



Fireside Chatter: The Wisdom of the New Deal

Resource Guide of **Camp We-Kan-Tak-It**
Celebrating 75th Anniversary of the WPA!

Milwaukee Public Theatre & Voices Theater
Wisconsin Humanities Council
2010 Major Grant Recipients



Vol.1, No.1 June /Aug, 2010

Work Builds Confidence!

Introduction

The *Fireside Chatter* is a resource guide for group or individual study on the Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects in Wisconsin. The guide is named after the series of thirty evening radio speeches called "fireside chats" given by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) between 1933 and 1944. **(FDR Picture above: chat #8, 9/06/36; www.history.sandiego.edu)**



The *Fireside Chatter* is a companion guide to *The Humdinger*, a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) resource created for the multi-media play, **Camp We-Kan-Tak-It**. (Copy of *The Humdinger* available at www.milwaukeepublictheatre.org) The study guides and play are the collaborative creation of Milwaukee Public Theatre and Voices Theater of Medford, WI. These projects received the 2009 and 2010 Wisconsin Humanities Council Major Grant - Wisconsin: Making It Home. **(View details at: www.wisconsinhumanities.org)**

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Where's My New Deal?	2
Infrastructure/Public Works	2
What was the WPA?	2
Federal Project One	3
Federal Arts Project	3
Federal Music Project	3
Federal Theater Project	3
Federal Writers Project	4
Historical Records Survey	4
National Youth Administration	4
<i>My Day</i> by Eleanor Roosevelt	4
Milwaukee Handicraft Project	5
Greenbelt Communities	5
CCC/WPA & Our Park Systems	5
Research Tips	5
How did WPA Work?	5
Sample WPA Reports	6
Research Topics	7
WPA Lesson Plans	7
Suggested Reading	8
Websites	8



Above: *The Greendale Blueprint: Celebrating 70 years of New Deal Urban Planning*. Editor: Christopher Miller; [www.Express Milwaukee.com](http://www.ExpressMilwaukee.com); July 30, 2008. Photos courtesy of Greendale Historical Society.



Clip art border by George (Bud) Bush; Artist of CCC Company 383; La Porte, PA.

Where's My New Deal?



The CCC program was created within the first 30 days of FDR's administration in 1933. After undergoing many administrative changes, it made slow but steady progress in stimulating the economy and providing financial relief for the poor and unemployed.

However, by January of 1935, many Americans were still waiting for their New Deal. "Useful public works" performed by the CCC were mostly blue-collar construction and conservation jobs for young men between the ages of 17 and 25, while the rest of the working population was forced onto relief rolls. To remedy the problem, Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act on April 8, 1935. This legislation supplied federal funds for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) established on May 6, 1935 for the purpose of creating jobs for all Americans.

Infrastructure is a word combination of the Latin prefix "**infra**", meaning "**below**" and "**structure**". The term refers to the technical structures that support a society such as: roads, bridges, water systems, sewers, power grids, and telecommunications.



The term **public works** refers to government-owned and operated infrastructure as well as public buildings such as: schools, libraries, museums, parks, community centers and court houses. Public works generally refer to physical assets needed to deliver public services (See both terms at: www.wikipedia.org) Most Depression-era documents exclusively use the term "public works" while today's documents tend to use the word "infrastructure."

What was the WPA?

The WPA was a group of federally-funded programs under the direction of FDR aide, Harry Hopkins. It employed people of every skill level and profession, providing training where necessary. Workers earned the prevailing wage-scale for that job in the area. Under the WPA program, grants and co-match funds were made available to any tax exempt, government-owned public works department that created useful employment projects for Americans on relief. Almost every community in the United States has a park,



Picture left:
Title: *The New Deal*. Artist: Conrad Albrizio, 1934. Commissioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture; Leonardo da Vinci Art School; New York, NY. Image reproduced with permission from Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum; Hyde Park, NY.

bridge, road, airport, sewer and communication system, hospital or school constructed by WPA workers. Congress intended to continue the program until the economy recovered. While some programs phased out earlier, all WPA programs were officially terminated on June 30, 1943.

During the Great Depression, the WPA was the largest employer in the country and the Roosevelt administration was the first in America to establish relief programs that supported the fine arts.

Federal Project One

The main component of the WPA was *Federal Project One*. Under this title, five divisions employed Americans in documenting our culture through art, music, theater, literature, and historical records.

Picture below: Title: *Dairy Farming*. Artist: Richard Jansen, 1940. Reedsburg, WI Post Office.

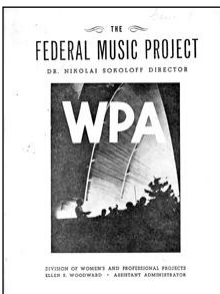


The Federal Art Project (FAP; 1935-1943)

employed easel painters, sculptors, muralists, poster artists and graphic artists to produce displays and ornamentation for tax-supported buildings. Wages varied from \$18.50 - \$23.50 per week to complete a given project. The project categories for artists in Wisconsin were Milwaukee Public Museum, the Index of

American Design in Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, and the Division of Creative Painting, Sculpture, and Printmaking. Many Post Office murals were supervised and funded by a separate project sponsored by the U.S. Treasury's Department of Painting and Sculptures (See: www.wpamurals.com/Wisconsin)

Picture: Poster for the Federal Music Project; Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, Director; Division of Women's and Professional Projects; www.broward.org



The **Federal Music Project (FMP; 1935-1939)** was divided into educational and performing units for instrumentalists, soloists and vocal ensembles, vocal quartets, grand operas, symphonies, theatre orchestras, and dance bands. The general purpose of the Music Project was to educate Americans in the appreciation of musical opportunities and provide free entertainment in outdoor parks and concert halls. In addition to performances, music professionals maintained music libraries and did piano tuning.

Picture: Poster for a Living Newspaper performance of *Spirochete* at the Blackstone Theater in Chicago, IL; April 29, 1938; www.aladin.wrlc.org



The **Federal Theater Project (FTP; 1935-1939)** employed out-of-work actors, vocalists, musicians, artists, writers, and directors. Its secondary aim was entertainment for poor families and creating relevant artworks depicting our American heritage. In order to serve a wide geographic area, theater projects toured in rural areas. For example, the Illinois circuit, with companies from Chicago and Peoria, gave performances in Wisconsin and Illinois. **Camp We-Kan-Tak-It** is a sample of a Living Newspaper-style production from the FTP. All dialogue and songs literally came from CCC camp newspapers, as was typical of this type of scripting.

Graphic: From *The Wisconsin American Guide Series*, p. 148.



The **Federal Writers Project (FWP; 1935-1943)** hired professional authors to document their travels through their home states. The *Wisconsin American Guide Series* was copyrighted in 1941 by the Wisconsin Library Association. It contains essays on a variety of historic and cultural topics in addition to a travel guide that describes the features of every town and village along the way. (See new reprint of *The WPA Guide to Wisconsin* by Norman Risjord in the suggested reading list.)



Graphic: From *The Wisconsin American Guide Series*, WPA drawing of Fr. Marquette and Native Americans, p. 49.

The **Historical Records Survey (HRS 1935-1943)** employed clerks, teachers, writers, librarians and archivists to catalog, analyze, and compile inventories of state and county records, newspapers, manuscript collections, genealogies, church archives and cemetery records. Microfilming projects recorded past census records and

minutes of Federal agency meetings. This project also recorded oral histories of unique American experiences such as slaves, Native Americans, pioneers and immigrants. Many of Wisconsin's records are available through interlibrary loan. Contact the Reference Librarian at the Wisconsin Historical Society for assistance.

www.wisconsinhistory.org

National Youth Administration (NYA)

Picture: First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt writing her syndicated column, *My Day*, 1936 (www.pbs.org)



First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt took an active interest in the effect long-term unemployment and borderline poverty had on America's youth. She told the New York Times: *I live in real terror when I think we may be losing this generation. We have got to bring these young people into the active life of the community and make them feel that they are necessary.* (www.gwu.edu) In June 1935, FDR signed an executive order establishing the **National Youth Administration (NYA)**, a WPA New Deal program designed specifically to address the problem of unemployment among Depression-era youth.

My Day by Eleanor Roosevelt

MILWAUKEE, November 12, 1936—We arrived this morning in Milwaukee...to visit the NYA sewing project for girls...This particular sewing room has space in the Courthouse and one hundred and ten girls work in three shifts at the machines and rug weaving looms. These youngsters on NYA projects in Wisconsin have the benefit of vocational guidance. Each case is studied as an individual case and the background and experience of the individual is taken into account as well as the ambitions and desires of the boy or girl. An effort is then made to give them work along lines which will help them to fit into some kind of useful activity, and at the same time, they are given school instruction in such things as they may need to supplement what they can learn at work.

I was particularly interested in the rug weaving because the rugs I saw were not only well executed but the designs and colors were very pleasing. So often in WPA handiwork projects, the skill is there but the taste, which is after all an important part, both in beautifying and in making a saleable article, is entirely absent. In this case skill and taste are combined and the teachers are doing an exceptionally good piece of work. (Content edited; Collection of My Day columns www.gwu.edu)

Milwaukee Handicraft Project

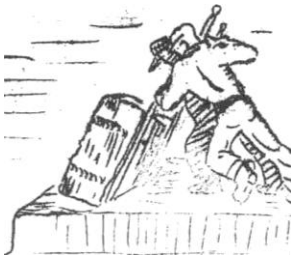


Milwaukee State Teachers College (now UW-Milwaukee) developed a light manufacturing project to employ unskilled women for the Milwaukee Handicraft Project. Under the direction of Mary Kellogg Rice, unemployed graduates of the Art Education Department were hired to design articles, make prototypes and teach workers to produce articles used by schools, hospitals, orphanages and other tax-supported institutions. Sheridan Park in Cudahy became one of the WPA Toy Loan Centers for the Handicraft Project.

Picture: WPA dolls of Milwaukee, 1939; www.newdeal.feri.org/dolls

Greenbelt Communities

One of the most unique projects undertaken by the WPA in Wisconsin was the 572-single and multi-unit housing development in Greendale. Built as a project of the Resettlement Administration, its designers combined the benefits of rural life with the closeness of an urban community. There were only three Greenbelt Communities built by the WPA in the entire U.S. They are located in: Greenbelt, Maryland, outside Washington, D.C.; Greenhills, Ohio, north of Cincinnati; and Greendale, Wisconsin. (www.thegreendalehistoricalsociety.org)



CCC/WPA & Our Park Systems

After 1935, every CCC camp in Wisconsin hired WPA workers for a variety of jobs that ranged from unskilled labor to professional services. When some CCC camps were ordered closed in 1937, park work was completed with WPA workers. Milwaukee County had nine CCC camps: Estabrook, Sheridan, Kletzsch and two camps each at Bluemound, Honey Creek and Whitnall Park. (See the history of our park systems:

www.dnr.state.wi.us; www.county.milwaukee.gov/history or your local community site. Graphic: Co. 1699 camp newspaper, *Skipper's Scandal*, Camp Estabrook; Jan. 1939)

Research Tips: When using newspaper articles in your research, be aware that printed quotes often used the letters *CCC* and *WPA* interchangeably. The CCC program started on March 31, 1933. The WPA did not exist until April 8, 1935. If your newspaper article claims something was built by WPA workers in 1933—it is inaccurate. Also, be aware that the name of the Works **Progress** Administration was changed to the Works **Projects** Administration on July 1, 1939.



How did the WPA Work?

A formal Presidential project application was prepared by a government agency who became the co-sponsor. The application described the project and contained an estimate of costs, such as hourly wages for workers, the number of workers and supervisors needed, estimated man-hours for completion of the project, and cost of materials. Once approved by the proper state authorities, a

project was assigned a state number. The formal application for funds was sent to the WPA Regional Office in Chicago, IL. A copy was saved in Madison and at the District WPA Office in Washington, D.C.

Upon receipt of funds, a **Help Wanted** sign describing the job and hourly wage was posted at the Unemployment Office and an ad was printed in the local newspaper. A sign was also posted at the job site labeling it as a WPA project. The person hired was limited to 30 hours or less a week of work on a rotation basis. A monthly progress report was completed and sent to the regional office.

Left: Sample WPA Project Application. Right: Sample Progress Report: Wisconsin Historical Society: Madison, WI; Wisconsin Conservation Commission 1937-1941; Series 271, Box 904, Shelf: 05/15/H-P.

WPA FORM GO-1108

SPONSOR Wisconsin Conservation Department
 LOCATION Ashland County
 DETAILED LOCATION Copper Falls State Park
 DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED WORK General Park Improvement

DESCRIPTION OF UNITS OF WORK	QUANTITY	UNIT	UNIT PRICE	TOTAL COST
Trail improvement	6	mile	1020 --	6118
Refuge signs	100	each	7.22	722
Landscaping	20	acres	312.25	6245
New Area	16	acres	5464	8737
Council fire arena	1	each	1212	1212
Shuffle board court	1	each	909	909
Bathing pond	1	each	8400	8400
Custodians dwelling	1	each	8173	8173
Play ground	1/2	acre	2612	1306
Contact station	1	each	4762	4762
Parking area	1/2	acre	2752	1376
Park lights	5	each	163.80	819
Rustic signs tables & benches	100	each	34.81	3481
Shelter houses	2	each	995	1990
Tree thinning	200	acres	30.21	6042
Supervision	63	MM	80.43-	5067

R 9/12/39 Wisconsin Conservation Department Madison, Wisconsin File: WPA *CPH*

PHYSICAL PROGRESS AND COMPLETION REPORT FOR WPA PROJECT UNITS Date Oct. 5, 1940

To: Mr. A. M. Keister, Supervisor of Work Projects, 149 E. Wilson Street, Madison

UNIT IDENTIFICATION: Ashland 6 7D-02-2048 18399
 County Unit No. Serial No. W.P.No.

LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT UNIT: Copper Falls Park, Mellen, Wis.
 Location

Description: Construction of 3 well pits, one pump house, demolition of old pump house and laying 1250 ft. of water main.

Number of crews working 1 Number of men in Crew #1 10 #2 #3 #4

REPORT OF COMPLETION OR PROGRESS FROM START OF UNIT TO DATE OF REPORT:
 Acres completed Miles completed Rods completed
 Number and type of bridges built Number and type of culverts installed

General description of all other work accomplished since beginning of unit:
One well pit constructed
300 ft. of water main laid
Construction of reservoir and pump house 25% completed

Unit was: Started Aug. 2, 1940 Suspended Date
 Reinstated Date Completed Date

Work completed is estimated to be 25% per cent of work planned in the unit proposal (1108 form).

REMARKS: (Use reverse side for extension of remarks or description)

SIGNED: Leif Steiro *Leif Steiro*
 Name of conservation department field officer
State Forest Supervisor

**WHO is the sponsoring agency for the WPA project on the left?
 HOW many men were hired for the project on the right?**

Research Topics for Individual Thought or Group Discussion

1. Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,


January 4, 1935

I am a little boy 12 years old. My daddy is on relief and only gets \$9.00 a week and there are 9 of us in the family. I have to wear old clothes that others give me. It just breaks my mother's heart to see us go without so many things we need and cannot have. I worry about her because she suffers from the cold and has no warm clothes to wear. Mrs. Roosevelt, if you lend me enough money to buy shoe skates, I sure would be happy. I would pay you back when I get big and can earn money. Please write to me, for I am interested in you and President Roosevelt.

Very truly yours, V.C. 1935; Baraboo, WI (Cohen, Robert. p.191; edited.)

The Relief Census of 1933 revealed that 42% of all relief recipients were younger than sixteen years of age. (www.archives.gov) Using this letter as a typical example, explore the ways the average American family benefitted from the CCC and WPA programs. Let's assume this boy had an older brother, 17 years old.

2. Below is the National Unemployment Rate from 1929 provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov):

1929	1931	1933		1937	1938	1940	Jan. 2010	Forecast 2011
3.1	16.1	25.2		13.8	16.5	13.9	9.7	8.2 - 8.5 (jsOnline.com)

Arrow indicates effect of CCC and WPA on unemployment rate

What does the data above reveal regarding the creation of Federal Government jobs and the effect on the unemployment rate? The March/April 2010 *CCC Legacy Journal* states the CCC program cost \$3 billion for camp operations and \$662,895,000 for allotments to dependents. From 1935 until 1942, the WPA Program spent over \$11 billion on projects and wages. Using the CPI Inflation Calculator at www.data.bls.gov, find the current cost of these two programs and compare them to the \$787 billion spent for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. (**Stimulus Watch**; www.recovery.wisconsin.gov)

3. At a White House Conference on Children held January 20, 1937, FDR stated: *I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished. The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have little. Half of the children of America are in families that do not have enough money to provide fully adequate shelter, food, clothing, medical care, and educational opportunity* (Cohen, Robert; p.35).

Please search the following websites for our current status of these issues:

- Current minimum wage rates in Wisconsin: <http://dwd.wisconsin.gov>
- Studies by Dr. Lois Quinn; Impact of Recession on Milwaukee's Labor Force; www.uwm.edu/Dept/ETI
- Green Projects, Lapham Venture, Housing Authority City of Milwaukee projects: www.hamc.org; and Federal Hope VI: www.en.wikipedia.org

WPA Lesson Plans & Classroom Discussion Guides

www.randomhouse.com/academic; *American-Made: When FDR Put The Nation To Work*, Nick Taylor.

www.newdeal.feri.org; New Deal Network Classroom Guide.

www.ideas.wisconsin.edu: Interactive dialogue source with other Wisconsin teachers.

Suggested Reading

Albano, Laurie Muench. *Milwaukee County Parks*. Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007.

Anderson, Harry H. *Milwaukee History: The Magazine of the Milwaukee County Historical Society; "Recreation, Entertainment and Open Space: Park Traditions in Milwaukee County", and "The Heart of Our Childhood World: Children and Milwaukee County Parks."* Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, Vol. 28, Spring-Summer & Fall-Winter 2005.

Carter, Ennis and DeNoon, Christopher. *Posters for the People: The Art of the WPA*. Quirk Books: Philadelphia, PA; 2008.

Cohen, Robert. *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Gurda, John. *The Making of Milwaukee*. Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999 (available on CD at your library).

Marten, James. *Milwaukee History: The Magazine of the Milwaukee County Historical Society; "A Chance to Grow: Recollections of the WPA Handicraft Project in Milwaukee."* Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, Vol. 29, Spring-Summer, 2006.

Rice, Mary Kellogg. *Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

Risjord, Norman. *The WPA Guide to Wisconsin: The Federal Writers Project*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006 (Reprint of 1941 original).

Taylor, Nick. *American-Made: When FDR Put the Nation to Work*. New York, NY: 20th Century Bantam Trade Paperbacks, 2009.

Trotter, Joe William, Jr. *From a Raw Deal to a New Deal: African Americans 1929-1945*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Websites

www.americanhistory.si.edu; Smithsonian Collection of American History.

www.broward.org; Broward County Research Library CCC & WPA Collections.

www.digicoll.library.wisc.edu; Oral histories and documentation of the Great Depression experience in Wisconsin; University of Wisconsin Digital Collections.

www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu; FDR Library and Museum.

www.qwu.edu/~erpapers; *My Day* Collection by Eleanor Roosevelt; George Washington University.

www.irp.wisc.edu/research/wipoverty; Institute for Research on Wisconsin Poverty Study.

www.lcweb2.loc.gov; Library of Congress Federal Art, Music, Theater, Writers and Historical Records-WPA Records by State.

www.themakingofmilwaukee.com; *Hard Times and Wartimes*; Overview of the Great Depression in Milwaukee by John Gurda. One part of nine-part history of Milwaukee.

www.madison.com/wsj; *Wisconsin State Journal*, "Rebuilding Wisconsin: Work of New Deal-era Programs Still Around Us," Madison, WI; 2/23/09.

www.wisconsinheritage.org; Search: Great Depression, WPA, CCC.

www.wpamurals.com; Collection of WPA murals by state.

www.wisconsinhistory.org/hp/register; Search Wisconsin Register of Historic Places by county for buildings built during the CCC and WPA-era (1933-1942).