member began singing (this occurred during the time the Elder seemed to be pausing for breath) others joined in, the piano player soon got the right key and joined in making music which sounded very much like jazz music played by Negroes around dance halls. As the singing progressed, the members arose from their seats and began moving about the floor passing each other seemingly without notice by avoiding collision, one with the other. Some screamed, some held their teeth tightly together not saying a word but dancing on as if they were not aware of the presence of others. As the dancing continued the participants became more absorbed in what they were doing; some began twisting and

⁴⁷ Viola Muse, "Negro Sanctified Church," July 30, 1936, Field Copy in "Negro Churches," 57-65, quote 59-60; Muse cites her interview with Hattie Jones, "Secretary of Church," 65.

shaking themselves to such an extent that they resembled the dancers in [a] moving picture⁴⁸

Wilson Rice and Martin Richardson described similar churches in Jacksonville, but their accounts lacked the objectivity of Muse's account. Rice noted, "Since the lives of these churches are as unstable as their memberships, accurate figures concerning them are not available." In another part of his report he wrote, "The church houses are usually in a dilapidated condition, badly in need of repairs, painting, etc." After a vivid description of their services conducted "with the clapping of hands and the beating of the drums in a rhythmic tom-tom fashion," Rice asserted, "This commotion is carried on at length with some strange unintelligible utterances which they call speaking in tongues." In like manner, Martin Richardson pointed out, "The stigma of nuisance generally attached to Sanctified worship has driven many of the congregations . . . to points away from the heaviest population, and frequently toward the outskirts of the city." Richardson and Johnson revealed the condescending attitudes of educated blacks toward the sanctified churches which were popular primarily with uneducated members of their race.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ "Negro Churches, 61-62.

⁴⁹ "Negro Churches," 92-94, quotes, 93-94.

The black writers gathered a wealth of documentation on African-American history and life, but the final manuscript for "The Negro in Florida" contained very little of it. White editors in the state office used the black writers' field reports selectively. As a result, the "The Florida Negro" revealed a paternalistic view of slavery and often directly contradicted the evidence gathered by the black writers. For example, an old slave who had lived in the area near the plantation of Zephaniah Kingsley's plantation on Fort George Island told J. M. Johnson that it was "dreaded by all who knew it." Martin Richardson interviewed other slaves in the area who also spoke of the "hard plantations, of the Lopez or Kingsley types, where cruelties, inhumane treatment, and grueling hours were common" But the final manuscript of "The Negro in Florida" spoke of the "kindnesses of the Kingsleys, Sandersons, and Blounts, all of whom were known to discharge overseers for beating slaves more than was considered absolutely necessary."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ FWP, Florida, "The Negro in Florida, 1528-1940" (unpub. manus., P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Univ. of Florida, Gainesville, 1940), 13; FWP Florida, "Negro History in Florida," (unpub. manus. P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Univ. of Florida, Gainesville, 1936) quotes, 50, 170. This manuscript is composed of the original field reports bearing the author's name and date they were written.

"The Negro in Florida" recounted none of the testimony gathered by the black writers that mentioned cruel punishments or the buying and selling of families. Every attempt was made to make Florida slavery a benign institution. One passage noted, "There seem to have been fewer really 'hard plantations, however, in Florida than in Mississippi, Alabama, and other states" "The Negro in Florida" mentioned "the Sandersons in Duval County and the Hansons in St. Johns [who] would carefully avoid separating families when buying or selling slaves." The text gave the impression that most slave owners "never sold a slave and refused to employ overseers who beat slaves." "The Negro in Florida" was filled with slanted testimony and distortions that masked the institution's more sinister side that the ex-slaves' testimony had so vividly revealed.⁵¹

"The Negro in Florida" reflected the viewpoint of Florida's FWP director, Carita Corse. Like most other white southerners, Corse maintained that slavery had been a benign and instructive institution. been a benign institution. In her 1942 review of Stetson Kennedy's volume, Palmetto Country, which drew heavily from the direct testimony of Florida's ex-slaves and quoted them liberally, Corse bemoaned the fact that "from the

⁵¹ "The Negro in Florida," 32, 48, 107.

multitude of slave interviews available, some showing harmonious, some antagonistic, relations between the races, he selected the most extreme cases of cruelty and ill-will." She chided Kennedy for his "pessimism" and supposedly distorted view of slavery. Kennedy's book had in fact presented a more realistic view of the slave experience than did Corse's "The Negro in Florida."⁵²

Compared with the exhaustive research and scholarship of The Negro in Virginia, the Florida study was simplistic and unrefined. With extended research and refinement, it could have been a first-class study. Instead, "The Negro in Florida" lacked the substance of the raw field reports, was uneven in quality, and poorly organized.

Although Zora Hurston was supposed to have worked on "The Florida Negro," the manuscript does not reflect her distinct literary style. The chapter entitled, "Folklore," in the 1940 manuscript was clearly not her work. It opened with the observation that, "Out of a past colored with superstition that was his religion, the Negro has developed certain practices relative to cures and beliefs that are peculiar only to himself." The essay pointed out that "a surprising large number of

⁵² C. D. Corse, "Kennedy's Palmetto Country," Savannah, Georgia, News, Dec. 27, 1936, clipping in possession of Mr. Kennedy. See "Slave Days" in Stetson Kennedy, Palmetto Country (New York: Dwell, Sloan & Pearce, 1942), 67-88.

Negroes still cling to these old superstitions; no doubt they have contributed to the high Negro death rate."⁵³

Hurston had written two chapters for "The Negro in Florida," one on folklore and the other on literature, but like so many other pieces of exquisite African-American writing, Zora Hurston's essays remained forgotten in the files. Her essay on literature, "Art and Such," was a diatribe on the racial question and far too controversial for inclusion in a government sponsored work. However, her essay on folklore was a masterpiece that brilliantly analyzed the beauty and meaning of Florida folklore.⁵⁴

In the end, only a fraction of the extensive collection gathered by the black writers in Florida was published. Very little of it appeared in the state guide. Although Alsberg had had the best of intentions, conditions in the individual states precluded a balanced, unbiased portrayal of the African-American experience. Carita Corse and other southern directors did not want the

⁵³ Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; Kennedy notes that "the bulk of the material to my knowledge already was intact before Zora came on board." As this manuscript was being edited in the white state office, Zora Hurston and Sterling Brown had left the project.

⁵⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, "Go Gator and the Muddy Water," Folklore File, "Art and Such," Hurston File, Florida Historical Society Library, USF, Tampa.

rest of the nation to know the more hideous side of their states histories. Although the black writers held up a mirror to Florida, thirty years passed before anyone saw its faithful reflection.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ George Rawick's edition of the ex-slave narrative collection, published in 1971 represents the only publication of the Florida black unit's work.

CHAPTER SIX: "IN THE NICK OF TIME"

As federal writers in Florida and elsewhere traveled through the hinterlands searching for new and unusual material for their state guides, they interviewed octogenarians, old-time residents, and just plain folks with interesting stories to tell. Without realizing the overall significance of their quest, they unearthed and recorded a great deal of indigenous folklore "in the nick of time."¹

Folklore revealed the customs and attitudes of the inarticulate, those on the lowest rung of the economic ladder who traditionally left no written records. Their songs, lore, and amusements, handed down from generation to generation, showed how they

¹ Title adopted from "In the Nick of Time: the Federal Writers' Project Folklore Collecting in Florida" Symposium sponsored by the Bureau of Florida Folklife Programs, Feb. 4, 1989, Miami, Florida. Hereafter cited, Folklife Symposium; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 268, 277.

looked at life, their pain, sorrows, and hopes for a better future.²

As the army of federal writers fanned out across the nation, American life was undergoing significant and rapid change. The barriers of cultural isolation between city and town were breaking down as automobiles, radios, motion pictures, advertising, and photo magazines changed the way Americans lived. As the folk moved indoors to listen to "Amos n' Andy" or read Life magazine, they stopped congregating on store front steps or on a neighbor's porch to tell tall tales or "swap lies."³

At the outset of the program, Henry Alsberg realized that the Federal Writers' Project possessed a rare opportunity to collect indigenous American folklore. The first set of guide instructions issued in October, 1935, included a supplement on gathering "folk lore and folk customs." As the manual stressed,

² McDonald, Federal Relief, 665; Robert Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977), 84-5; B. A. Botkin, "WPA and Folklore Research: 'Bread and Song'" Southern Folklore Quarterly III (March, 1939), 10, 7-15.

³ Stetson Kennedy, "The Federal Writers' Project I Knew," 12, Folklife Symposium; Earl H. Rovitt, "The Regions Versus the Nation: The Critical Battle of the Thirties," Mississippi Quarterly XIII (Spring, 1960) for a discussion of the changes in technology and culture that were taking place and their implications to region and nation; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 268.

"such an opportunity to collect this material may never recur."⁴

In the 1930s, folklore was still a relatively new discipline. The American Folklore Society had been founded in 1887, but academic departments in the nation's universities had existed only since 1927. Most folklorists were traditional academics who maintained that only trained scholars could collect and interpret folklore. For the most part, these traditionalists concentrated upon the European origins of American folklore. The roots of an Elizabethan ballad interested them more than "mutations and developments wrought by transfer to a new and pioneer land." A growing number of progressive folklorists began concentrating on American folklore as a living and vital demonstration of American culture. From this progressive vantage point the Federal Writers' Project approached folklore collecting.⁵

⁴ "Instructions: Folk-lore and Folk Customs," 8551, Bound Copies of Instructions, The American Guide, FWP, R.G. 69; These first instructions, written by Katherine Kellock, reflect Henry Alsberg's basic ideas about the American Guide Project and folklore; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 277, 268.

⁵ Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 86-87; Instructions: Folk-lore and Folk Customs," 8551; B. A. Botkin, "Bread and Song," 7-14; McDonald, Federal Relief, 711; B. A. Botkin, "We Called it 'Living Lore,'" New York Folklore Quarterly (Autumn, 1958), 189-201; see B. A. Botkin, ed. A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and

The Federal Writers' Project proposal to use writers on relief to collect the nation's folklore was in itself a revolutionary act. Henry Alsberg sensed that local workers easy rapport with members of their own communities more than compensated for their lack of professional training. In most cases, local guide writers were members of the communities whose songs, tall tales, and customs the FWP sought. As one of the folk, they established an easy working relationship with their subjects, many of whom were relatives and friends. As Stetson Kennedy, who collected folklore for the Florida project, summed it up, "Unlike many a trained professional collector, the field workers of the Florida Writers' Project did not have to relate to their informants; they were related--by virtue of common culture, class, neighborhood, and sometimes kinship. All they had to do to establish rapport was to rap on the door."⁶

During the 1930s, trained folklorists had great difficulty collecting folklore in the South. More than one professionally-trained folklorist had been

Traditions of the People (New York: Crown Publishers, 1944) xxii.

⁶ Stetson Kennedy, "The Federal Writers' Project I Knew," 11-12, Folklife Symposium; "Bound Instructions," 8551; Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 86-88; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 277-78.

run out of a town, threatened with murder, or made the subject of local jokes. Alan Lomax, who recorded songs for the Library of Congress' Archive of Folk Song, recalled his bitter experiences in Conahatchie, Mississippi. He and his field party were detained, questioned, and made "to register, as if we had entered a foreign country."⁷ In order to remain in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, on a collecting trip with Zora Neale Hurston in 1935, Lomax had to disguise himself:

It was the only way I could live there. So at Zora's direction, I put tanning on my skin. Of course all the blacks knew perfectly well that I wasn't really colored, because they could look under the sleeve and see. But it made them feel comfortable, and it made it possible for me to stay there overnight without the police knocking at my door. So I was able to spend a couple of peaceful weeks there, without being bothered.⁸

The federal writers experienced few of these difficulties. In towns where they were not known personally, they approached a minister or local leader and

⁷ Botkin, Treasury of American Folklore, xxii; Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 86; Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935), xviii, 1; Hurston remarked: "Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds."

⁸ Alan Lomax, "The Lomax Recordings," 5, 7, Folklife Symposium.

gained their confidence. These contacts suggested the best local sources of folklore.⁹

Guide instructions explained the types of folklore the national office wanted and how to collect it. Initially, for the purposes of the state guides, the FWP sought folk customs that could be tied to "one place, one section, or one object." Workers were told to survey their districts with "fresh eyes" and to recognize that "the lore and customs known to them all of their lives were novel and interesting to people from other parts of the country."¹⁰

In Florida, the federal writers combed their areas for unusual customs, anecdotes, dialect, jargon, proverbs, folk songs, superstitions, and voodoo practices. In March, 1936, while researching the early history of Jacksonville, Rose Shephard interviewed Mrs. Elizabeth Barnwell, an eighty-year old, long-time resident of the area. Mrs. Barnwell recited lullabies and work songs from her childhood. In Miami, Cora Mae Taylor collected African-American songs and spirituals, many of which were improvisations whites seldom heard. The simple wording

⁹ Stetson Kennedy, "The Florida Federal Writers' Project I Knew," 10, Folklife Symposium.

¹⁰ Instructions: Folk-lore and Folk Customs," 8551; Alsberg to Corse, Dec. 15, 1936, "Correspondence Pertaining to Folklore Studies, 1936-1941," Fl., Box 195, WPA, Record Group 69.

and three line refrain of "The Lord Will Provide" characterized these African-American spirituals.

The Lord will provide
 The Lord will provide
 The Lord will provide
 Sometime another, the Lord
 will provide (refrain)
 It may not be in my time
 It may not be in yours
 But sometime or other the
 Lord will provide.¹¹

The federal writers in Tampa expanded an earlier Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) sociological study of the Latins of Ybor City. They collected Cuban and Spanish songs, recorded local lore, and documented the district's old-world Spanish customs.¹²

Stanley Hanson and Carl Liddle, working in the Ft. Myers area, gathered local lore and listened to stories of local residents who told "The Famous Edison Fish Story." When Thomas Edison settled in Ft. Myers in the 1880s, "the great electrical wizard ran a wire out on the bottom of the Caloosahatchee River and electrified all the fish that he wanted for breakfast.

¹¹ Cora Mae Taylor, "Old Time Negro Spirituals," May 14, 1936, Federal Writers' Project Collection, Florida Bureau of Folklife Programs, White Springs, Florida. Hereafter Cited, FTFB.

¹² Alsberg to Corse, Dec. 15, 1936; Lomax to Alsberg Nov. 27, 1936, Box 195, WPA, R. G. 69.

Such fish it was said, kept indefinitely without ice."¹³

In Glades and Hendry Counties, Veronica Huss recorded customs of Florida's shy and reclusive backwoods crackers who normally shunned outside contacts. Huss, who had lived in the area all her life, moved among them freely. They spoke candidly about their lives and their families. In her report, Huss noted that the crackers supplemented their meager diets by eating "the heart of the common Florida cabbage palm, which grows so plentifully in this state." Recently outsiders had discovered this common cracker fare, promoted it as a delicacy, and reaped huge profits selling it to northern restaurants. Huss noted that one northern hotel placed it on the menu at \$1.00 a portion. "Rather expensive for so cheap a food," she quipped.¹⁴

¹³ Stanley Hanson and Carl Liddle, "The Famous Edison Fish Story," September 11, 1936, "Fort Myers County History," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville, c. 1936-1937), 42.

¹⁴ Federal Writers' Project, Florida, "Hendry County History," (unpublished manuscript, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, c. 1937), 8-29, 108-113 contains the full flavor of Huss' biased, slanted but revealing field copy. Her report on their "frolics" was to be included in the proposed volume of Florida folklore. Although in many places amateurish, her field report was filled with the raw stuff of history and proved the desirability of letting locals collect folklore.

Local workers turned up so much local and regional folklore, much more than the state guide could absorb, that the national office considered separate folklore publications. In June, 1936, Alsberg hired John A. Lomax, Alan Lomax's son, as honorary curator of the Library of Congress' Archive of American Folk Song as the FWP's first part-time folklore director to help organize and plan publications for the FWP's impressive collection. An authority on ballads and African-American songs, Lomax had discovered the famous African-American guitarist "Lead Belly," while collecting folksongs in a Texas prison. He shared Alsberg's enthusiasm for collecting local lore and saw in the FWP a unique opportunity to expand the nation's collection.¹⁵

During the eighteen months he served on the FWP, Lomax encouraged workers to tap new sources of information. He was eager to expanded FWP collection in African-American songs, spirituals, and children's games. He suggested that workers seek out and interview the "cook, washerwoman, [and] gardener," old residents "close to the soil" who, "because

¹⁵ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 265-66; McDonald, Federal Relief, 695.

circumstances have cut them off from education and progressive enlightenment," made the best "repositories for local lore, legend and superstition." To make their accounts authoritative, Lomax stressed, workers should record the folklore in the "precise language of the narrator." To state directors who complained that there was very little unusual lore in their areas, Lomax replied, "We advise that you interview prisoners in the penitentiary." In Florida and in other states, some of the best folklore and legends turned up on the city and state work farms.¹⁶

In July, 1937, Martin Richardson interviewed Bob Davis, a "frequent inmate" of the Jacksonville City Prison Farm; Frank White, serving "his second time;" and 'Panama Red' Hooper, working off a six-month sentence. They told Martin Richardson the tales of "Daddy Mention."¹⁷ Richardson noted that:

¹⁶ Alsberg to Corse, n.d. [1936], Box 195, WPA, R.G. 69; Instructions to state directors on how to collect folklore material are contained in Supplement #9, "Bound Instructions," 9692, American Guide Manual, FWP, R.G. 69; McDonald, Federal Relief, 695, 705-8; Mabel Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture for the WPA," 656. Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 265-66.

¹⁷ Federal Writers' Project, Florida, "Folklore and Folk Customs," (Unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville), 82-95; Richardson cites the prisoners' names and sentences on

When or where, Daddy Mention came into being will require some research; none of the guests at the Blue Jay seems to know. Only one thing is certain about the wonder-working gentleman: he must have existed, because so many people claim to have known him.¹⁸

Daddy Mention's many friends in Florida's jails and work farms bragged about his "wonder-working" brute strength and bravado. They described to Richardson his many feats to Richardson, including his daring escape from the Polk County jail. It seemed Daddy Mention did not like being locked up for vagrancy, nor did he like the treatment he got in "a little jug outside of Lakeland." So he decided to run away. But as the residents of the "Blue Jay" told Richardson:

Daddy Mention knew he had to have a . . . plan. And he made up one, too. None of us know much about it, cause he didn't talk about it much. But we begin seeing him doing more work than anybody else in his gang. He would chop a tree by hisself, and wouldn't take but one more man to help him lift it to the pile Cap'n and his friends was picking up a little side money by betting other people that Daddy Mention could pick up any tree they could cut [It] got to be a regular sight to see Daddy Mention walking around the jail yard carrying a big tree in his arms. . . . [Finally] Daddy mention picked up . . . [a] big log [and] . . . stared to-wards the gate with the log on his shoulder. None of the guards didn't bother him, because who ever saw a man escape with a pine butt on his shoulder?¹⁹

page 95.

¹⁸ FWP, Fl., "Folklore and Folk Customs," 82.

¹⁹ FWP, Fl., "Folklore and Folk Customs," 86-88.

But that is just what this herculean black man did, walked out of the Lakeland prison farm with a huge log on his shoulder and escaped. He sold the log and rode all the way to Tampa, never to be seen again in Lakeland.²⁰

Tales such as these conveyed the prisoners' views of the harsh, oppressive realities of the Florida prison system in the 1930s. The guards referred to "Daddy Mention" as "boy." He addressed them as "Cap'n." Before noon one day "Cap'n Smith had cussed at Daddy Mention two or three times." As the prisoners told it, "he didn't work fast enough to suit 'em down there." Cap'n Smith arbitrarily put Daddy Mention in the "box," a hated place reserved for unruly prisoners. Using his superior wit, Daddy Mention outsmarted his captors and triumphed over the system by escaping.²¹

As the state collections expanded, Alsberg abandoned plans for several national volumes in favor of more

²⁰ FWP, Fl., "Folklore and Folk Customs," 88; Other tales told of his attempted escape from the state prison "the Big Rock" at Raiford and his experiences selling whiskey in Ocala.

²¹ Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 298-440. I have drawn heavily upon Levine's analysis of "Black Laughter" and his chapter on black folk heroes, "A Pantheon of Heroes." Neither chapter mentions the "Daddy Mention" tales which comprise some of the most novel and revealing of any collected in the two decades between the two world wars.

comprehensive state publications. The proposed Florida book was to include superstitions and anecdotes indexed by counties, songs and ballads, tall tales, and unusual ethnic customs and practices.²²

By the end of 1937, the sheer size of the FWP collection demanded a full-time director to make it authoritative and complete. In December, 1937, Alsberg attended the fiftieth anniversary meeting of the American Folklore Society at Yale University and asked its executive committee to recommend one of their members as full-time FWP director. Much to Alsberg's surprise, the Society refused his request, questioning the legitimacy of a program which used amateurs to collect folklore. "No one who is not a scientifically trained folklorist can collect dependable folklore," they added. Rebuffed by the prestigious American Folklore Society, Alsberg returned to Washington, "crestfallen and humiliated." He needed to find a competent, academically-trained folklorist to direct a field force of amateurs.²³

²² FWP. Fl., "Florida Folklore," Box 195, Florida, WPA, R.G. 69; John Lomax to HGA, May 24, 1937, Florida File, Box 195, WPA, R.G.69.

²³ John Lomax, "Review of Botkin's The Treasury of American Folklore," Saturday Review (July 1, 1944), 19; "Folklore Group Urged to Help W.P.A. Activity," New York Herald Tribune, 13, Box 102, Primary File, Div. of Information, WPA, R.G. 69.

Benjamin A. Botkin, an experienced folklorist with impressive academic credentials, agreed to direct the federal writers. As the son of Lithuanian-Jewish immigrants, he had worked his way through Harvard, done graduate study at Columbia University, and earned a Ph.D. in English from the University of Nebraska. While still an undergraduate at Harvard, Botkin had developed a fascination with folklore. He took his first job as an English instructor at the University of Oklahoma in 1921, and began collecting mid-western lore. Between 1928 and 1932, he edited several volumes of it, publishing them as Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany. The collection focused on "living lore," present and dynamic folk life, and "folk-say," what the people have to say about themselves.²⁴

On leave from the University of Oklahoma, Botkin joined the project in May, 1938. He welcomed the opportunity to participate in what he believed was "the greatest educational as well as social experiment of our time." He saw in the FWP a chance "to give back to the

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of Botkin's career and views on folklore see Jerrold Hirsch, "Folklore in the Making: B. A. Botkin, Journal of American Folklore (Jan.-Mar., 1987), 3-38; Botkin, "We Called it Living Lore,"; B. A. Botkin, "Bread and Song," 7-15; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 277; McDonald, Federal Relief, 711.

people what we have taken from them and what rightfully belongs to them."²⁵

Although Botkin directed the FWP folklore program for just a little over a year, his influence was monumental. Whereas Lomax concentrated on more traditional folklore, Botkin encouraged the collection of contemporary and urban lore. To Botkin, folklore was a living, dynamic expression of America's pluralistic culture. As he saw it, the task of the FWP was not just one of collection but also one of assimilation, "research not for research's sake but for use and enjoyment by the many." He stressed that the purpose of the FWP folk collection was to create an understanding of the cultural context out of which "it springs" and to translate "the lore back into terms of daily living and leisure-time." His nineteen-page Manual for Folklore Studies, compiled shortly after he joined the project, emphasized this living relationship between folklore and the cultural context, "relating the foreground of lore, to its background in life." To Botkin, folklore was ever changing, ever growing, and ever emerging.²⁶

²⁵ B. A. Botkin, "Bread and Song," 10.

²⁶ Botkin, "Bread and Song," quote, 10, 7-14; Hirsch, "Portrait of America," 38; Botkin, ed. A Treasury of American Folklore, xxii; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 277; McDonald, Federal Relief, 711; Botkin, "We Called it Living Lore," 189-201; Botkin served as FWP folklife

One of the best examples of Botkin's influence on the Florida collection was the expansion of the Lexicon of Trade Jargon. In 1937, Florida field workers began recording the quaint expressions of citrus and cigar workers. Botkin expanded the program, encouraging the collection of the jargon of other trades as well. Their trade jargon, developed as they labored long hours in relative isolation, revealed the intricacies of their trade, how they worked, and what they thought about life. In the jargon of stevedores along Florida's waterfront, to "barrel" meant to drink to excess, a "boomer" was an itinerant worker, a "clipper" a beautiful girl. Florida citrus workers referred to a tree full of fruit as a "honey." Oranges missed by workers were "shiners." A tall orange tree was a "skyscraper." Latin cigar workers in Ybor City, a suburb of Tampa, developed the most extensive jargon describing their occupation. Vuelta abajo referred to the finest tobacco used in handmade cigars. A "bunchmaker" made the inside of the cigar, and a "rolero" put on the wrapper. Within a decade, as

editor from May 2, 1938 to July 31, 1939.

mechanization replaced hand labor, these occupations changed radically and much of the jargon disappeared.²⁷

Botkin's catholic approach to folklore influenced not only the Florida program, but the individuals on it. Stetson Kennedy joined the Florida project in December, 1937, just before Botkin became national folklore director. Beginning as a junior interviewer in the Gainesville office, Kennedy quickly distinguished himself as one of the few good writers on the Florida project and was promoted to the state office. Although he worked as an editor and troubleshooter, helping to rewrite guide essays and edit the Palm Beach city guide, Kennedy's natural talent and interest in folklore emerged.²⁸

In late 1938, the national office opened a new state position: folklore, socio-ethnic, and life history editor. Carita Corse recommended Kennedy for this non-relief position, one that provided a raise in salary and

²⁷ Corse to Alsberg, Feb. 14, 1938, Alsberg to Corse, June 14, 1938, Box 195, WPA, R. G. 69; "Dialect common to the Florida Waterfronts," "Citrus Trade Jargon," "Lexicon of trade jargon" folder, Box 195, WPA, R. G. 69; John W. Rabb, "Trade Jargon of the Cigar Industry in Tampa," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville).

²⁸ Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; Corse to Couch, June 16, 1938, Nov. 16, 1938; Botkin to Corse, May 26, 1939; W. T. Couch to Corse, Dec. 6, 1939, Admin. Corresp., Fl., WPA, R.G. 69. Stetson Kennedy's career is documented in a biographical brief, Kennedy Papers.

greater job security. Although Kennedy's appointment was approved, cutbacks and the dismantling of the national project a short time later prevented it from being implemented. Nevertheless, Kennedy unofficially directed Florida's folklore programs.²⁹

In May, 1939, in conjunction with a proposed recording expedition planned by the WPA Joint Committee on Folklore, Kennedy prepared an inventory of Key West folklore. Intended as an outline of recording possibilities, the comprehensive report was a detailed study of the area's culture and folklore. Drawing on Botkin's Manual for Folklore Studies, Kennedy emphasized the living, contemporary aspects of Key West folk culture and related it to local work, art, and life. "Folklore in Key West is unusually abundant and varied," Kennedy wrote. Its "insular isolation . . . provided exceptional conditions for the acculturation of immigrant lores." Kennedy detailed Key West languages and dialects, as well as Cuban, Bahamian, and Conch customs, songs, and lore. His summary imparted the full flavor of what life was like in this village in the 1930s. The island's multi-national population held on to quaint customs brought from the

²⁹ Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; Stetson Kennedy Papers; Corse to Couch, June 16, 1938, Nov. 16, 1938; Botkin to Corse, May 26, 1939; W. T. Couch to Corse, Dec. 6, 1939, Admin. Corresp., Fl., R. G. 69.

Bahamas and Cuba. Street vendors peddled their wares in Spanish, "Aguacate maduro tengo, naranja de China yo llevo!" (I have ripe avocados, oranges of China I carry!" Callejero's wandered about the streets at dusk playing guitars and singing Cuban songs. A grand march prefaced all Key West dances, a custom probably carried over from Spanish military balls.³⁰

Kennedy's study greatly impressed Botkin, who called it "one of the best surveys of this kind that we have seen." Botkin's collection techniques, relating the foreground of living to the background of life, made a lasting impression on Kennedy and influenced his later work and collecting. Much of the folklore he collected on the Writers' Project, Kennedy published in his first book, Palmetto Country.³¹

In April 1938, a few months after Kennedy joined the Florida FWP, Zora Neale Hurston, a Florida native and the only trained African-American folklorist in the South, joined the Florida Writers' Project. A gifted writer and dedicated folklorist, Hurston had come a long way from her

³⁰ Kennedy, "Memorandum," 7, Kennedy Papers. This memorandum is a detailed summary of Key West Folklore in the 1930s.

³¹ Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; Kennedy Papers; Stetson Kennedy, Palmetto Country (New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce, 1942) The University of Florida Presses republished Palmetto Country in August, 1989.

Eatonville roots. Basically on her own since her mother's death when Hurston was 14, she had learned to live by her wits and overcome mammoth odds. She supported herself by working as a maid. One thing led to another until finally she landed a job with a Gilbert and Sullivan troupe. Working as a wardrobe girl, Hurston traveled throughout the South and learned of the larger possibilities life that had to offer. When she left the Company in Baltimore, Hurston settled in Washington, D. C., imbued with the desire to get an education. She attended night classes at Morgan Academy and supported herself with odd jobs during the day. After earning her high school diploma, Hurston enrolled in Howard University in Washington and worked as a manicurist at a black-owned beauty shop frequented by influential whites. While at Howard, Hurston was invited to join the University's select literary club. She entered one of her short stories in the literary club's short story contest and won second place. Fannie Hurst, one of the judges of the Stylus Club contest, maintained that Hurston should have won first, rather than second place. From this experience grew a life-long friendship between the two women and an opportunity to attend Columbia University.³²

³² Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 9-35; J. M. Johnson, "Zora Neale Hurston, Novelist," Hurston Papers, Special Collections, UF.

Arriving in New York in 1925 with "no job, no friends, but filled with a lot of hope," Hurston enrolled in Barnard College. Her charismatic personality, brilliance as a raconteur, and her intimate knowledge of black folklife quickly established Hurston as a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance. As "queen of the nigerrati" she won new friends and devoted white patrons.³³

At Barnard, Hurston worked under Franz Boas, the nation's leading anthropologist and a pioneer in the field of folklore. Immediately recognizing Hurston's brilliance, he helped to mold her as a folklorist. In 1927, just before completing her degree in anthropology at Barnard, Boas arranged an expedition for her funded by a grant from the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History to collect black folklore in the South. This early collecting trip taught Hurston a valuable, life-long lesson: "Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds." Hurston learned to become one of the people and "never act as if she had been to school at all." Three folklore collecting trips in the South between 1928-1932, following her graduation from Barnard in 1928, taught her that the

³³ Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, quote 9, 35-59; See Hemenway's chapter, "Harlem City," 35-59, for an excellent discussion of Hurston's part in the Harlem Renaissance.

best folklore was found in small backwoods lumber, railroad, and phosphate camps. In these isolated places, however, the challenge of collecting was the greatest because these people, "being unusually under-privileged are the shyest."³⁴

The folklore gathered on these trips provided Hurston with material for two novels and a folklore collection that she published in rapid succession between 1934 and 1937. In 1937, Hurston accepted a Guggenheim Foundation grants to fund her trips to collect Haitian voodoo material in the Bahamas. Hurston moved so deeply into the native rites that in June, 1937, when she became violently ill, she was convinced that she had gotten too close to voodoo power. As she told one friend, "For a whole day and a night, I'd thought I'd never make it." Terrified, she cut short her expedition, stopped collecting, and returned to the United States. After a brief stay in New York, she settled in Florida and began turning her field

³⁴ Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 148, 152, 123-27, 227, 1-135; Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men (J.B. Lippincott, 1935), quote, 2; Hemenway details Hurston's collecting experiences in his chapter, "Godmother and Big Sweet," 104-135; From these trips Hurston gained an intimate, first-hand view of African-American folklore in the South and published her first book, Jonah's Gourd Vine (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1934), followed by Mules and Men; Although traditional anthropologists questioned Hurston's narrative participation in the volume, J. B. Lippincott insisted that she insert her narrative to heightened the reader's interest.

notes into her fourth book Tell My Horse. Just one month after Hurston finished her manuscript in March, 1938, Hurston joined the Florida Federal Writers' Project.³⁵

Living in Florida during 1938-1939 proved a healing experience following her harrowing collecting experiences in Haiti. The Florida FWP perfectly fitted Hurston's needs and disposition. Comforted and inspired by familiar surroundings and temporarily free from financial worry, she settled in a spacious clapboard house on the edge of Lake Buck near Eatonville. To one visitor, the landscape and surroundings appeared as "an ideal setting for a country lodge." Here amid solace and solitude, Hurston did some of her most brilliant work.³⁶

On the project, Hurston was "dynamic" but "very hard to control." Hurston, like other writers on relief, was required to produce 1,500 words weekly in order to collect her monthly \$75 relief check. Carita Corse recalled in an interview years later that, "She would go off and you

³⁵ Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 160-271.

³⁶ Darel McConkey to HGA, April 22, 1938, Field Reports, Fl., FWP, R. G. 69. Hurston had published Their Eyes Were Watching God (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1937). The book is now considered her literary masterpiece. Her second collection of folklore appeared as Tell My Horse (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1938); Paul Diggs, "The House by the Lake," Zora Hurston File, Florida Negro Collection, USF; J.M. Johnson, "Zora Neale Hurston, Novelist," Hurston Papers, Special Collections, UF.

wouldn't know where she was, and she was supposed to be working by the week." She would suddenly reappear, offer her apologies and a host of excuses, and reaffirm her determination to do better. After one of her frequent lapses when no work had been delivered, Hurston wrote Corse:

. . . you are an author yourself and I feel that you can understand my form of insanity perhaps. Dr., every now and then I get a sort of phobia for paper and all its works. I cannot bring myself to touch it. I cannot write, read or do anything at all for a period I have just been through one of those periods that lasted about nine days. It is stronger than I am boss. But when I do come out of it I am as if I had just been born again.³⁷

Hurston played on Corse's sympathies and ego, ingratiating herself with her boss in much the same manner that she had with her rich white patrons in New York. She referred to herself as Carita Corse's "pet darkey," a term she also used with Fannie Hurst. In a letter to Corse describing her trip to Boston promoting her new book, Tell My Horse, and a brief stop-over at FWP headquarters in Washington, D. C., Hurston wrote:

It would have been lovely if you had been in Boston with me. Everything was so restrained and polished that you would have been right

³⁷ Zora Neale Hurston to Carita Corse, Maitland Florida, December 3, 1938, Hurston Papers, Special Collections, Univ. of Fl., Gainesville; Robert Hemenway, "Interview with Carita Doggett Corse," Feb. 25, 1971, Jacksonville, Florida.

and polished that you would have been right in your element. Somehow they (the town) showed great enthusiasm for me You might have been a little proud of your pet darkey. Yes, I know that I belong to you and that Sterling Brown belongs to Allsberg. I laugh at the little phenagling he does to give Sterling the edge over me. BUT he cannot make him no new head with inside trimmings and that's where he falls down. You ought to see Sterling exhibiting his jealousy as I top him time after time.³⁸

Hurston invited Corse to attend an all-black storefront church service, something she had done with her benefactress Mrs. R. Osgood Mason. In an interview nearly twenty years later Corse vividly remembered the experience:

She [Zora] asked me one time if I would like to go visit a store-front church in Jacksonville. Of course, my editors and I were delighted. So about nine o'clock one night we went down on the corner of Broad and Forsyth, further out Forsyth Street than we were accustomed to going at night as it was sort of a Negro section. And there one of the abandoned stores had been occupied as a church by the neighboring Negro congregation. We arrived about ten o'clock, and the preacher wasn't preaching very earnestly and loudly at the time, but after we took our seats, Zora whispered to me, "I'm gonna get 'em on their feet." She rose and began clapping her hands and saying in a rhythmic tone, "Yeah, Lord...Yes...Yes...Yes," until the rest of the congregation began to imitate her, and finally they were in such ecstasies from the hypnotic rhythm that they began to

³⁸ Zora Neale Hurston to Dr. [Carita] Corse, Dec. 3, 1938, Maitland, Florida, Hurston Papers, Special Collections, Univ. of Florida. Sterling Brown had been appointed Negro Affairs Editor in early 1936 and worked in the national office until 1939.

uncontrolled activity and whispered to Zora that I would like to leave. So we slipped out a side door, and took our car from the alley and departed. But it made a deep impression on me³⁹

Despite her sporadic work schedule, inexplicable disappearances, and difficulty directing, Zora Hurston's contributions to the Florida folklife program were without equal. Not only was Hurston a trained folklorist and a gifted writer, but she knew from experience that the best African-American folklore was to be found in small, isolated hamlets where the people were the most wary of outsiders. As an African-American, she could act as a participant-observer, collecting songs and lore that white workers could not. Alan Lomax, who traveled with Hurston and Elizabeth Barnacle on a Library of Congress collecting trip in 1935, recalled that Hurston could get anything out of her informants "in the friendliest sort of spirit" because she spoke their language and could "out-nigger any of them." He recalled that, "She swapped jokes, slapped backs, honnied up to the men when necessary and managed them so that they asked for no money."⁴⁰

³⁹ Nancy Williams, Interview with Carita Doggett Corse, Mar. 18, 1976.

⁴⁰ Alan Lomax, quoted in Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 211-212; see also his comments, Lomax, "The Florida Recordings," Folklife Symposium.

Years ahead of her time, Hurston portrayed black folklife as a separate entity, culturally complete, and not a mere appendage of white civilization. Her folklore authentically documented the oral literature of "the Negro farthest down" in the state's turpentine, railroad, and lumber camps. She refuted contemporary stereotypes that portrayed rural blacks as suffering from cultural deprivation. She believed that black folklife "represented the greatest cultural wealth of the continent." To the Florida FWP she brought her single-minded determination to record it as it was, and not as it had been perverted or misinterpreted by white anthropologists and folklorists.⁴¹

Zora Hurston's contribution to the Florida folklore program has never been documented fully, nor has her position on the project been completely explained. Robert Hemenway, in his biography of Hurston, covered her participation in "the New Deal's answer to literary unemployment" in a few paragraphs. He mistakenly believed her to be an editor, when in fact she was not. She joined the project as an ordinary worker on relief, collecting the same relief stipend given to all field workers in her district. She did not work at a desk in the state office.

⁴¹ Robert Hemenway, *Folklore Field Notes From Zora Neale Hurston, The Black Scholar* (April, 1976)1, 39-46; Hemenway's article provides the most concise explanation of her contribution to African American folklife.

The racial mores of the South would not have tolerated such an arrangement.⁴²

Much of the folklore Hurston contributed to the Florida project had appeared in Mules and Men. Hurston took early versions of her folk tales, rewrote them, and submitted them in slightly varied form. There is no indication that her superiors objected to or even knew about, what she had done. For example, her story of how blacks got their color, which appeared in Mules and Men, reappeared in her essay "Other Negro Influences." Indeed, the version submitted in 1939 was slightly longer, more elaborate, and more thoughtfully written.⁴³

Three essays written as chapters for the proposed "Florida Negro" represent her most original and creative work on the Florida Federal Writers' Project. The longest of these, "Folklore and Music" (later renamed "Go 'Gator and Muddy the Water") demonstrated Hurston's refined thinking on the meaning of folklore and Florida's contribution to the discipline. Hurston wrote:

Folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special area, time, nor people. No country is so

⁴² Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 251-253; Hurston's essays are found in the Florida Negro Collection, Florida Historical Library, USF.

⁴³ Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men, 29-30; Zora Neale Hurston, "Other Negro Influences" 4-5 (unpublished manuscript, Florida Negro Collection, USF)

primitive that it has no lore, and no country has yet become so civilized that no folklore is being made within its boundaries.⁴⁴

Like Botkin, Hurston maintained that folklore "is still in the making." However, she conceded that "formal education and mechanical inventions" threatened the "primitive imagination." Hurston asserted that folklore was the "first thing that man makes out of the natural laws that he finds around him--beyond the necessity of making a living." Folklore was primitive man's description of natural happenings which he could not otherwise explain. Each community gave folklore its own special flavor. "So when we speak of Florida folklore," Hurston wrote, "we are talking about that Florida flavor that the story and song makers have given to the great mass of material that has accumulated in this sort of culture delta."⁴⁵

The largest portion of the essay contained Florida folk tales illustrating Hurston's ideas about folklore. Folktale, she maintained, grew out of "a single incident" into a "long and complicated story with a smashing

⁴⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, "Folklore and Music" (unpublished manuscript, Florida Negro Collection, USF), 1.

⁴⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, "Go 'Gator and Muddy the Water," (unpublished manuscript, Florida Negro Collection, USF), 1.

climax." A folkloristic rendition of the hurricane of

1928 illustrated her point:

They have strong winds on the Florida west coast, too. One day the wind blew too hard till it blew a well up out of the ground. Then one day it blew so hard till it blew a crooked road straight. Another time it blew and blew and scattered the days of the week so bad till Sunday didn't come until late Tuesday evening.⁴⁶

Her essay, entitled "Other Negro Influences," analyzed Bahamian folklife, comparing it with Florida's.

Hurston wrote:

The Bahaman music is more dynamic and compelling than that of the American Negro, and the dance movements are more arresting; perhaps because the Bahaman offerings are more savage. The Bahamas and the West Indian Negro generally has had much less contact with the white man than the American Negro. As a result, speech, music, dancing, and other moods of expression are infinitely nearer the African.⁴⁷

In southern Florida, she pointed out that Bahamian drum rhythms had permeated the dominant white culture. "Nightly in Palm Beach, Fort Pierce, Miami, Key West and other cities of the Florida east coast the hot drum heads throb and the African-Bahaman folk arts seep into the soil of America." Although Bahamian music was more distinctive

⁴⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, "Go 'gator and Muddy the Water," 8-9.

⁴⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, "Other Negro Folklore Influences," (unpublished manuscript, Florida Negro Collection, USF), 1.

and more African, Bahamian folk tales lacked the "will to humor and building to a climax" universal characteristics in the African-American folk tales. She concluded, "This proves that what has always been thought of as native Negro humor is in fact something native to American soil." The Bahamian influence and Florida's own home grown African-American's folk tales, she wrote, made Florida folklore "the most tempting, the most highly flavored Negro plate around the American platter."⁴⁸

Considering the fact that African-American folklore and African-American studies had not yet been established as scholarly fields of endeavor, Zora Hurston's contribution to the Florida project was even more remarkable. She pioneered a field of cultural scholarship largely left untouched until the 1970s. Her folklore illustrated the integrity of black culture long before the mainstream of white academia acknowledged it. Years ahead of her time, running counter to accepted scholarship in the thirties, Hurston's work on the Florida project

⁴⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, "Other Negro Folklore Influences," 6-7; Zora Neale Hurston, "Art and Such" (unpublished manuscript, Florida Negro Collection, USF. The essay had little to do with folklore and represented Hurston's own views on why the African-American had not made more progress in the arts.

remained clouded and buried for almost half a century.⁴⁹

Hurston left the Florida project in June 1939, when the eighteen month rule went into effect. However, during the summer of 1939, she acted as a scout for the WPA's Joint Committee on Folk Art. The WPA Committee, formed by the four arts projects of the WPA in conjunction with the Library of Congress' Archive of Folk Song, sponsored a recording expedition through the southeast. FWP workers in each of the states located songs and willing participants to sing them. The Library of Congress lent the Committee a huge and bulky recording machine that required two men to transport.⁵⁰

When the machine arrived in Jacksonville in August, 1939, Hurston sang many of the African-American songs she knew, such as "Uncle Bud." In the standard interview conducted during each recording session, Stetson Kennedy asked Hurston about "Uncle Bud." "What kind of song would you call that?" said Kennedy. "Oh, that's one of those jook songs," replied Hurston. "What do you mean jook song?" retorted Kennedy. "Well, a jook song is one which you wouldn't sing in front of anybody but a jook woman,"

⁴⁹ Hemenway, "Folklore Field Notes From Zora Neale Hurston," 39-46.

⁵⁰ clipping Jacksonville Journal, Feb. 15, 1940, Stetson Kennedy Papers; Stetson Kennedy, "The Florida Writers' Project I Knew," 10-12, Folklife Symposium.

quipped Hurston. The Library of Congress' disk recorded everything, including Hurston's rendition of "Uncle Bud" and Kennedy's questions.⁵¹

Hurston located African-American informants who sang songs and spirituals. Eartha White told an old slave tale, "Why Horses Have White Faces," a ghost story mothers told their little girls to make them behave. A church choir led by Annie Whitaker sang "Gotta Make a Hundred, Ninety-Nine and a Half Won't Do." Mrs. Whitaker explained that the song described the perfect effort required of Christians to please God. The song had come to her a few years earlier, "right out of the sky, straight from God." It was now sung at African-American revivals all over Florida, Georgia, and Alabama.⁵²

Hurston guided the WPA recording expedition to the isolated turpentine camps in Polk County where she maintained the best African-American folklore was found. In the office of the Aycock and Lydsay Turpentine Company in Cross City, Cull Stacey, a 56-year-old black turpentine worker sang, "I'm Goin' to Georgy ta Work in the

⁵¹ Record 2, A1, A 2, transcriptions made of Aug. 16, 1939 WPA Recordings, Florida Bureau of Folklife Programs, White Springs, Fl., Hereafter cited, WPA Recordings, FTFB; Stetson Kennedy, "The Florida Federal Writers' Project," 19-21, Folklife Symposium.

⁵² Record 2, A 1, A 2, Aug. 16, 1939, WPA Recordings, FBFP.

Turpentine." Stetson Kennedy asked, "Where did you first hear this song?" "When I was a small boy," Stacey replied. He explained how workers migrating from North Carolina to Georgia and then to Florida brought the tune and words with them. The song spoke of the turpentiners' continual state of indebtedness:

I'm goin to Georgy ta work in the turpentine,
When I got in Georgy, I didn't have long ta stay,
I got in debt and had ta run away.⁵³

James Griffin sang "Worked all Summer Long," a prison song learned during incarceration in the Dixie County Prison Camp. Down and out, feeling lonely and deserted, he had been forced to do hard labor for not paying his employer \$50 in back rent. Griffin told Kennedy the words to the song kept up his spirits and helped him survive:

Worked all summer long,
I didn't save my railroad fare
Hum. . . um. . . um. . .

Worked all summer long,
I didn't save my railroad fare,
I ain't got no money,
And my friends they don't even care.⁵⁴

Other turpentiners workers described "Joe Mows," good luck charms they used to win at gambling, and talked about their belief in ghosts, witches, and folk remedies. Still

⁵³ Record 4, Aug. 19, 1939, WPA Recordings, FBFP.

⁵⁴ Record 7, Aug. 19, 1939, WPA Recordings, FBFP.

others "talking from the heart" discussed their feelings, their thoughts about women and wives, saints and sinners, and their children.⁵⁵

Hurston left the recording expedition in Cross City, but Stetson Kennedy and Robert Cornwall continued down Florida's west coast. At Tarpon Springs the group recorded the fishing songs, love songs, and lullabies of the Greek fishermen. In Tampa and nearby Ybor City, Latins sang their drinking songs, lullabies, and children's game songs. Their work songs, tales, and jokes revealed their attitudes, their love of their children, and their propensity to have a good time.⁵⁶

Martin Noriega, a Cuban cigar worker, recounted the tale of "Juan Jose," a working man with a beautiful wife named Rose. The story derived from a novel read to the cigar workers as late as 1931 by lectors, paid readers who entertained the cigarmakers while they worked. Cigar factory owners had banned lectors from their factories in 1931, fearing that the lectors were spreading liberal ideas. The workers continued the practice by telling each

⁵⁵ Records 4-8, WPA Recordings, Cross City, Aug. 19, 1939, FBFL.

⁵⁶ Records 10-15, WPA Recordings, Ybor City, Aug. 24-25, 1939, FBFL.

other tales as they stripped, rolled, and boxed their cigars.⁵⁷

Florida was so rich in folk recording possibilities that the WPA Expedition barely scratched the surface. The Library of Congress left the machine in Florida so the FWP could record more of the folk songs the project had uncovered. During the next year, the Florida recording expedition returned to Ybor City and Tampa, recorded the songs of the Minorcans of St. Augustine, and captured the quaint dialect and lore of the Conchs of Key West and Riviera Beach.⁵⁸

The Key West area proved fertile ground for collecting Bahamian, Cuban, and Latin songs and lore. Theodore Rolle, a huge Bahamian nicknamed "Tearoll," sang the songs he knew, even those considered pornographic in the 1930s. Conservative congressmen may have taken exception if word had gotten out that the Florida FWP was recording songs with titles such as "I Got Those Syphilis Blues." Stetson Kennedy, who conducted the recording sessions, realized these songs were important because they revealed an aspect of the "forgotten American" rarely seen by outsiders. In addition to Bahamian tunes, the

⁵⁷ Records 10-12, WPA Recordings, Ybor City, August, 24, 25, 1939, FBFL.

⁵⁸ Records 1-7, Conch Recordings, Jan. 15, 1940 Jan. 15, 1940, WPA Recordings, FBFP.

Library of Congress graphite disks captured the lore, song, and rites of the Seminole, the fiddle tunes of the crackers near Sebrig and the songs of the Portuguese and Italian fishermen and African-American shrimp pickers of Fernandina.⁵⁹

What had begun as part of the research for the state guide turned into a major undertaking that documented the folklore and customs of the "forgotten American" more comprehensively than any other effort, before or since the thirties has ever done. Despite the richness and quality of the collection, very little of the material was published. Stetson Kennedy's volume, Palmetto Country, which drew heavily from the FWP folklife files, stood as a testimony to what the FWP could have accomplished.

⁵⁹ Record 16, January 23, 1940, Key West, WPA Recordings, FBFP; clipping, "Folk Songs Recorded By Congressional Library Group During Stay Here," St. Augustine Record, October, 1, 1939, Florida Historical Library, USF.

CHAPTER SEVEN: LET THE PEOPLE SPEAK

In 1937, William T. Couch suggested a project to Henry Alsberg that would "let the people speak for themselves." Just as the ex-slaves chronicled their experiences as bondsmen, so Couch believed Southerners should tell the nation of their lives in their own words. Their testimony would give the rest of the country a clear, authentic picture of southern life, correcting misconceptions projected in popular novels such as Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road (1932), which Couch believed presented a depraved image of Southern life. The life histories would profile the lives of people so ordinary that when asked about themselves they would retort, "What do you want to know about us? We're just plain folks."¹

¹ Federal Writers' Project, These Are Our Lives: As Told by the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1939), ix, x, xi, xix. The "Preface" written by W. T. Couch contains the best explanation of the goals of the Life History Program;

In 1938, when William Couch became the FWP's director for the southeastern region, Alsberg let him implement the life history program. As the director of the University of North Carolina Press and as editor of Culture in the South, Couch had long been associated with the regionalists at UNC who believed that southern problems could be solved through education and planning. He promoted life history interviews as a way of individualizing the South's problems and making them both credible and real.²

With the help of Ida Moore, a writer on the North Carolina project who had collected the life histories

Jerrold Hirsch, "Culture on Relief: The North Carolina Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943," (M.A. Thesis, Univ. North Carolina, 1972), 30-32; Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Maury Hirsch, Such As Us: Southern Voices of the 1930s (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1978), xviii-xx; Jerrold Hirsch and Tom E. Terrill, "Conceptualization and Implementation: Some Thoughts on Reading the Federal Writers' Project Southern Life Histories," Southern Studies (Fall, 1979), 351-362; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 152-54; McDonald, Federal Relief, 863-64.

² Hirsch, Culture on Relief, 61-66, see Chapter III, "Southerners Tell Their Own Stories," for an excellent discussion of Couch and the part he played as director of the FWP Life History Program; Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, eds., Such As Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1978), xvii; FWP, These Are Our Lives, x, xx-xxii; Gladys Buck, "The Burns Family," Florida Life Histories, # 2, 3, Southern Historical Collection, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, hereafter cited, SHC; Stott, Documentary Expression, 148-212; McKinzie, "Writers," 154-156; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 366-67.

of textile mill workers, Couch compiled "Instructions to Writers." The manual listed the types of persons the federal writers were to interview, how to record their testimony, and general topics the life history should cover. This included general information about the informants' backgrounds, their families, living conditions, work, and attitudes toward education, politics, and religion. The manual asked the writers to describe the size of the family, cleanliness and order of the house, home furnishings, bathroom facilities, and the pride that informants showed in their possessions.³

Guidelines were meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. "The stories will not be usable if they are constructed on a rigid pattern," Couch stressed. Workers were to use their discretion in securing any additional material which would "give an accurate, honest, interesting, and fairly comprehensive view of the kind of life that is lived by the majority of the people in the South." Couch wanted interviews that flowed naturally and that created human interest and sympathy. Above all, Couch stressed that insofar as possible "the stories should

³ Couch, ed. These Are Our Lives, ix-x, 419; McKinzie, "Writers," 154-56; Hirsch, "Culture on Relief," 76-81.

be told in the words of the persons who are consulted."⁴

Although the formal life history program operated for less than a year, federal writers in the southern states amassed over a thousand first-person interviews. Couch edited and published thirty-five of them in These Are Our Lives, which appeared in March, 1939. As Couch wrote in the preface, he purposely selected "stories which seem to me most typical and most important." Farm laborers, sharecroppers, mill and factory workers, a country doctor, a small town merchant, a justice of the peace, a lunch counter attendant, a boot black, and persons on relief poignantly told how they were struggling against the odds and surviving. Their testimony explained, in everyday terms, the displacement of farm workers by mechanization, the exploitation of mill labor, the competition small-town businesses felt from new chain stores, the struggle many poor southerners faced daily against deprivation and poverty, and the need for minimum wage legislation.⁵

⁴ Couch, ed., These Are Our Lives, 419; W. T. Couch to Carita Corse, Nov. 7, 1938, "Miscell. File, 1937-38, Ed. Corresp. Fl., WPA, R.G. 69.

⁵ Couch, ed., These Are Our Lives, ix-x; McKinzie, "Writers," 154-56; Terrill and Hirsch, eds. Such As Us, xix-xvi; Hirsch, "Culture on Relief," 76-81.

Couch planned other volumes, tentatively titling the series "Life in the South." Subsequent publications would broaden and expand the collection, profiling southerners in other states besides North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. However, less than a year after the project began, it ended as sponsorship of the arts projects was turned over to the states in August, 1939.⁶

In Florida, the most experienced writers conducted the life history interviews. Barbara Berry Darsey and Elvira Burnell, both of whom had been relief workers, collected compelling testimony from their former clients. Paul Diggs, a member of the African-American writers unit, interviewed blacks in a variety of trades, while Stetson Kennedy recorded the life histories of rum runners and cigar manufacturers.

These interviews were impressionistic rather than verbatim accounts. Recording the informants' life history meant taking laborious notes and transcribing

⁶ Four decades after the life history program ended, a number of them were published. Terrill and Hirsch, eds., Such As Us, contained thirty of the one thousand life histories gathered in the Southeast; Ann Banks, ed. First Person America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980) published the first anthology of national life histories; James Seay Brown, Jr. ed., Up Before Daylight: Life Histories from the Alabama Writers' Project, 1938-1939 (Univ. Ala: Univ. of Ala Press, 1982) presented the life histories collected by the Alabama Federal Writers' Project workers.

them later. An interviewer had to write quickly to keep up with a lively subject. Charles Foster, a supervisor on the Florida Federal Art Project who accompanied Veronica Huss on her life history interview of Wilber Roberts, recalled Huss "scribbled furiously all during the interview. She was doing her best to keep up with Mr. Roberts" As Foster noted, "Reconstructing her notes later meant laboriously transcribing them and fleshing out from memory what Roberts had said and the way he said it."⁷

The quality of interviews depended on the ability of a writer to find willing subjects and to get them to speak candidly about themselves. Before conducting an interview, Stetson Kennedy sat down with his subjects, chatted with them informally, and discussed local history or any other general subject. Only after he had established a good rapport did Kennedy ask them if he could record life histories. "Most people agreed," Kennedy recalled, "and the more notes you took, the more they liked it." He remembered some people grew silent when they saw a notebook, but others spoke freely, interjecting in the middle of an

⁷ Charles Foster, Conch Town USA (Gainesville: University of Florida Presses, 1991), 64.

interview, "'Don't put that down!' after coming up with something juicy."⁸

Paul Diggs established an immediate rapport with subjects that resulted in a number of outstanding interviews. On one occasion Diggs appeared, unannounced, in a camp of the South Florida Turpentine Corporation near Lakeland. Rich Grey, who ran the camp of "40 dilapidated shacks," immediately stopped Diggs and cried, "Who are you? And what is your business? We have rules and regulations in this here camp, and bein' as how I'se foreman, I have to know all the business what comes around here." Diggs explained his mission, whereupon Grey retorted, "So you're another of them government fellers! One come here jest last week about that Social Security business . . . and asked all kinds of questions; now you come along and want to know about my life. I had to answer enough questions last week." Diggs kept the conversation going, asking Grey about the horse he was riding and the saddle. The conversation flowed quite naturally to Grey's work as foreman. By keeping his subject talking about himself, Diggs obtained not only

⁸ Stetson Kennedy Interview, Jan. 6, 1989; Couch to Corse, Nov. 7, 1938, "Ed. Corresp.," Florida, WPA, R.G. 69; Hirsch, "Culture on Relief," 56-91, 82-85.

Grey's life history, but those of his wife and several turpentine workers.⁹

Most often, however, federal writers' credentials as government workers gave them immediate credibility and helped them to obtain interviews. While a FERA certification worker, Barbara Berry Darsey had gotten to know dozens of cracker families who squatted on land in the remote backwoods areas of south central Florida. Working in this capacity, she had gotten to know dozens of backwoods cracker families. When she became a life history writer, Darsey visited her former clients to record their life histories. The crackers spoke candidly about their feelings and personal lives, revealing details they would have hidden from most outsiders. Darsey recorded over a dozen candid interviews, some of the best in the Florida collection.¹⁰

⁹ Paul Diggs, "Rich and Lula Gray, Jan. 27, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #16, quote, 2, see also #19, 2-3, SHC; The best evidence of how the interviewer and informant interacted was the life history itself. Many interviews such as "Rich and Lula Grey," contained the initial banter between the FWP worker and his subject. This life history was a difficult one to obtain not only because turpentiners worked in remote areas, but also because the turpentine companies did not want the details of their exploited workers' lives revealed.

¹⁰ Federal Writers' Project, Florida, "Florida Squatters," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville, 1940), contains a number of the interviews Barbara Berry Darsey did with the

On occasion, informants confused the federal writers with WPA certification workers who could get relief jobs for them or family members. Wilbur Roberts, a blind Conch, asked Veronica Huss, "Won't you please go see the relief office for us, so my gal Bernice can get on in the sewin room?"¹¹

When the writers completed their life histories, they sent them to the state office in Jacksonville for editorial comment. Editors deleted superfluous details, corrected grammar and spelling, and often suggested additions to heighten the story's literary appeal and interest. Using these editorial comments, field workers rewrote the interviews, often returning to their subjects for more information or verification.¹²

The life history genre had been used in Florida before the formal program began in late 1938. In 1935, the FERA Sociological Survey of Ybor City collected autobiographical accounts of cigar workers and factory owners, revealing detailed information

Florida backwoods squatters. Darsey recorded the initial remarks between herself and her subjects.

¹¹ Veronica Huss, "Wilbur Edward Roberts, A Riviera 'Conch,'" Nov. 14, 1938, Florida Life Histories, #22, 2, SHC.

¹² Interview with Stetson Kennedy, Jan. 6, 1989.

about their lives and working conditions. In early 1936, the federal writers began interviewing pioneer residents in Florida cities in response to American Guide instructions. Rose Shepherd recorded life histories of early Jacksonville residents, who told about their experiences during the Civil War and the occupation of northern Florida by Union troops. They related incidents in Jacksonville's early history as well as recent trends toward urbanization and modernization.¹³

In 1938, when the formal life history program began, Florida writers began selecting a broad cross-section of people who detailed their experiences in a variety of circumstances. Several of the informants described their struggle. Annie Allen spoke of the impact of the Depression on her family. Like many others, the Allens had been poor before the national depression began. The collapse of the land boom in south Florida in 1926 ruined the family's contracting business. "When the Depression came, Mr. Allen lost

¹³ Gerardo Cortina Pinera, "Life History: Reader in Cigar Factory," Florida Life Histories #45; Jose Ramon Sanfeliz, "Cigar-maker-bar tender," Florida Life Histories #46; B. M. Balbontin, "Life history, Bar-tender in Cigar-factory Town," Florida Life Histories #47, SHC; Federal Writers Project, Florida, "Biographical Sketches, Jacksonville," (unpub. manus., P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville, 1936-1940) Rose Shepherd conducted most of these interviews in early 1936.

all the business he had," recalled Mrs. Allen, "and living in the house with him and the boys was just awful." Their economic ruin ended in personal disaster as well. Mr. Allen, embittered by his misfortune, deserted his family and divorced his wife. Without education or job skills, Mrs. Allen had no way of making a living, and the family was forced to go on relief. Conditions had not improved by 1939 when Elvira Burnell interviewed Mrs. Allen. The family was barely making a living. Unable to afford nutritious food, they subsisted upon beans, grits, corn meal and canned milk. The Allen's son had to quit school and get a job at the Miami Country Club to help support the family, while the daughter, unable to afford proper clothing, had to drop out of school.¹⁴

Hard times increased job insecurity. James Kirby Ward, expressed his concerns as he discussed his life as a bus driver in Jacksonville. He recalled that when he went to work for the company in 1918:

A man didn't need no pull or nuthin in them days to get a job. All he had to do was to use his own face. Business was good then and jobs was plentiful. But I've seen change with all kinds of business since then. When times get hard the transportation suffers

¹⁴ Elvira Burnell, "The Allen Family," *Life Histories Miami* (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville, 1939), 1-27, 10, 22-23, 18.

'cause people just don't ride like they do in good times. They get out and walk where they want to go¹⁵

As the life history of Albert Denman illustrated, many small business owners were just getting by. Mr. Denman barely made enough to restock his small country grocery store. "I don't make much now in the store, and never have, but it helps us, and gives us a chance to give the children some of the kind of food they need like milk, even if it is canned, and dried fruit, apples and bananas, and canned tomatoes," he told Barbara Darsey. "I never could buy all them things at retail the way prices is now," he added. Keeping the store also gave him meaningful work. He believed it better to "keep a tryin' to work than to give up and sit down and do nothin."¹⁶

Hard times affected even seasonal workers like John Whitehead, an African-American lawn cutter. During the Florida Boom, he told Paul Diggs, he "used to make four or five dollars a day." In 1939, when Diggs interviewed him, he earned just half that.

¹⁵ Lillian Steadman, "James Kirby Ward, Florida Life Histories, #29, 2-3, SHC.

¹⁷ Barbara Darsey, "Albert Denman, Country Store Proprietor," January 19, 20, 1939, Florida Life Histories, # 7, 4-5, SHC.

"Boom time don' over with now," Whitehead remarked.

"Do you rec'kon any more times coming like the boom?" he asked. In Lakeland, he told Diggs he faced stiff competition from other lawn cutters. As he expressed it, he had "to hustle to beat the odder fellows out dar. It's look like dar'is ten men to one job when work pick up." He and his wife lived marginally. "We don't have much to eat at times. Food is so high." They managed to survive by eating fruit their neighbors brought them from nearby groves and by using their son's monthly CCC check. His son's contribution paid for the license plate for the car. Surprisingly, John and his wife did not think themselves deprived. Mr. Whitehead told Diggs, "I only pay fifty cents for dat' shack and the rest goes for food. Most de' time we eat . . . only eat two meals a day, dat's 'nough for any body." ¹⁷

The Florida life histories show that many families had migrated to Florida during the thirties, looking for warmer weather and a cheaper place to live. Before the Depression, Henry and Rose Maddox lived in New York City. As Mr. Maddox explained, "We did not save much, though we always had the idea of a

¹⁷ Paul Diggs, "John and Hannah Whitehead, Lawn Cutter," February 17, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #30 A, 8-9, SHC.

farm in mind. But we had a nice apartment, went to shows, had good clothes, and [drove] a fine car." He extended too much credit to his customers, however, and lost his repair business. Bad luck and illness depleted their savings, forcing them to give up their dream of buying a farm, and they lived as squatter farmers near Lake Okeechobee. Like others who lived marginally, the Maddoxes did not have enough money to buy fresh meat and milk. Mrs. Maddox remained sick, lacking a proper diet to cure her anemia. "I have wanted to get a cow but haven't had the money," Maddox confided to his interviewer, "Cash is so scarce."¹⁸

Like the Maddoxes, many other Floridians struggled through the Great Depression. Mary Windsor complained that even when her husband Willie "worked steady," they barely seemed to keep up. "All the money we get goes fer food and a few clothes." The Blake family, which could afford only five dollars a week for food, survived on the cheapest, starchiest fare. "Our main food is beans, grits, potatoes, cabbage, light bread, and very little meat except hamburger once in a while," remarked Mrs. Blake. As she told Barbara Darsey, "It's the best I can do with

¹⁸ Barbara Berry Darsey, "Henry and Rosa Maddox," Nov. 22, 1938, Florida Life Histories, # 12, 1-7, quotes, 3, 6. SHC.

the little money I have to spend on the table."

Lolly Bleu and her family found it equally difficult to afford adequate, nutritious food. "On the little money we have, it is hard for all of us to have just what we need, and we never think of just what food we really want," Lolly told Mrs. Darsey.¹⁹

Not everyone interviewed by Florida's federal writers experienced deprivation. The Florida collection included profiles of middle-class families that lived comfortably and enjoyed their lives. Earl Guenther, a barber in Palatka, Florida, recalled, "I don't make anything like I used to--about half as much, I'd say--but then it only takes half as much to live here." Guenther's wife worked as a beautician and had a shop of her own adjoining his. Together the couple banked about fifty dollars a month. Their income enabled them to buy a five-room bungalow and a new car every year. They were able to take a month's vacation annually. To the Guenther's life was comfortable and pleasant. "My wife and I go out a great deal," Mr. Guenther noted. "We usually see a

¹⁹ Barbara Berry Darsey, "Mary Windsor," Florida Life Histories, #9, 8, SHC.; Barbara Berry Darsey, "The Blake Family," Jan. 30, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #3, 6, SHC; Barbara Darsey, "Lolly Bleu," Nov. 29, 1938, Florida Life Histories, #6 A, 9-10, SHC.

show a week and always go to high school athletic games."²⁰

Paul Haskins provided a comfortable income for his family repairing train cars in Miami. With his income, the family rented a nicely furnished bungalow, ate well, and bought a new car. His wife felt they were much better off than many other families. "He has steady work all year 'round, and that's something to be thankful for."²¹

"The Miller Family" life history, although not typical, revealed the self-indulgent life style of a Miami artist and his wife. The couple had no children. As Hazel Miller explained, "Bob doesn't want any. He says he can easily take care of the two of us, but if we had any children, he would be tied down too much." Although his work was seasonal, Bob Miller earned enough money in the winter months to sustain the couple throughout the year. They rented a pleasant apartment on Miami Beach and could afford occasional extravagances. At Christmas they took their first plane trip from Miami to Jacksonville. Mrs. Miller noted the plane fares were expensive and

²⁰ Bill Dowda, "Earl Guenther, Barber," Florida Life Histories, #20, 3-7, SHC.

²¹ Elvira Burnell, "The Haskins Family," Mar. 1, 1939, Florida Life Histories, # 4 A, 7-8, SHC.

they had to economize to make up for the expense, but the experience of flying made the trip well worth it. We were "there almost before we knew it. It took just a little more than three hours," she added. "If I can't have a home and family, we might as well use our money to fly where we want to," she said.²²

One of the major objectives of the FWP life history program was to profile the lives of southerners in a variety of trades. Florida offered a number of unique occupations, such as cigar making, citrus production, and phosphate mining. In addition, Florida in the 1930s was the center of turpentine, shrimping and fishing, and vegetable and truck farming. These interviews described attitudes toward working conditions including, low pay and long hours.²³

William Jackson candidly told Paul Diggs about his work as a phosphate miner. Like other unskilled and uneducated black phosphate miners, William Jackson found work in the mines hazardous and exploitative.

²² Dorothy Wood, "The Miller Family," Feb. 15, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #39, 5, 8, 11-12, SHC.

²³ Hirsch, "Culture on Relief," 101.

My main objection on this job is low pay and injury to my health. Changing of shifts and working in water cause a man to take medicine to keep his system in order At present I am a nozzle-man. My salary is \$.30 per hour for eight hours work, making \$2.40 a day. We only work four days a week, which gives me \$9.60. What worries me is, my income does not meet my bills. It keeps me below a decent standard of living.²⁴

The turpentine industry, another large employer of unskilled black labor, presented conditions far worse than those described by William Jackson. The lowest paid and most exploited of all Florida workers, turpentiners lived and labored under conditions similar to peonage. Despite their reluctance to speak to outsiders, Paul Diggs interviewed Rich Grey and several of his workers. Grey liked his foreman's position, a job paying \$2.50 per day. As he told Diggs, "I prefers living out here, as to bein' in town. We's free out here, and being as how I haves what want, why not!" He described his job to Diggs.

I civers from 20 to 30 acre a day. I watch out fer fires, and see thet the cup doan run ova. I also checks locations fer supplies of turpentine what's ready for dippin. We works around 40 peoples out of this still. Some is chippers, and they work in the woods. We only uses trees what's nine inches in diameter.

²⁴ Paul Diggs, "William and Corneal Jackson," Jan. 20, 1938, "Florida Squatters," (unpublished manuscript, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville,), 97-109, quote, 97.

The life of a tree is from four to five year in this business. Clay cups I used on the trees, and they holds anywhar from one quart to one-half gallon. We tries to empty them nigh-on to ever three week, when the sap is runnin. There ain't vera much to do in winter, but work picks up in spring and summa.²⁵

His workers barely made a living. As Grey admitted, the price the turpentiners had to pay for their food in the commissary "is much higher than they is in Lakeland . . . too high fer folks what lives here in this camp." Mack McMillan, one of the turpentine workers, chimed in:

Yeh, we kin hardly make a go at it, specially when we payin' 20 cents a poun' fer white bacon here at the commissary, and the same fer fresh po'k. Worser then thet, butta is 15 cents a stick, syrup comes from 25 cents to 40 cents a quart, and black-eye peas is 10 cents a poun. We only gits paid oncet ever five or six weeks and by thet time everything you make is done tuk up.²⁶

McMillan explained that a turpentine worker had to chip 6,000 trees a week to do well, and "it takes a good man to do thet." A good chipper only made six dollars a week. As he exclaimed, "what kin a feller do with that? Especially those what's got families. It shore is lucky that I'se single." Grey explained, "We

²⁵ Paul Diggs, "I Don't Do No Votin: Rich and Lula Grey," n.d., Florida Life Histories, #16, quote, 4, 1-8, SHC.

²⁶ Ibid., 6-8.

realizes that they doan make enough to live on, but it's the best we kin do. What they earn is all accordin to the price the boss is gittin fer the turpentine on the market."²⁷

Conditions in the state's citrus industry were little better than those in turpentinizing or phosphate mining. Citrus work was seasonal, and wages were low. Willard Mitchell a citrus grove duster, who worked at night, did better than most other grove laborers, earning 25 cents an hour rather than the standard 20 cents. But Mitchell realized he was not going to get ahead as a laborer and wanted "to save up enough money to quit his job and run his farm full-time." Barbara Darsey's interview captured his dream for a better future:

We have 40 acres of good farmin land down south of 'her in this country. We also have some lumber toward building our house. I aim to raise vegetables and hogs. We already got three fine hogs to get us goin'. We sure is aimin to make some money one of these days.²⁸

Like Willard Mitchell, Horace Thompson was a citrus laborer. He earned only 15 cents an hour, was not paid for night-time dusting, and did not receive

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Barbara Darsey, "Willard Mitchell, Citrus Grove Duster, Feb. 8, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #10, 12-14, 15, SHC.

additional wages for overtime. Feeling angry and exploited, Thompson quit his job, even though his family needed the money. "You know, Ma'm," he told Barbara Darsey, "us poor folks jest ain't got no chance in this world. We is victims of those what has got the money Jest seems like everything is agin' the poor man."²⁹

The life history interviews revealed the changes taking place in Florida's Latin-dominated cigar industry. As automated equipment replaced hand labor, many small factory owners had to close their marginal operations, putting skilled cigar rollers out of work. Stetson Kennedy interviewed Amanda, the wife of a small cigar manufacturer who had been driven out of business by the larger concerns. Her husband, Enrique had twelve men working in his factory at one time. "But you know he didn't have enough capital to keep going," Amanda explained. "He had to buy all his material for cash and sell for credit, so he needed more capital than he had," she explained. Enrique had to shut down his little factory, Amanda noted, but he

²⁹ Barbara Darsey, "Horace and Lily Thompson," Feb. 8, 1939, Florida Life Histories, # 6 A, 11, SHC.

lived for the day when he could start a factory of his own again.³⁰

In northern Florida, near the protected waters of St. Augustine harbor on the Atlantic coast, lucrative fishing and shrimping industries developed. Alberta Johnson, a writer in the Jacksonville office, profiled the life of one of these shrimping families, the Olsens. Mrs. Olsen explained her husband's job and her attitude toward being a shrimper's wife. She spoke proudly of her husband's work:

Some people seem to think that the ones who shrimp or fish for a living live in shacks, . . . [and] haven't any education or comforts. We have to economize and have many things to contend with, such as bad seasons, stormy weather, and costly accidents, such as happened recently, [but] . . . taken as a whole we . . . live [comfortably] . . .³¹

To Mrs. Olsen there was much more to shrimping than just luck. "You know my husband is called a lucky fisherman. But it is not so much luck as it [is] the understanding of the fishing area, watching closely the migration and . . . speed of the shrimp " During the shrimping season, her husband caught an

³⁰ Stetson Kennedy, "Enrique and Amanda," Florida Life Histories, #24 A, 8-9, SHC; Enrique and Amanda are fictitious names used for Kennedy's brother and sister-in-law who gave him this frank interview.

³¹ Albert Johnson, "The Olsen Family," Florida Life Histories, #15 A, 6, SHC.

average of 2,000 to 2,500 pounds weekly. By owning his own boat, Mr. Olsen was able to make a comfortable living and provide amply for his family. They were able to give their children the educational advantages they needed to "to take care of themselves later on."³²

The Florida life history writers profiled a number of farm families and workers involved in a variety of agricultural pursuits. These life histories shed light upon common bonds which held families together, the distribution of work, and women's roles in the family. As these interviews indicated, conditions varied widely among the state's farm families. At one end of the spectrum squatters barely made a living, while at the other, prosperous dairy and poultry farmers led comfortable, middle-class lives.

Cracker farmers "squatted" on the rich muck lands around Lake Okeechobee and scratched out a marginal existence, raising cabbage and other greens, hunting, and fishing. They bartered for the few dry goods they needed, exchanging their greens for flour and bacon. When they needed cash they cut firewood to

³² Johnson, "The Olsen's," 2-7, quote, 7.

sell in town. Their diet was simple. As one cracker told Barbara Darsey, "Just give us plenty grease, salt pork, a little cabbage, and flour dough fried bread and we is satisfied." Some of the cracker men worked on FERA and WPA jobs when they were available.³³

As Lolly Bleu indicated to Barabara Darsey, many of these backwoods farmers had migrated to Florida with great expectations. Bleu recalled that she and and her husband "came to Florida as we had heard so much about the farm land here, especially down around the Lake. We thought we could do better here than in Texas." But they never seemed to get ahead and "never have made the money that pa and his pa made on their nursery." Despite their meager circumstances, Lolly Bleu was content, "We like it here, though, and do like livin out this way" She did not seem to mind not having a car. As she told Darsey, "Some folks say we ought to have a car livin' this far out here in the woods, but we get on all right.

³³ Barbara Darsey, "Jason and Lily Iby, Florida Squatters," Florida Life Histories, #10, quote 5, 5-6, SHC.

And even if we could buy an auto, we couldn't run it.
We got too many children to have a car."³⁴

Paul Diggs' interview with George Derrick revealed the hard-working attitudes of truck farmers who raised strawberries, tomatoes, and other crops in southern Florida. Mr. Derrick told Diggs, "I wouldn't do anything else these hard times but farm . . . I try to keep something growing on my 3 acres all the time . . . After I get through with the strawberries I hope to have tomatoes coming on." In addition, he raised cucumbers, beans, cabbage, and sugarcane. Despite their constant effort and hard work, the family earned only \$100 a year.³⁵

The same hard-working attitude emerged in Walther Delmater's interview with Mrs. Grant, the wife of a dairy farmer. Mrs. Grant described her family's dairy operation. "Dairy life is not easy," she said, "but it furnishes us a fair living and as times are now, we feel that we are pretty lucky." Her husband had given up regular farming, which was "too uncertain," and bought a dairy business. The entire

³⁴ Barbara Berry Darsey, "Lolly Bleu, Florida Squatter," Nov. 29, 1938, Florida Life Histories, #5, 6-8, SHC.

³⁵ Paul Diggs, "George and Bessie Derrick," Feb. 10, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #17, 4-6, SHC.

family worked milking, pasteurizing, and delivering the milk. "We get along very well here on the farm," said Mrs. Grant, "and Dad would never be contented to live in the city. We have nearly everything we need and are as happy as the average family. Maybe one of the reasons we get along so well with each other is the fact that we all share some in the business of running the farm." She explained how each family member had his or her small business interest. She and a daughter ran a small poultry operation, a son raised bees and sold the honey, another son helped his father sell the milk, while the youngest child raised goats. "There is good money in goat milk. It brings anywhere from 40 to 60 cents a quart," she added.³⁶

The Suffolks, who had once run a large poultry farm, likewise explained their hard work and the satisfaction they derived from farm work. In 1939, they tended only 300 laying hens. They regretted they were not making as much money as they had a decade earlier. There had been "a great deal of satisfaction in making a lot of money," Mrs. Suffolk confided. But their more modest income was "sufficient . . . as our needs are few." Her

³⁶ Walter DeLamater, "The Grant Family," Jan. 15. 1939, Florida Life Histories, #11 A, 7-8, SHC.

husband could get work in town when he needed it, and she could sell some of her flowers.³⁷

Although their poultry business was one-tenth its former size, the Suffolks worked at it full-time. As Mrs. Suffolk explained, "A successful poultryman must be constantly on the go. The houses must be cleaned and disinfected regularly to keep down diseases and insects. Chickens must have food and water all the time, for the more they eat and drink the higher the egg production." They worked year round collecting the eggs, grading, washing, and packing them carefully. But in spite of the work, Mrs. Suffolk added, "I love it."³⁸

Not all of the Florida narratives spoke of the joys of farm work and family life. Jaydy Abbin told Lindsay Bryan that he and his father had given up farming in the muck lands because "we couldn't hardly make our seed and fertilize a-farmin." He was tired of working "fum kin till can't[,] . . . fum the time you kin see in the mawnin till you can't see at night" So he told Bryan he and his father "sot us

³⁷ Barbara Berry Darsey, "Virginia Suffolk, Feb. 14, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #8, 11-15, SHC.

³⁸ Ibid., 11-16.

up a little still down in the big hammock and went to makin shine. We done right good at that, sellin to bootleggers in Bradentown and Tampa, but it tuck most all we made to pay off the prohibition agents fer lettin us run."³⁹

The Florida life histories contain a wealth of information on immigration and the acculturation of ethnic groups who migrated to Florida seeking economic opportunity. Conch fishermen, who derived their name from the Conch-shelled animal they ate, emigrated from the Bahamas to southern Florida, one group settling in Key West and the other in Riviera Beach, a small inlet town north of Miami. In the 1930s, the Conchs lived in close-knit communities, largely shunned by outsiders because of their mixed Bahamian-black and British ancestry. Even though the Conchs were Anglo-Saxon in appearance, whites refused to let Conch children go to their schools. Despite their impoverished circumstances, they were ineligible for relief because they were British subjects.

Veronica Huss, who spent a year living in Miami and writing a special study of the Conchs, recorded their life histories. Her candid interview of Wilber

³⁹ Lindsay Bryan, "Jaydy Abbin, Florida Adventurer," Feb. 15, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #1, 4, SHC.

Roberts, an 84 year old Conch, described his life in the Bahamas and his experiences in Florida:

A-course the fishin and the like haint as god 'ere as in the islands. In the islands one could make a livin fishin, but 'ere them fish dealers charges us so much to rent their boats and nets--and buy gas from em too--we can't hardly get by. It still wouldn't be so bad if we could sell the fish we ketch for a fair price--but we have to sell all the fish to the fish dealers, or they won't let us have the boats and nets and gas on credit. They buys our catches for almost nothin, and then resells em at high prices. It's terrible. We go hungry from it.⁴⁰

Reverend Carl White, the Conch's minister, believed their poverty stemmed from being "betrayed and gypped right and left by the fish dealers Someday them fish dealers will pay for their sins in the Great Hereafter."⁴¹

Because they were poor and uneducated, the Conchs could do little to improve their status. They survived as a close-knit community, relying on each other for medical aid and folk remedies. In her interview, Izzelly Haines told Huss how she became a

⁴⁰ Veronica Huss, "Wilbur Edward Roberts, A Riviera Conch," Nov. 14, 1938, Florida Life Histories, #22, 3-4, SHC.

⁴¹ Veronica Huss and Stetson Kennedy, "The Riviera Conchs," Nov. 1938, Florida Life Histories, # 23, 1-10, quote 10, SHC.

midwife and decribed her practice in the Conch community:

I was born in the Bahamas and I'm still belonging to that country I been a midwife ever since I was 17. I useter tend all the women around where I lived in the Bahaymees I still go when I'm called 'ere in Riviera, but if it gits beyond me I always calls a doctor. Most of what I know I owe to me aunt for it was er what ad the books.⁴²

Haines recalled the difficult cases that she had tended, the lives she had saved, and the folk remedies she used. "As for pay, I takes whatever they give me," she noted. "I can't expect much for folks 'ere is most as poor as they was in the Bahaymees, so I'm willin to tend the women for whatever they can afford and am glad to do it," she added. In the end, she concluded, "What little I does git out of it 'elps though, cause there haint much in fishin now days."⁴³

In addition to attitudestoward work, the FWP life histories offer historians a vital source of information on political and racial attitudes in the 1930s. As the Florida narratives demonstrate, the poor and uneducated generally took a casual attitude toward politics. Lower-class women, who were

⁴² Veronica Huss, "Izzelly Haines," Oct., 1938, Florida Life Histories, # 21, 2-3, SHC.

⁴³ Ibid., 2-3.

generally uneducated, clung to the attitudes of their mothers and grandmothers. Their outlook refelected the nineteenth rather than twentieth century. Thus, most of them considered politics an unnatural and unfeminine pursuit. Lolly Bleu voiced the sentiments of a majority of Cracker women:

Votin is a man's business . . . Why the women ever wanted to get into it is more than I can see. What does a woman know or care about politics? Things have sure come to a pretty pass when the women have to leave their homes and vote.⁴⁴

Lillie Thomas, the wife of a citrus laborer, agreed. She felt politics was a man's business. "That don't seem like nothin for a woman to mess with, and I ain't never voted and I don't aim to start now," said Lillie. Annie Allen, poor, uneducated, and on relief, did not feel herself competent enough to vote. "When politics is mentioned, that's when I keeps my mouth shut for I don't know much bout that." Ella Burns and her daughter did not "think its the woman's place to vote." Mary Windsor, a squatter farm wife, voted only because her husband told her to: "I have voted some and jest like Willie told me to do He knows all about it and just what to do. I never could see

⁴⁴ Darsey, "Lolly Bleu," Florida #5, 11.

why women want to vote, my ma never did. But Willie says its the law and we got to do it." she added.⁴⁵

Like many of the Florida squatters, Jason Iby voted the preference of anyone who drove him to the polls or bought him a gallon of gas so he could drive to town himself. "Politics are all one and the same to me and what's the use to worry over 'em?" he said. Neither Henry Maddox nor his wife Rosa voted much. "Politics don't interest us," said Mr. Maddox. If he did vote, he had no personal preference but chose the way of his party, the Democrats, in national elections.⁴⁶

The life histories of middle class and educated Floridians underscore their interest and participation in politics. Paul Haskins, who made a comfortable living for his family as a railroad mechanic, said, "We never fail to vote and I do a good deal of readin' in order to keep up with politics in general I must admit . . . trouble is so many people take no interest" ⁴⁷ Dr. Albert Kershaw,

⁴⁵ Darsey, "The Thomas Family," Florida Life Histories, #6 A, 17, SHC; Burnell, "Anna Alden," Florida Life Histories, #5, 25, SHC; Burnell, "The Burns Family," Florida Life Histories, #2, 9, SHC; Darsey, "Jason and Lily Iby, Florida Life Histories, #10, 7, SHC.

⁴⁶ Darsey, "Jason and Lily Iby," 7; Darsey, "Henry and Rosa Maddox," 7.

⁴⁷ Burnell, "The Haskins Family," 13-14.

a well-educated and civic-minded African-American physician, took an active interest in politics and always voted. "I keep up with politics through reading and other sources," he commented.⁴⁸

As the Florida life histories demonstrate, few-working class blacks interviewed by the FWP writers voted or even expressed an interest in voting. Most of them were uneducated and easily intimidated. As Ed Gray, a Negro tenant farmer, told Paul Diggs, "It is hard for colored to vote. I have never voted I mind my own business." Patience Fletcher, who lived with several of her brothers and sisters-in-law, said, "No one votes in our house. My brothers don't think along that line. Where we come from a colored man better had not look like he wanted to vote, so naturally they do not think about such things down here." Robert Scot, a farmer who lived in Combee, a small African-American community near Lakeland, recalled that he had voted in South Carolina but had never voted in Florida. "Once I started to vote and was told that a nigger could not vote in a cracker election. So I stayed from the polls ever since," he confided. John Whitehead told Paul Diggs that he

⁴⁸ Burnell, "The Haskins Family," 13-14; Elvira Burnell, "Albert J. Kershaw, Jr. M. D." Feb. 20, 1939, Florida # 22A, 7, SHC.

"listens to what the white folks say about politics and doesn't think he knows enough to vote." He added, "Lucky we have folks to look out for us, if we didn't we would be lost in dis' old world." Likewise Rich Grey, a Negro turpentine camp foreman, confided to Paul Diggs, "I don't do no votin. A man had to know what he's doin' when he goes votin' or dealin' with pollytics. Lots of fool folks goes votin' and don't know what they're votin' fer. I ain't aimin to fool with hit myself."⁴⁹

The Florida life histories captured the racial attitudes of white Southerners who in the 1930s believed blacks were second-class citizens and an inferior race. Jaydy Abbin, who had lived in the South all of his life, went to Detroit to work in a Ford factory. He told Lyndsay Bryan, "them Yankee niggers haint gotta bitta manners. Why, the black sons-o-buzzards 'ull set right down by a white man, in a street car or any place. I got arrested twice up there fer kickin the tar outa niggers."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Diggs, "Ed and Ida Grey," 8; Paul Diggs, "Patience Fletcher," Feb. 24, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #31A, 8, SHC; Paul Diggs, "Robert and Rosa Lee Scott," n.d. Florida Life Histories, #32 A, 3, SHC; Diggs, "John and Hannah Whitehead," 9; Diggs, "Rich and Lula Grey," 9.

⁵⁰ Lindsay M. Bryan, "Jaydy Abbin: Florida Adventurer," 3.

Homer Jordan, a self-described "genu-wine Florida cracker," had worked 25 years selling furniture, clothing, and burial insurance to African-Americans in Jacksonville. Homer dealt with blacks on a daily basis and bantered with them freely. To Homer and many other southern whites, African-Americans were an inferior race. As Homer told Stetson Kennedy:

What beats me is why niggers ain a heap sight worse than they is. They puts up with more than I believe any other race of people could stand. The nigger's cursed. The Bible says so. Cursed like the mule. . . . But the mule and the nigger ain got no spirit--they was meant ta work. Just lookin at a nigger you can see he's cursed. He's cursed cause he's black-- . . . niggers ain like other peoples. They got no damn brain! Their heads is too thick--ya kaint hardly kill a nigger by beatin him in the head. Ya ever seen a nigger worry? Ya never will. Ya watch one set down with his mind all made up ta worry about sumpum another, and first thing ya know he'll be fast asleep!⁵¹

On the other hand, James Kirby Ward, a Jacksonville bus driver, did not adhere to the Jim Crow system. Ward refused to enforce the rule that blacks on buses had to surrender their seats to white people. "I don't have trouble with anybody Some people think a conductor ought to make the Negroes get up and give up their seats, but if they get on first and get the seats they are entitled to

⁵¹ Stetson Kennedy, "Mister Homer," Feb 3, 1939, Florida Life Histories, #26, 3, 1-3, SHC.

them," asserted Kirby. It was over just this point that the civil rights movement would begin a generation later.⁵²

World War II, full employment, and the prosperity that followed transformed the rural world of the 1930s. The Florida life histories preserved the simplicity, nobility, and struggles of an earlier decade. They documented the attitudes of the forgotten American who in his own words told later generations how he lived and felt. Still largely an untapped source of social history, they offer social historians rare insight into the personal lives of the lower one-third of the nation. By letting the people speak for themselves, the federal writers' had probed beneath the surface of American life and bequeathed to later generations rare documentation of American life.

⁵² Steadman, "James Kirby Ward," 9.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CLOSING DOWN

Four years after the Federal Writers' Project began, the average American still had little understanding of what it did. Americans saw red-white-and-blue signs for WPA construction projects, but the work of the Federal Writers' Project remained hidden from view. By the summer of 1939, only 19 state guides had been published. In the public mind, five years of subsidizing "writers on relief" had produced very little.¹

The program's lack of visibility, the eccentricities and radicalism of writers on the big city projects, and the clear lack of writing talent in most states exposed the FWP to controversy and derision. The conservative, anti-New Deal press highlighted the program's negative features.

¹ Pathfinder, Dec. 17, 1938, 4; Publishers' Weekly, Mar. 18, 1939, 1130. One FWP supervisor was asked if the chief function of the Writers' Project was to publish all manuscripts rejected by commercial publishers; "WPA Achievement," Time (August 12, 1940), 64.

Conservative editorials noted that in addition to WPA shovel-leaners, the Federal Writers' Project added pencil leaners. They echoed the sentiments of Republican presidential candidate Alf Landon, who, during the 1936 presidential campaign, lambasted the Roosevelt Administration for finding "the time to make tourist guidebooks." To these anti-New Deal critics, government subsidies for the arts were not only highly controversial, but unthinkable. They viewed a project that hired half-baked writers to record frivolous facts as a waste of tax dollars. "Who needed a guidebook in the middle of the country's worst depression?" they asked. Other critics warbed that governmental subsidies to the arts would create a permanent class of government pensioners. On the whole, conservatives viewed the arts programs as "ruinously wasteful and uneconomical."²

The experimental nature of the arts projects and their vulnerability to public opinion contributed to the termination of federal sponsorship in 1939. In 1935, the New Deal was at "high tide" and the arts

² Taber, "The Federal Writers' Project in the Pacific Northwest," 21-22; "Don't Doggle This Boon," Washington Daily News, Nov. 14, 1935, Box 101, Information Division Files, WPA, R.G. 69; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 48, 199-201; Glicksberg, "The Federal Writers' Project," 158; [MacLeish], Unemployed Arts, 109.

projects were politically invulnerable. The Emergency Relief Act of 1935 gave President Roosevelt a blank check to spend relief funds in any way he saw fit. Although never popular with conservatives, the arts projects encountered little political resistance until 1937, when political winds shifted, and a conservative backlash in Congress began to hammer away at the New Deal in general and the cultural projects in particular. The Writers' and Theatre Projects became political pawns in a deadly anti-New Deal chess game.³

In August, 1938, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, formed during the rise of Hitler, opened its hearings. Led by arch-Conservative Martin Dies of Texas, the Committee began investigating allegations that the Theatre and Writers' Projects were "infested with radicals from top to bottom." In addition, the Committee accused the Writers' Project of waste, inefficiency, and mismanagement. Several disgruntled FWP workers appeared before the Committee, giving unsubstantiated testimony that Communists controlled the big-city projects. Dies and

³ Rosenstone, "The Federal (Mostly Non-) Writers' Project," 403; Mangione, "The Federal Writers Project," 2, 32; Billington, "Government and the Arts," 474-76; Mangione, The Federal Writers' Project, 4-9, 216-17, 220; McKinzie, "Writers," 1.

his committee hearings drew greater attention than normal because Washington was nearly deserted, the President was out of town, and nothing of interest was happening. Dies outrageous, unsubstantiated charges made front- page headlines across the nation, smearing the reputation of the Federal Writers' Project for decades.⁴

Most of the Dies Committee charges were so reckless that New Dealers first chose to ignore them. However, as the Committee continued to level more and more criticism against the Writers' Project and received the unbridled attention of the national press, WPA officials decided to let Ellen Woodward, the head of Federal One, testify before the Committee to set the record straight. Woodward proved a poor witness. She was unprepared and ignorant of the day-to-day activities of the Writers' Project. After Woodward's failure, Henry Alsberg appeared before the

⁴ The Federal Theatre Project was attacked as savagely as was the Writers'. Hallie Flanagan could not keep Congress from terminating the Theatre Project. Billington, "Government and the Arts," 474-476; Glicksberg, "The Federal Writers' Project," 162-63; Rosenstone, *The Federal (Mostly-Non) Writers' Project*, 403; Aaron, "Giant Mirror," 278; Mangione, *Dream and the Deal*, 15-26, 91, see especially his chapter "Congress Sees Red," 289-328, which details the background and investigation of the Dies Committee; McKinzie, "Writers," 202-236; Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 181-200.

Committee. Alsberg, who was a trained lawyer, made an excellent witness. His conciliatory and humble attitude quickly won Dies' sympathy. He convinced the chairman of his staunch anti-communist views, pointing out that he had edited Letters From a Russian Prison, which "was considered the most devastating attack on the tyrannical Russian situation." Striking a resonant chord in Dies, Alsberg continued to testify "as one confides his family troubles to a friend." He spoke of the problems he had with radicals on the New York project but admitted he now had things under control. Alsberg's testimony more than likely saved the Writers' Project from being scraped altogether.⁵

The Emergency Relief Act of 1939, which went into effect on June 30, 1939, ended federal sponsorship of the writers, music and art projects, and terminated the Federal Theatre Project. The remaining arts projects had to find state sponsors to bear 25 percent of their operating costs. At this time, Congress terminated the employment of all relief

⁵ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, quotes 315, 317, 289-327, 4-5; McKinzie, "Writers," 202-236; Goodman, The Committee, 24-25, 42-43; Dies told Alsberg, "The Chair wants to commend you for your frankness, for your desire to give the committee the facts and for the attitude you have assumed."

workers who had been on WPA for more than eighteen months.⁶

In 1939, the nature of the Federal Writers' Project changed dramatically. The national office was scaled down and became primarily an advisory board. Henry Alsberg, the target of much of the criticism leveled against the project, was forced to resign. In August, 1939, by John Newsom, a no nonsense administrator who had been state director of the Michigan project succeeded him. Newsome ran the central office more efficiently but less creatively. He once made the remark, "This is a production unit, and it's work that counts. I've never been for art for art's sake alone." To his credit, Newsom brought the remaining state guides to completion.⁷

Although the state programs did not officially close until the spring of 1943, their most creative

⁶ "WPA Arts Program to Continue With Little Reduction," News Release, Sept. 10, 1939, Division of Information Files, Box 83, WPA, R. G. 69; Billington, "Government and the Arts," 474-476; Glicksberg, "The Federal Writers' Project," 162-63; Rosenstone, The Federal (Mostly-Non) Writers' Project, 403; Aaron, "Giant Mirror," 278; Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 15-26, 91; McKinzie, "Writers," 237-39.

⁷ "WPA Achievement," 64; McKinzie, "Writers," 237-241; "Killing the Writers' Project: Enforced Dismissal of Henry G. Alsberg as Director," The New Republic (Aug. 23, 1939), 62.

and productive phase ended with termination of federal sponsorship. Despite Alsberg's idiosyncracies and laxity in administration, his leadership had been the creative, driving force behind the Federal Writers' Project. Under state control, the Writers' Programs (their names were changed) turned to a multiplicity of smaller projects for state sponsors. By 1942, most of them were heavily involved in the war effort.⁸

In Florida, the termination of federal sponsorship meant the period of fear and anxious waiting was over. Most state relief workers sensed the end was coming. Stetson Kennedy had half jokingly written to Bob Cornwall, "No doubt upon the loss of my security wage I'll resort to subsisting on fish and crawfish. Thousands of others do it, why can't I? It must be great."⁹

Editorials in Florida newspapers charged the Writers' and Theatre Projects with being "very Red." The Florida FWP fought back, submitting a rebuttal to the local press and lobbying the state's legislature

⁸ Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 329-48; Penkower, The Federal Writers' Project, 215-237; McKinzie, "Writers," 237-258.

⁹ Kennedy to Cornwall, n.d. c, May, 1939, Kennedy papers.

to pass a resolution praising the project. Project supervisors wrote letters to Florida's Congressional delegation, urging their continued support of the Writers' Project. The strong show of local and state support helped convince Congress to continue the FWP under state sponsorship.¹⁰

The federal writers in Florida, however, who had been on the FWP more than eighteen months, lost their FWP jobs. Stetson Kennedy found a temporary position on the Federal Music Project writing publicity releases. Zora Hurston accepted a job at a black college in Durham, North Carolina. Others were not as fortunate.¹¹

In July, 1939, the Florida FWP officially became the Florida Writers' Program. State sponsors, the Florida State Planning Board from 1939 to 1940 and the University of Florida from 1940 to 1942, assumed financial responsibility for the Writers' Program and provided 25 percent of the FWP's non-labor costs.¹²

Under state control, the Florida program completed many of the projects begun under federal

¹⁰ Bob Cornwall to Stetson Kennedy, May 23, 1939, Kennedy papers.

¹¹ Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989; Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 253.

¹² "Final Report," 2.

sponsorship. However, it quickly become a booster organization, producing studies, pamphlets, and booklets for sponsors and co-sponsors. For Florida's Department of Agriculture, the Florida Writers' Program produced agricultural bulletins on a wide variety of subjects, including "Iceberg Lettuce," "Avocados," "Grow Your Own Vegetables," and "The Story of Sea Island Cotton." The State Chamber of Commerce sponsored the Florida Fact Book, a by-product of guide research. Project personnel provided editorial assistance for Southern Folklore Quarterly, which was edited at the University of Florida, a sponsor of the state program.¹³

Other guide research material was turned into supplementary school readers by the State Department of Education. These booklets covered a broad range of topics, including, "The Story of Naval Stores," "The Flamingo," "History of Citrus in Florida," and the pirate, "Black Caesar." The two largest school boards in the state in Dade and Duval Counties, sponsored "The Florida Everglades," "Light Houses," "The Spanish

¹³ "Final Report," 2-4, 11-12.

Moss Industry," "Timucuan Warfare," and "Native Palms of Florida."¹⁴

As war loomed on the European horizon, the activities of the State Writers' program turned to the civilian war effort. Recreational handbooks encouraged servicemen "to seek out clean recreation especially that which brings him into good moral contact with civilians." The staff produced readers on blackouts, first aid, accident prevention, incendiary bombs, good health, nutrition, and V-bombs for the State Defense Council, that sponsored the program during its last months. Charles Duncan, who wrote lectures on aeronautics for the Jacksonville Naval Air Station, was later hired to teach the classes. State writers produced radio talks and pageants to keep up civilian morale. In effect, the war activities of the state Writers' Program made it an adjunct of the United States military.¹⁵

As the nation mobilized for total war and under-employment ceased to be a problem, the national office

¹⁴ For the most complete bibliography on what the Florida Writers' Project produced, see Evanell Brandt Powell, The WPA Writers' Publications: A Complete Bibliographic Checklist and Price Guide of Items, Major and Minor, Of the Federal Writers' Project and Program (Palm Beach, Florida: Powell Publishers, 1970), 10-13.

¹⁵ "Final Report," 4-5.

suspended the state Writers' Programs in January, 1942. A few months later, in an atmosphere "markedly sad and quiet," the national office closed permanently.¹⁶

In Florida, the project had dwindled to a handful of older workers who were ineligible for military service. What was left of the program, a small technical writing unit for the State Defense Council, closed with the other WPA projects in March, 1943.¹⁷

As a relief project, the Florida Federal Writers' Project displayed all of the basic flaws of New Deal relief. It was poorly administered, politically vulnerable, and encumbered by mountains of red tape. Most often, its relief goals and production requirements worked at cross-purposes. The recruitment of the majority of FWP personnel from the relief rolls compromised productivity and quality. The rapid turnover of personnel, coddling mediocre talents, project infighting, clashes of editorial viewpoints, inadequate funding, and local political

¹⁶ McKinzie, "Writers," quote, 257, 256-57.

¹⁷ "Final Report," 5-6, 2.

pressures made Washington's insistent demands for copy of high literary quality hard to meet.¹⁸

Florida director Carita Corse faced her task with resolve, but she was limited by the realities of a project that insisted on using relief labor to turn out first-class guidebooks. The position required skills that few state administrators possessed. Corse was not a professional writer, nor was she an editor. However, her historical background, knowledge of research, and experience writing for state agencies contributed positively to the state program. She pointed out that her experience as an educator helped her in guiding her writing staff. As Florida's FWP director, Corse was at once creative, energetic, and imaginative. She managed to survive all seven years and the Florida program benefited from having only one director. Under her leadership, the Florida FWP produced an impressive list of publications.¹⁹

Although Corse was a qualified director, she was also a political appointee. Her political influence benefited the Florida program by keeping the state WPA

¹⁸ McKinzie, "Writers," 259; Mathews, "Cultural Democracy," 327; Billington, "Government and the Arts," 474-77; See also, Mangione, Dream and the Deal, 194-238, for an insightful critique of the harsh realities that ended this dream.

¹⁹ "Final Report," 1-12.

from exerting too much power over the Writers' Project, placing too many political appointees on the payroll, and sabotaging the program's objectives. Corse was a capable bureaucratic fighter who knew how to pull political strings when necessary to get what she wanted. Her political contacts insured a higher percentage of FWP publications than in other states.²⁰

Carita Corse was also an effective publicist. Under her direction, project releases heralded the achievements of the state writers. Florida writers also presented short radio programs. Corse encouraged local offices to use guide research to write historical pageants and engender public support for the guide project.²¹

As FWP director in Florida, Corse filled a job that in the private sector would ordinarily have been reserved for a man. In this respect, the New Deal was remarkably liberal in hiring women in responsible capacities. The directors of the Professional and Service Division and of the Federal Art Project in

²⁰ Stetson Kennedy Interviews, Aug. 2, 1988, Jan. 6, 1989.

²¹ Publicity Release, Files of Henry Alsberg, FWP, R.G. 69. Hurston staged an adaptation of her play, "From Sun to Sun."

Florida were both women, and Corse worked closely with them.

For a white southerner, Corse was remarkably liberal on racial issues. She actively encouraged the creation of a black unit in Florida and directed the collection of ex-slave narratives. Corse's liberalism emerged most clearly in her friendship with Zora Hurston. Corse befriended Hurston, treated her as an equal, and made allowances for her outlandishness, flamboyance, and erratic work schedule. No other white southern director, with the exception of Eudora Ramsey Richardson of the Virginia Project, would have accepted Hurston's invitation to attend an all-black church service. The fact that Corse did demonstrated her unusual open mindedness.²²

However, Corse's liberalism had its limitations. She was a product of her times, steeped in racial stereotypes, fears, and the Jim Crow system of the 1930s South. Her editing of the final manuscript of "The Negro in Florida" and deletions in the state Guide reflected this. She did not use the bulk of the research done by the black unit and altered its research to fit her paternalistic views on race.

²² Williams, "Interview with Carita Corse," Mar. 18, 1976; Hemenway, "Interview with Carita Doggett Corse," Feb. 2, 1971.

Also, when orders came from Washington to reduce the state's employment quota, African-Americans were the first persons she fired.²³

The FWP did not enhance Corse's career as a writer. But the administrative experience that she gained in directing a large governmental enterprise helped her to obtain a position as state director of the Florida organization of Planned Parenthood.²⁴

Since few professional or aspiring writers worked for the project, the Florida FWP helped writers' careers in only a few cases. Stetson Kennedy launched his writing career as a direct result of his work on the Florida Writers' Project. His first book, Palmetto Country appeared while he was still on the project while his exposure to all manner of Florida life aided significantly in the publication of his later works, I Rode with the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow Guide to the USA. The FWP sustained Zora Neale

²³ Williams, "Interview with Carita Corse," Mar. 18, 1976; "Final Report," 3-4. The report stated that "the Florida Negro, sponsored by the State College for Negroes, and edited by Zora Neale Hurston, noted writers and authority on Negro life, . . . was not completed because of war time conditions."

²⁴ Evanel Brandt to Pam Bordelon, Jan. 21, 1989.

Hurston while she wrote Moses Man of the Mountain, published in 1939 just after she left the project.²⁵

Most of the personnel on the state project were white collar workers who quickly returned to private employment when the war started. In several cases, their project experience helped them find employment. One writer who did a great deal of research on blood banks during the early war years became manager of the Dade County Blood Bank. A state editor who prepared lectures for the Jacksonville Naval Air Station was offered a job directing a team of aeronautics instructors. Two FWP writers took jobs with advertising agencies, while another accepted a position with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A lawyer "whose morale had been seriously undermined" by the Depression, attributed "his rehabilitation to work on the project." When his project employment ended he was hired by the U.S. Attorney General's office. As the war years brought about renewed

²⁵ Stetson Kennedy, Palmetto Country (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1942); Stetson Kennedy, I Rode With the Ku Klux Klan (London: Arco Publishers, 1954); Jim Crow Guide to the USA (London: Lawrence Wishart, 1959); Zora Neale Hurston, Moses, Man of the Mountain (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1939); Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 256.

prosperity, Robert Cornwall and several editors resumed their careers as newspapermen.²⁶

For most Florida writers, project employment meant subsistence during hard times. As a part of the conservative Roosevelt revolution, the Florida project preserved skills and boosted the morale of hundreds of project workers and their families. To Roosevelt, people mattered more than ideas. To Florida's writers and their families, the Writers' Project experience demonstrated that a democratic government could responded to the needs of all its citizens.²⁷

When the national and state projects closed in 1943, few people comprehended the significance of the FWP files. In Florida, Carita Corse arranged for unpublished manuscripts to be preserved at the University of Florida, an FWP sponsor from 1940 to 1942. Corse sent "train loads of project materials to Gainesville." Some time later, she learned with horror that the librarians at the University of Florida had sorted through the files, kept some of the

²⁶ "Final Report," 9; Interview with Stetson Kennedy, Aug. 2, 1988; Bernard De Voto, "The Writers' Project," Harper's Magazine (Jan. 1942), 221-223. De Voto provides one of the best contemporary assessments of the FWP.

²⁷ MacLeish, "He Cherished American Culture," New Republic CXIV (Apr., 15, 1946), 540.

materials, and thrown the rest away. The Florida project's collection of hundreds of documentary photographs was broken up and filed according to various subjects. In effect, it had disappeared. As Corse summed it up in an interview years later, the attitude they had was that it was a defunct project."²⁸

The Florida Historical Society received miscellaneous files, mostly raw field copy. Interested project members, realizing that FWP materials were being discarded, carted home duplicate files before they were destroyed. Stetson Kennedy saved folklore, life histories, correspondence, and miscellaneous project data. All other materials were burned.²⁹

²⁸ Hemenway, "Interview with Carita Doggett Corse," Evanell Brandt, Mar. 31, 1990, telephone interview.

²⁹ Evanell Brandt, Mar. 31, 1990, telephone interview; Interview with Stetson Kennedy, Aug. 2, 1988.

EPILOGUE

What the federal writers in Florida and elsewhere had done was to create with words a giant mirror of the American scene. The frontispiece of the program, the state guide, documented life in Florida more realistically and comprehensively than any other single source has ever done. Mile by mile, the Florida guide writers described the state's physical features and highlighted its cultural life. In an effort to find something different to say about each Florida town and the surrounding countryside, the Florida guide writers sought out and interviewed a wide variety of local informants. The end result was a startling portrait of the state.

The focus was on the community as the root of American cultural life. At a time of economic and social chaos, the community became a symbol of strength and order. The individual was seen as a product of his communal environment. As Ruth

Benedict had written at the beginning of the decade, the "life-history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community." Everything in the Florida guide exhibited this communal viewpoint. The individual alone was less important than his or her life in relation to the community. The Florida writers found Ft. Myers' provincialism--its refusal to install free electric lights because they might keep the cows awake--more significant than Thomas Edison's offer. Likewise, Ormond Beach resident John D. Rockefeller was not important as a robber baron, or a millionaire, or the founder of Standard Oil Company. Florida barely mentioned these facts. Instead, the guide writers highlighted his relationship in the community, his neighborliness, and his philanthropy in Ormond Beach.³⁰

As Florida demonstrated, the guide writers imparted a cultural flavor to each Florida town. They described ordinary people doing ordinary thing, such as working, shopping, going to town, and enjoying Saturday nights. The best town histories recreated

³⁰ Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture, with a new preface by Margaret Mead (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), xvi, 3; Florida, 341-43, 399-400.

the pace and atmosphere of daily life: Key West on Saturday night, Tallahassee on Saturday afternoons, La Belle as an outpost of nineteenth-century frontier life.

The tour form, the most unusual and the most misunderstood feature of the American Guide Series, was largely responsible for the guide's unusual format. Recording the nation's history mile by mile meant canvassing the backroads of the nation, observing, questioning, and recording what they saw. Following the documentary impulse that was so much a part of thirties America, the guide writers did not attempt to analyze or draw conclusions. They merely observed and listened and recorded their impressions. They collected the "raw stuff" of history, a registry of "what most deeply interested the contemporary mass record."³¹

Following guide instructions sent out from the central office in Washington, the field workers searched diligently for new and unusual sources of documentation. As the Florida guide demonstrated, the best material came from local guide worker's personal observations and their interviews with ordinary Americans. Here was Everyman interviewing Everyman to

³¹ Kazin, On Native Grounds, 381.

write the state's history and document its life. And the Florida guide unmistakably illustrated their point of view; it was a product of their predilections and selection process. The writers' field copy presented the most faithful representation of the contemporary mass record. However, very often the images that guide writers presented in their field reports were distorted by the editorial mill. The state office wanted a guidebook that highlighted the state's most glamorous features, attracted tourists, and boosted the state's sagging economy. For this reason, the original cover on the moderately-priced Florida guide pictured an arresting beach scene with palms. No mention was made of the seamier side of Florida life, migrant problems, labor conditions, peonage, and the state's harsh penal system.

Despite editorial distortions, the American Guide Project opened up new fields of inquiry and extended the definition of who and what constituted an American. As guide research widened and deepened, the federal writers began to probe more deeply beneath the surface of American life. Whereas the state guides provided a physical description of the nation, folklore and first-person interviews reached deeper into the fabric of American life than did guide

research, offering insight into the personal and unique. African-American studies, folklore, and life history interviews focused on ordinary Americans, those who left few written records. These programs collected social documentary in the purest sense. They communicated feeling and life experience.

In Florida, black writers extended guide research techniques, using first-person interviews to chronicle the lives of former slaves. For the first time, the nation learned about slavery from their unique point of view. The Florida ex-slave narratives demonstrated that black interviewers were able to get at the truth of the slave experience. Their interviews, taken as a composite, recreated the world of the slave community, revealing attitudes and feelings largely hidden from whites. The Florida narratives proved that slaves had had their own separate sense of identity and their own culture as slaves and since emancipation. Their testimony also spoke of the contemporary world in which they were living and their feelings concerning economic deprivation and political discrimination. The town histories, based largely on first-person interviews with blacks from a wide variety of occupations, presented a communal history of the African-American experience in Florida.

Miscellaneous reports, prepared as background chapters for "The Negro in Florida," supplied a vast compendium of data on labor conditions, religion, and education. The massive documentation of African-American life by Florida's black writers indicates that with stronger leadership and direction, "The Negro in Florida" could have been a first-class work, opening new lines of inquiry and offering rare insight into African-American culture.

Research for the individual state guides led to a massive inventory of the nation's folklore. Collecting the oral literature of the people, those who ordinarily left few written records and whom historians had traditionally rendered inarticulate, rounded out the national portrait. Under Benjamin Botkin, the FWP folklore program revolutionized the discipline by extending and broadening its application. The FWP proved that amateurs could collect credible lore and, in many cases, could penetrate cultures inaccessible to academics. Florida's collection offered rare insight into the process of cultural transmission and acculturation. African-American songs and lore, clearly the most outstanding feature of the Florida FWP collection, demonstrated not only the cultural integrity of the

black world. They also documented local attitudes and mores, revealed subtle and acceptable forms of social protest, and illustrated how blacks had survived despite a harsh and oppressive environment.

The life history program exposed the nation's soul. These first-person interviews let ordinary Americans explain the truth about the nation. Designed to include the life stories of a broad, cross-section of national life, they made it possible for other Americans to see, know, and feel the details of another's existence. Had the series been published as planned, the life history interviews could have had a greater impact on the writing of southern history than they have had. The Florida life histories revealed the shape ordinary Floridians gave their experience and the meaning they found in their lives. Their testimony offered rare insight into interpersonal dynamics, the structure of the family, and contemporary attitudes.

The work by the federal writers in Florida was but one part of the massive national inventory that had created in words a giant mirror of the American scene. Only a small portion of their work was published and held up for the nation to see. The largest segment, African-American materials, folklore,

and life histories, which presented the clearest and most vibrant image of national life, remained in the files unused and improperly preserved. Throughout the McCarthy Era, Americans tried to forget a project which had hired Communist sympathizers, a project which had wasted millions of dollars on make-work programs. Several decades passed before Americans chose to examine the creative work of a nation on relief and consider the giant mirror of the American scene that federal writers in each state had helped to construct.

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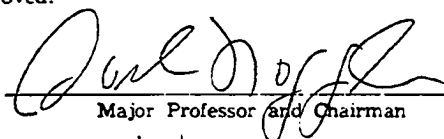
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT


Candidate: Pamela G. Bordelon

Major Field: History


Title of Dissertation: The Federal Writers' Project's Mirror to America:
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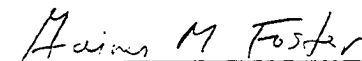
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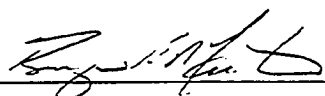

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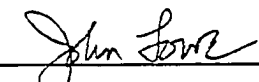

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