

THE WPA FEDERAL ART PROJECTS IN MINNESOTA, 1935-1943

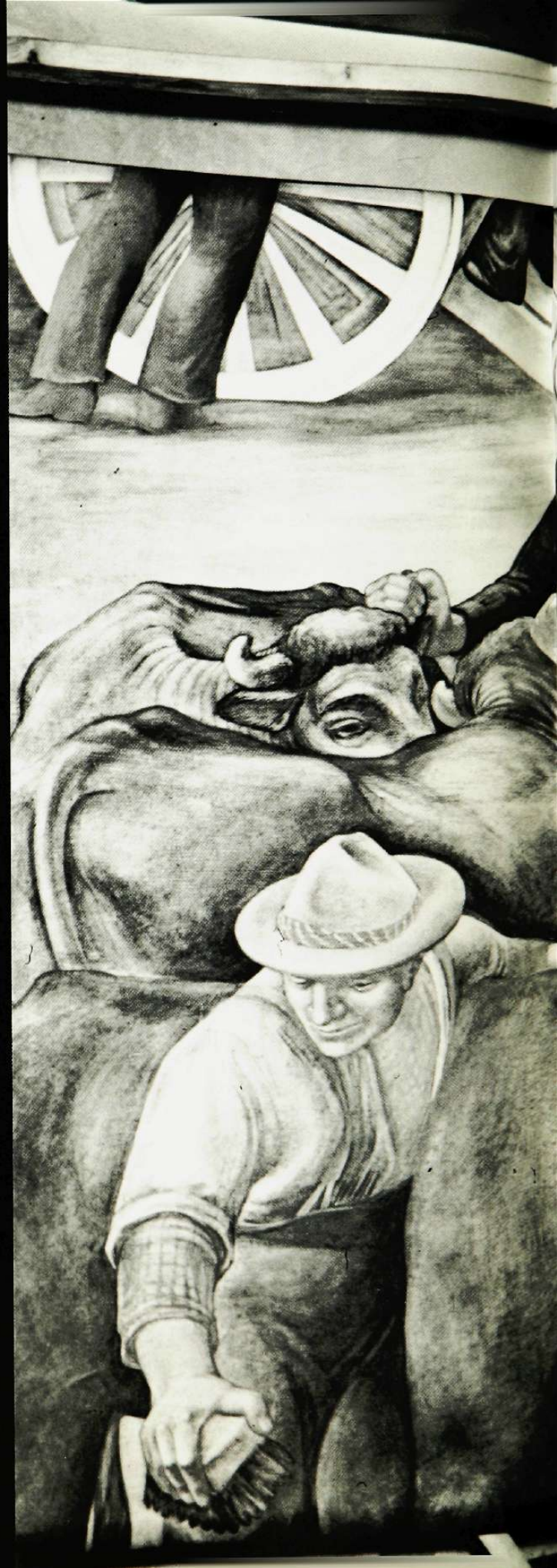
By 1932 President Herbert C. Hoover had recognized the need for work-relief projects, but his administration gave little attention to the problem. That year the Reconstruction Finance Corporation did advance millions of dollars to the states to finance relief to "destitute persons," but white-collar workers received virtually no help. Most programs were designed to stimulate construction and industry. When the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) began operations in the spring of 1933 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the leadership of Harry L. Hopkins, changes began to occur. The most noteworthy of these, for white-collar workers, were the efforts to develop programs to employ women, many of whom were not manual laborers, as well as "professionals," male and female. But since FERA gave outright grants to the states, it had no authority over the choice or administration of relief projects. There were few major accomplishments.¹

Unlike FERA, the Civil Works Administration (CWA), created in November 1933, was both financed and administered by Washington. It was of this agency that cultural work-relief programs were born. Projects for actors, musicians, writers, and

¹William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 15-17, 25, 53-54.

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Lucia Wiley, working on a mural of Red River oxcart drivers for Moorhead High School. The large canvas is mounted on a roller mechanism to enable her to reach the top sections without a scaffold.

artists began to appear during the winter of 1933–34, first in New York City and then in other metropolitan centers. Many of these programs were recreational in nature, and there was little consistent effort to achieve high professional quality. In Minnesota, on the other hand, the CWA-funded Public Works of Art Project employed some fifty talented artists who produced hundreds of images of the state.²

The Civil Works Administration was a temporary experiment. When it ended in March 1934, the responsibility for work relief returned to FERA, and the responsibility for administering existing projects was simultaneously returned to the states. The old problems of developing and running cultural programs also returned. FERA, operating with less money than CWA, had to hire administrators from the relief rolls. Some states attempted to set up work-relief projects for artists, but the quality of these varied considerably. It was not until the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935 that a body of significant work was produced. The federal organization changed its name—but not its initials—in 1939 and continued to function as the Work Projects Administration until 1943.³

The WPA, which once again federalized relief work, included specific provisions for employing artists and professionals. The arts-program philosophy, as conceived by Harry Hopkins and his colleagues in Washington, was to make it possible for actors, musicians, writers, and artists to produce the best work they could and to make the results available to the public. As before, these projects were centered primarily in large metropolitan areas where there were many artists, but in an effort to be democratic the WPA established ventures in almost all states, even where professional artists were few. All of the programs suffered throughout their existence from inadequate financial support. They never provided assistance to all who needed or requested it, and their record of providing cultural enrichment was uneven.⁴

Under Hopkins's nominal leadership and the actual day-to-day direction of his assistant Ellen S. Woodward, the arts program was subdivided into four sections, each with its own national director: Hallie Flanagan for theater, Nikolai Sokoloff for music, Henry Alsberg for writing, and Holger Cahill for art. Collectively, the four subdivisions were known as WPA-Sponsored Federal Project Number One, or Federal One. They were administered from Washington, D.C., by the WPA until 1939 when, under pressure from Congress, the supposedly leftist federal theater project was canceled and the three surviving projects were required to have partial state funding and local sponsorship. The complicated and changeable chain of command included, at times, regional directors for each of the four

subdivisions and state project directors, who answered to a state WPA administrator and to Washington.⁵

Although there is considerable literature on Federal One from the perspective of Washington, few studies have focused on specific states. Yet here—at the state and local level—is where the action was and where its impact can best be observed. Every study at this level brings the overall view into sharper focus. Minnesota is a splendid case study.⁶

THE STORY of the Federal Theater Project in Minnesota can be briefly told. Surveys in 1935 indicated the presence of slightly more than one hundred “legitimate theater people” in the state, most of them concentrated in the Twin Cities area. Flanagan, the national director, authorized a project, and a University of Minnesota drama professor, A. Dale Riley, became state director. Riley, who took the job on a one-dollar-a-year volunteer basis, appointed a staff of nine paid supervisors in early December 1935. Auditions followed, and soon there was a company that included a theater group, a children's theater, a vaudeville and variety show, and a marionette and puppet troupe.⁷

The project seemed to be developing without incident and with the general support of the public when a major controversy erupted. On December 13, 1935, the *Minneapolis Journal*, an intensely anti-New Deal paper, published a story claiming there was a stripper in the vaudeville troupe. The article was accompanied by a photograph of Ruby Bae, dubbed “Federal Fan Dancer No. 1.” The *Journal* claimed that Bae had been “cavorting about . . . in the nude” at a local establishment when the police arrested her for disorderly con-

²McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 52–59; Thomas O'Sullivan, “Joint Venture or Testy Alliance? The Public Works of Art Project in Minnesota, 1933–34,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 9 (Spring 1989): 89–99.

³McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 66–71.

⁴Milton Meltzer, *Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976).

⁵McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 129, 146–56, 162–68. The abolition of the theater project and the return of the others to state control marked the end of Federal One, per se, although the three remaining subdivisions continued until the end of the WPA in 1943.

⁶See, for example, Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., “The Federal Arts Projects in Iowa,” *Upper Midwest History* 4 (1984): 29–38, “Politics of Culture: The Federal Music Project in Oklahoma,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 63 (Winter 1985–86): 361–75, and “The WPA Arts Projects in Texas,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 26 (1988): 3–13.

⁷E. C. Mabie to Hallie Flanagan, Nov. 11, 1935; Jacob Baker to A. Dale Riley, Nov. 23, 1935; Hallie Flanagan to Dean J. B. Johnson, Nov. 27, 1935; E. C. Mabie to Victor Christgau, Nov. 10, 1935—all in Federal Theater Project, Minnesota, Record Group 69, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Theater, NARG 69).



Picture of Ruby Bae that graced the Minneapolis Journal article and later became part of the Federal Music Project files

duct and closed the club. Shortly thereafter she went on relief, and when she heard about the new theater project, she auditioned for Enza A. Zeller, the staff person in charge of the vaudeville troupe. Zeller liked what she saw and put Bae on the roster; the *Journal* said that she would be entertaining young men at Civilian Conservation Corps camps. Unknown to either

woman, according to later correspondence, the reporter had somehow found out about the audition and secretly observed and photographed it. His published account claimed to represent the outrage of all decent citizens that tax money was used for lurid purposes.⁸

The story was an out-and-out lie. Zeller had no idea that Bae was a "fan dancer" when the woman, who was legitimately on relief, asked for an audition. Bae had not worked for more than a year, and although she previously had some difficulty with the law, there was no recent incident. As for the photograph, it was from the paper's files. Most significantly, Bae was never placed on the roster. What really happened was that the *Journal* reporter knew the woman, knew about her past, and concocted his story when he learned that she had applied for a job with the WPA.⁹

Reaction to the fan-dancer incident revealed the sensitivity of Federal One leadership to public opinion. Follow-up stories in the press kept the matter alive for several weeks while national theater director Flanagan, state theater director Riley, and state WPA administrator Victor Christgau pondered their response. By early 1936 they decided the project should be canceled. Riley resigned, and the appropriated funds—more than \$53,000—were returned to Washington. Officials stated that there were too few theater people in Minnesota to justify the project and public opinion did not support it.¹⁰

Neither explanation was entirely true. There were plenty of theater folk available for a viable program, and Flanagan received numerous pleas from groups and individuals begging her to reinstate it. What then was the reason for the debacle? Flanagan believed Christgau was not wholeheartedly in favor of the arts program, and she was therefore reluctant to proceed. Here she was mistaken, for Christgau soon joined with those who pleaded for reinstatement. There was some further discussion of the matter, but when in 1937 it became clear that there would be no federal appropriation for the theater project in Minnesota, the matter was dropped for good.¹¹

THE FEDERAL MUSIC PROJECT fared much better under the capable, if unorthodox, leadership of its state director, Dr. John J. Becker. Little known today, he was, together with Charles E. Ives, Carl Ruggles, Henry D. Cowell, and Wallingford Riegger, one of the so-called American Five of avant-garde music. For several decades he served as the group's militant crusader in the Middle West, seeking to establish a new national music with inspiration drawn from America, not Europe. Although he was controversial as a musician, egotistical, and sometimes overbearing as a person, and although he often sorely tried the patience of his colleagues as well as his superiors, he remained on the job

⁸*Minneapolis Journal*, Dec. 13, 1935, p. 17; Mabie to Flanagan, Jan. 4, 1936, Theater, NARG 69.

⁹Enza Zeller to Congressman Elmer Ryan, Jan. 15, 1936, Theater, NARG 69.

¹⁰Christgau to Hopkins, Jan. 6, 1936; Mabie to Flanagan, Jan. 4, 1936; Flanagan to Christgau, Jan. 9, 1936; Riley to Flanagan, Jan. 10, 1936—all Theater, NARG 69.

¹¹Ralph P. George to Flanagan, Jan. 13, 1936; E. Kendall Davis to Flanagan, Mar. 2, 1936; Herbert Ashton to Flanagan, Oct. 22, 1937; Flanagan to Lawrence S. Morris, Nov. 12, 1937; Morris to Flanagan, Nov. 19, 1937—all Theater, NARG 69.



Program booklet, about 1937, for a series of performances by three Twin Cities groups: the Jubilee Singers, civic orchestra, and band. Local churches hosted this round of free concerts.

throughout the lifetime of the project and achieved some notable successes.¹²

Minnesota's Federal Music Project had eight components, largely concentrated in the Twin Cities area: the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra, at first called the Twin Cities Civic Orchestra; the Minnesota Symphonic Band; the Twin Cities Dance Band; the Twin Cities Jubilee Singers, an African-American group that specialized in gospel songs; the Duluth Civic Band; the Virginia Dance Band; the teaching project; and the copyists project, which provided multiple copies of sheet music. Subject to budgetary constraints, these employed from 70 to 160 people at various times between 1935 and 1943. Becker, like many federal music project directors around the country, gave most of his attention to the symphony, which he soon came to re-

gard as an artistic creation rather than a make-work relief project. Determined that the orchestra should rise above its humble origins to compete favorably with the privately endowed Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, Becker began a never-ending quest for a larger quota of musicians to employ and more funds.¹³

Organized during late 1935 and early 1936, the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra started by playing for summer-school students at the University of Minnesota and at various churches. These concerts drew favorable reviews. Some writers even saw in the development of the symphony an argument for permanent public support of the arts. For example, the *Minneapolis Star* arts editor, John K. Sherman, wrote that the WPA concerts pointed the way to a state-subsidized symphony independent of the generosity of wealthy patrons. Tax money, wrote Sherman, should be spent for culture as a regular function of the state in America just as it was in many other countries. Great music, he suggested, should be treated as public property like schools and libraries.¹⁴

Beyond dispute, the project gave music to many Minnesotans for the first time in their lives, and people generally appreciated this gift. Throughout the early years of its existence, the symphony increased its schedule of free performances, most of them in the Twin Cities area. By 1939 the group could point to a regular series of programs in public theaters as well as series sponsored by Hamline and Macalester colleges in St. Paul. The University of Minnesota also worked with the group, broadcasting concerts over radio station WHLB. Audiences were generally large and appreciative, and the reviewers were usually complimentary.¹⁵

Although smaller, the other music projects in Minnesota were also important. The dance bands in Du-

¹²Henry Cowell, "Trends in American Music," in *American Composers on American Music: A Symposium*, ed. Henry Cowell (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1933), 3-13.

¹³John Becker to Nikolai Sokoloff, June 14, 1937, Federal Music Project, Minnesota, Record Group 69, National Archives (hereafter Music, NARG 69).

¹⁴*Minneapolis Star*, May 16, 1937; see also Frances Boardman's column in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 31, 1937—both in clippings scrapbook, Music, NARG 69.

¹⁵"Minnesota Symphony Orchestra," undated pamphlet, Federal Music Project files, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul. For sample reviews, see *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Nov. 11, 1937, Jan. 16, 1938; *Minneapolis Journal*, June 26, 1936, p. 27; July 9, 1936; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Dec. 10, 1936, clippings scrapbook, Music, NARG 69. For examples of programs, dates and descriptions of concerts, and public-relations activities, see Narrative Reports, 1937-39, Music, NARG 69. See also the following letters to Sokoloff in 1938: Fred Truax, Jan. 26; George E. Leach, Jan. 28; Charles E. Doell, Jan. 27; Coates P. Buell, Jan. 27; Herbert F. Chase, Jan. 29; Barkley Schroeder, Feb. 12—all Music, NARG 69.



Twin Cities Jubilee Singers, St. Paul, rehearsing about 1940. The group's repertoire included such favorites as "Wade in the Water," "Let My People Go," and "Swing Low Sweet Chariot."

luth, Virginia, and the Twin Cities made numerous appearances and were widely praised. When, in 1937, it was decided to terminate the radio broadcasts by the Virginia group, there were noisy protests. The teaching component was smaller in Minnesota than in many states, but it served a relatively large clientele in the Twin Cities. Ten to fifteen teachers found employment and, in turn, provided lessons to several hundred people a month.¹⁶

These achievements did not come without some difficulties. Becker's personality traits led to problems. In 1938 the local unit of the Workers' Alliance of America, an organization of WPA unions from all over the country, accused him, among other things, of discriminating against African Americans and Jews, of favoring the large groups over the small, and of forcing relief musicians to pay their own travel expenses or be fired. These charges generated enough concern in Washington that Sokoloff sent his assistant, Guy Maier, to investigate. Himself a gifted musician possessed of a rather

Young couple posing with a WPA dance band



¹⁶Narrative Reports; G. E. Kistler, program director, WHLB, Virginia, to WPA Administration, Dec. 11, 1937—both Music, NARG 69.

sensitive temperament, Maier developed an instant loathing for Becker but nonetheless found that most of the charges were exaggerated. On the other hand, he also reported that Becker was a miserable administrator and should be removed. Sokoloff considered this recommendation, but because he could not pinpoint any truly significant misfeasance, he declined to act.¹⁷

THE FIRST DIRECTOR of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) in Minnesota was Dr. Mabel S. Ulrich, a physician, energetic member of many civic and suffrage organizations, and bookstore owner who also sold art and antiques. She served as state director from 1935 to 1938, during which time her attitude toward the effort in Minnesota—and toward the project in general—changed from enthusiasm to cynical dismay. At length she concluded that while relief and support for the arts were both noble purposes, they should not be linked together in a government program.¹⁸

During Ulrich's tenure, the most important work of the FWP was the research and preparation leading to the publication of *Minnesota: A State Guide*. This book was to be part of a series, all following a blueprint devised in the nation's capital. The idea was to locate material in all parts of the state and create a volume that would be at once a guide for tourists, an encyclopedia, and an interpretation of Minnesota's culture. When completed in 1938, it was a work of nearly five hundred pages containing essays on geology, natural resources, Indian history, agriculture, the economy, and social development. There was also a section of

Mabel Ulrich, newly appointed writers' project director, with state WPA administrator Victor Christgau, November 1935



tours and a description of many points of interest in the state. Like other guides in the series, it was popular, went through several printings, and has recently been reprinted. Reading it today, one would never guess what great trauma accompanied its creation.¹⁹

Ulrich's account of the evolution of this book provides a rare view of the inner workings of a WPA arts project. There are innumerable official reports and mountains of correspondence available to the historian, but few state officials left such detailed, personal reminiscences. According to her disillusioned account in *Harpers Magazine*, Ulrich's first task—and simultaneously her first problem—was to select workers. The state had a quota of about 120 for this project, but the relief rolls yielded few who classified themselves as writers. The director had to interview and choose among the people she had culled from the lists as possibilities. There were newspapermen—she hired all of them—but she also saw many preachers, lawyers, executives, and students, each with a heartrending tale of woe. In assembling her group, Ulrich exercised considerable latitude in her interpretation of the designation *writer*, as she put it, “praying that release from economic pressure would release talents as well.”²⁰

As Ulrich told the story, the excitement and enthusiasm of the first few weeks were infectious, and before long a noticeable change came over many of the “writers.” Heads were raised, shoulders squared, and eyes glowed with a new-found pride. The change was so dramatic that it partially canceled out the discomfort she felt arising from the realization that many of her people were incompetent. For better or worse she was determined that the guide be written by those receiving the federal money and not by herself or the nonrelief professional editors on her staff. So, she asked only that her writers do their best. Chapter by chapter the manuscript went off to Washington for approval.²¹

¹⁷David Lasser to David K. Niles, Dec. 16, 20, 1937; Congressman Harry G. Reagan to Sokoloff, Dec. 16, 1937; Stanley Ballard to Harry Hopkins, Dec. 13, 1937; Hamilton A. Bird to Chester Watson, Dec. 13, 1937; Charles C. Kirk to Hopkins, June 24, 1937; Guy Maier to Sokoloff, July 11, Nov. 20, Dec. 16, 1937; Florence S. Kerr to Ellen S. Woodward, Jan. 5, 1938—all Music, NARG 69.

¹⁸*Golfer and Sportsman* (Minneapolis), June 1936, p. 30, 52; Mabel S. Ulrich, “Salvaging Culture for the WPA,” *Harpers Magazine* 178 (May 1939): 653–64.

¹⁹Federal Writers Project of the WPA, *Minnesota: A State Guide* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), reprinted as *The WPA Guide to Minnesota* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1985).

²⁰Ulrich, “Salvaging Culture,” 654–55.

²¹Here and below, see Ulrich, “Salvaging Culture,” 656; Alsberg to Ulrich, July 16, Aug. 12, Nov. 7, 1936; Reed Harris to Ulrich, Aug. 17, 1936; Ulrich to Alsberg, July 20, Aug. 19, 1936—all in Federal Writers' Project, Minnesota, Record Group 69, National Archives (hereafter Writers, NARG 69).

Invariably, the pages would come back weeks, sometimes months, later accompanied by copious editorial comment and criticism. Most of the criticism was deserved and accepted but, as Ulrich later wrote, "We were completely baffled by the tendency of all federal editors to regard us as inhabiting a region romantically different than any other in the country." The Washington bureaucrats, it seemed, wanted more material reflecting the unique folkways of Minnesota. It was Ulrich's opinion, backed by project advisers in the department of social anthropology at the University of Minnesota, that beyond Paul Bunyan and perhaps a few Indian tales there was really little to offer. She told national director Henry Alsberg that there were many Scandinavians, but they were pretty much the same wherever they were found; there was little about them that could be called "uniquely Minnesotan." Ulrich finally prevailed, for *Minnesota: A State Guide*, unlike most others in the series, has no chapter on folklore.

The guide project was set up in 1935 to last for six months, and the writers' group attempted to complete the task in that period in spite of numerous internal problems and constant entanglement in the red tape of Washington. Four times they met deadlines, only to be told that plans had changed and there would soon be new instructions. Not only did they write, they made maps and then remade them to conform to new specifications. They sent the maps to Washington where they were lost and had to be made again. Photographs were taken and printed, submitted, approved and then disapproved, then lost and printed again. Personnel quotas went up and down, personalities clashed, "chiselers were terminated and midnight telephone threats shrugged off." Grievance committees were formed to protest federal actions and rulings over which Ulrich had no control.²²

As the book took shape, the director noticed a dramatic shift in the attitude of her personnel. In her opinion, the first group of writers had reacted to their selection with "gratitude" and "zeal" for the work. By 1938,

however, they and their successors had come to view government employment as some kind of "inalienable right." Many of them unionized and, like some of the Minnesota musicians, affiliated with the Workers' Alliance of America, making things uncomfortable for administrators like Mabel Ulrich.²³

The crisis finally came in the spring of 1938 when Ulrich transferred two writers whom she regarded as "hopelessly incompetent" from the guide to a book-binding project with an appropriate reduction in pay. The writers' union, Local #474 of the Workers' Alliance of Minnesota, protested vehemently. Led by John Marshall, whom Ulrich thought to be a Communist, union members sent letters to Washington and threatened to call a strike.²⁴

There was no strike, but the wrangle continued for weeks. Finally, the national office gave in to the union's demands for an investigation. This revealed that Ulrich's actions were justified, but to her disgust there was no letter of apology or vindication from Washington. Instead, Alsberg ordered her to make no further transfers of personnel. To Ulrich this could only mean that Washington had become overly sensitive to the demands of the organized relief workers, losing sight of the original purposes and goals of the program. To make matters even worse, she learned that Victor Christgau had resigned his post as state WPA administrator at about the same time. Christgau, she believed, was pressured out by Governor Elmer Benson and the Workers' Alliance for refusing to make political appointments. Stunned, hurt, and thoroughly disgusted by these events, she resigned in the spring of 1938.²⁵

Minnesota writers at work in their crowded office as the project was winding down, 1943



²²Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture," 657; Thomas A. Canty to Alsberg, Dec. 14, 1936, Aug. 19, 1937; Ulrich to Canty, Dec. 14, 1936; Reed Harris to Ulrich, Dec. 17, 1936, Mar. 16, 1937; Ulrich to Harris, Dec. 21, 1936, Mar. 29, 1937; Alsberg to Harris, Dec. 21, 1936, Mar. 29, 1937; Alsberg to Ulrich, Mar. 6, 1937; Ulrich to Alsberg, Mar. 8, 1937; Harris to Congressman Dewey Johnson, Apr. 3, 1937; Alsberg to Canty, Sept. 2, 1937—all Writers, NARG 69.

²³Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture," 658–59.

²⁴Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture," 661; John Marshall to Harry Hopkins, May 28, 1938; Ellen Woodward to Marshall, June 6, 1938; Woodward to Congressman John T. Bernard, Apr. 22, 1938; Woodward to Victor Christgau, Apr. 22, 1938; Arthur G. Patterson to Bernard, Apr. 6, 1938—all Writers, NARG 69.

²⁵Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture," 662–63.



Promotional booth at the Minnesota State Fair. One poster boasted, "Colorful items in old-time newspapers, unearthed by project workers, are being reprinted for the enjoyment of today's newspaper readers."

At that time the writers' project in Minnesota had finished the state guide and one to St. Cloud, which by common agreement was embarrassingly bad. There were also a number of projects in various stages of completion: guides to the Arrowhead region and Roseau County; a children's history of the Indians of Minnesota; and a history of the St. Croix River. Under Ulrich's successors the work intensified, at least for a brief period. By the end of 1938 the state guide was published, the Arrowhead manuscript was complete (it was published in 1941), and two of the county histories were distributed in mimeograph form. There were more than two dozen new ventures planned, including several regional, economic, and ethnic studies, a number of encyclopedic works, and—now that Ulrich was gone—a folklore project. Drastic budget cuts in early 1939 forced the cancellation or delay of most of these proposals, and even though the writers struggled along, most of the remaining work was incomplete when the WPA arts program was finally terminated in 1943.²⁶

FROM 1935 TO 1941, the state director of the Federal Art Project (FAP) in Minnesota was Clement B.

Haupers. The noted painter from St. Paul had gained substantial administrative skills over the years, organizing—among other things—tremendously popular art exhibits at the Minnesota State Fair. When he began work for the WPA, Haupers found that the regional director in Chicago, Mrs. Increase Robinson, a well-known patron of the arts, intended to establish a small program for highly skilled professionals only. He convinced Robinson and national director Cahill to broaden the plan, and so the Federal Art Project in Minnesota assisted not only well-established painters like Sydney G. (Syd) Fossum but also numerous journeyman artists and art educators. Divisions such as easel painting, sculpture, photography, printmaking,

²⁶Parker T. Van DeMark to Alsberg, July 14, Dec. 16, 1938; W. A. Harpin to Howard S. Drew, Feb. 22, 1939; Alsberg to Margaret McKechn, Mar. 29, 1939; Walter M. Kiplinger to S. L. Stolte, Nov. 4, 1941; Stolte to Florence Kerr, Oct. 13, 1941—all Writers, NARC 69; *The WPA Guide to the Arrowhead Country* (1941; reprint, St. Paul: MHS Press, 1988). *The Bohemian Flats* (1941; reprint, St. Paul: MHS Press, 1986) resulted from the ethnic studies project.



André Boratko at work on his mural for the Minnesota State School for the Deaf, Faribault, about 1936

handicrafts, and art education brought in a wide range of talents.²⁷

The Minnesota relief artists produced a great deal of material which, largely through Haupers's diligent efforts, found permanent homes in public buildings across the state. Murals, for example, adorned such locations as the Minnesota School for the Deaf in Faribault, Sebeka High School, and Brandon Town Hall. Sculpture was placed in public schools from Chisholm to Albert Lea, on the Minnesota State Fair grounds, and in city buildings from Walker to St. Paul. Oils, watercolors, and lithographs were made for large uni-

versities and small towns throughout Minnesota. And exhibitions brought art to the masses at various community centers, public schools, and halls. The material varies considerably in quality, but much of it is very good indeed.²⁸

Three aspects of the Federal Art Project in Minnesota deserve special mention: the mural program, the art-center movement, and the Index of American Design. The mural program, begun in 1935, was neither the first nor the only federally sponsored project of its type. The Public Works of Art Project (1933-34) commissioned murals, as did the Treasury Relief Art Program, which ran concurrently with the FAP.²⁹

The FAP normally commissioned murals for non-federal public buildings. In order to get a job, an artist would submit sketches for the approval of both Haupers and the sponsoring agency. Once accepted, a project always received a great deal of publicity designed to raise public consciousness with respect to art. When the artist finished, there was a formal dedication. The mural program was intended to provide a broad spectrum of viewers with art to enjoy, not only for the present but into the foreseeable future.³⁰

FAP artists used a variety of themes in their work,

²⁷Nicholas Westbrook, ed., "Clement Haupers, Conversations on Six Decades of Painting in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 46 (Fall 1979): 296-99. Haupers left Minnesota to serve as Cahill's assistant in Washington, 1941-43.

²⁸Minnesota Art Project, *Accomplishments*, pamphlet, [1940?], Clement B. Haupers and Clara G. Mairs Papers, MHS.

²⁹O'Sullivan, "Joint Venture," 89-99.

³⁰Here and two paragraphs below, see John F. White, "Art for the People: Minnesota's Muralists and Public Patronage in the 1930s," unpublished paper, 4-17, copy in author's possession; O'Sullivan, "Joint Venture," 93-94.

but most of the murals they produced drew images from the environment, myths and legends, economic development, and, occasionally, Indian subjects. One of Minnesota's best-known muralists of this period was David Granahan, who produced work under the sponsorship of all three federal programs between 1934 and 1938, when he accepted employment with the United States Department of Agriculture. His most famous work, commissioned by the treasury program, depicts the regional granite industry. Installed in the St. Cloud Post Office in 1938, the mural is now displayed at the Stearns County Historical Society's Heritage Center.

Other notable FAP muralists included Lucia Wiley, who produced frescoes for the Minneapolis Armory, the Miller Vocational School (Minneapolis), Moorhead High School, and several post offices; Elizabeth Carney, who did the Chisholm, Minnesota, mural at the Minneapolis School of Art; and John M. Socha, whose work appeared at Winona State Teachers College, the University of Minnesota agriculture school at Crookston, New Ulm High School, St. Paul Park High School, and a chapel at Fort Snelling. Socha often depicted historical events and topics such as the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, the New Ulm battle of 1862, industrial progress, early Indian life, and transportation on the Mississippi.

MANY FAP ARTISTS also served as teachers in art centers, the second major facet of the art program in Minnesota. From 1935 to 1943 the project established 103 community centers nationwide, offering classes for people of all ages, lectures on art, and exhibition space. Usually the government provided salaries for the artists and teachers while the community provided suitable space and paid rent, utilities, and operating expenses. The goal of the art-center program, like the mural program, was not only to promote artistic creativity but also to build a larger audience for it. In Minnesota, centers were established in Duluth, St. Paul, and Minneapolis.³¹

In Duluth, the board of education first sponsored an art school in the Lyceum Building in 1932, funded by the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA). The WPA took over this project in 1935. From that date until federal funding ended in 1943, the Duluth Art Center was directed by William Norman, and among the practicing artists who taught there were Paul Van Ryzin, Birney Quick, and Kathryn MacKay.

Between 1935 and 1942, there were several art centers in the Twin Cities area. One of these for adults operated in St. Paul in the post office building at Fifth and Market streets. Bennet Swanson, a native of that city who had studied painting in New York and Paris, was among the faculty. Class offerings ranged from the



Master printer pulling a lithograph, Burlesque, drawn by project artist William Norman, at the Walker Art Center print studio, 1938

fundamentals of art to cartooning, ceramics, puppetry, crafts, photography, and interior design.

As in Duluth, the community art centers in Minneapolis were first funded by SERA and sponsored by the public schools. Beginning in 1934, any student could attend a wide variety of classes for a fee of two dollars. Director Charles S. Wells, formerly of the Minneapolis School of Art, led a faculty including Erle Loran, Elof Wedin, Mac Le Sueur, Syd Fossum, Lucia Wiley, and Stanford Fenelle. When SERA funding ceased in the spring of 1935, this program somehow survived until the WPA began to support it in the fall. At that time painter Dewey Albinson was appointed director of the state FAP educational division and became supervisor of all of the art centers in Minnesota.³²

The most significant aspect of the art-center movement in Minneapolis was the development of the Walker Art Center. Lumber baron T. B. Walker built this museum in 1927 to house his private collection. It was open to the public for a small fee, but few visitors

³¹Here and two paragraphs below, see Nancy A. Johnson, *Accomplishments: Minnesota Art Projects in the Depression Years* (Duluth: Tweed Museum of Art, 1976), 9, 10.

³²Johnson, *Accomplishments*, 10; Mary T. Swanson, "Dewey Albinson: The Artist as Chronicler," *Minnesota History* 52 (Fall 1991): 276-77.

came. The Great Depression hurt the Walker estate, and the museum was almost forced to close.³³

In the winter of 1938–39 the Minnesota Arts Council, led by Rolf Ueland, a Minneapolis attorney, proposed to the T. B. Walker Foundation that the museum be reorganized as an art center under the Federal Art Project. The council would raise \$5,500 to launch the venture. All parties agreed, and the drive got under way later in the year.

Ueland experienced considerable frustration with the fund drive. The Junior Chamber of Commerce, for example, promised to assist but dropped the project six weeks later after collecting only \$22.50. Nevertheless, the effort gradually came together, and by the spring of 1939 the arts council claimed success. The building was renovated during the summer, and the Walker Art Center opened in January 1940 with Daniel S. Defenbacher, formerly an assistant to national director Holger Cahill, as director.

During the next three years an aggressive program of art and art education at the Walker employed fifty to sixty-five artists. They administered the project and conducted free classes, offered demonstrations and lectures, made radio broadcasts, and, of course, mounted exhibitions. The entire program was successful; during the first year alone, more than 111,000 people visited the center and more than 3,000 took art classes. When the Federal Art Project ended in 1943, the board of

directors of the Walker foundation continued to operate the enterprise as a community art center. Fifty years later, the Walker Art Center remained a highly respected cultural institution.

The University Gallery, founded in 1934 on the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota, also benefited from the WPA's art program. In 1935 Ruth Lawrence became director and began almost at once to seek FAP support. She finally succeeded early in 1938, receiving federal funds for twenty staff people. This group proceeded to organize numerous exhibitions for circulation in schools and towns throughout the state, using WPA funding until the program ended. In the 1990s the institution, renamed the University Museum, continued to provide the state with on-site and touring exhibitions.

A third major facet of the FAP in Minnesota, the Index of American Design project, started in New York City but soon spread to the rest of the country. Its purpose, outlined in the *Index of American Design Manual*, was "to compile material for a nation-wide pictorial survey of design in the American decorative, useful and folk arts from their inception to about 1890." Objects representing American design and workmanship were to be rendered in watercolors and sent to Washington with research notes to become part of a national collection. Between four and five hundred people worked on the project nationwide, about a dozen of them in Minnesota under the direction of artist Jean Taylor. This group scoured the state for items of interest, often engaging in spirited discussion about whether the objects truly represented indigenous art forms. Included among the artifacts recorded in Minnesota and housed in the Library of Congress are jugs, clock faces, glassware, cigar-store Indians, carts, cabinets, tools, wood carvings, and dozens of others.³⁴

CONSIDERABLE EVIDENCE suggests that artists appreciated the opportunities that the Federal Art Project offered them—both to build their careers and to contribute to cultural growth. As David Granahan put it: "We all owe a great deal to the New Deal which enabled young artists to continue through the Depression and at the same time enrich the lives of the citizens. I don't know how Lolita [his wife] and I could have coped it if hadn't been for the WPA and Treasury projects." Even the acerbic Syd Fossum was complimentary, calling the FAP program "a renaissance." He believed that the projects produced a considerable amount of good art, saved many careers, and made fine art available to the masses: "People . . . wouldn't go to museums, but they went to these WP art centers." He especially praised the revitalization of the Walker.³⁵

Yet Fossum represented another view as well. Just as in the other Federal One projects in Minnesota, there

³³Here and four paragraphs below, see McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 463–74; Johnson, *Accomplishments*, 11–12; John F. White, "The Walker Art Center: A Crowning Achievement," in *Art in Action: American Art Centers and the New Deal*, ed. J. F. White (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 9–19. See also Florence Kerr to Victor Christgau and to Ellen Woodward, both May 5, 1938; S. L. Stolte to Kerr, Sept. 26, Oct. 24, 1941; Walter M. Kiplinger to Stolte, Oct. 18, 1941; Daniel S. Defenbacher to Holger Cahill, Aug. 14, 1941; Defenbacher to Rolf Ueland, Nov. 22, 26, 1938, Feb. 28, May 11, 1939; Ueland to Defenbacher, Nov. 23, Dec. 2, 7, 10, 30, 1938, Feb. 2, 16, 28, 1939; Haupers to Thomas C. Parker, June 12, Nov. 30, 1938; Ueland to Eleanor Roosevelt, Oct. 13, 1939; Parker to Haupers, Aug. 2, 1938; Ueland to Cahill, Oct. 16, 1939; Cahill to Haupers, May 11, 1939; Defenbacher to Parker, Feb. 5, 1939; Archie D. Walker to Ueland, Dec. 28, 1938—all in Federal Art Project, Minnesota, Record Group 69, National Archives (hereafter Art, NARG 69).

³⁴McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 441–49 (quote, 446); Jean Taylor to C. Adolph Glassgold, Oct. 30, Nov. 16, 24, 1936, Nov. 9, 11, 1937, May 6, June 30, July 12, Aug. 5, 11, Nov. 23, 1938; Glassgold to Taylor, Oct. 20, Nov. 4, 23, Dec. 2, 1936, Nov. 12, 15, 1937; Clement Haupers to Glassgold, Oct. 31, Nov. 4, 30, 1936—all Art, NARG 69. For a sampling of entries, see Erwin O. Christensen, *The Index of American Design* (New York: Macmillan, 1950).

³⁵Granahan quoted in White, "Art for the People," 8–9; Syd Fossum, interview by George Reid, Aug. 4, 1977, transcript, 4–7, MHS.



Painter, printmaker, and activist Syd Fossum, preparing a work for exhibition, 1940

was no lack of controversy in the FAP. The fear and animosity that developed in that program was not focused upon the state director, as it had been in the music and writers' projects. Art-project workers objected to policies imposed from above.

In the summer of 1935, even before the WPA program was formalized, the Minnesota Artists' Union was born and soon boasted more than one hundred members. Most of these joined the FAP when it was organized that fall. The union had three declared objectives: to promote cultural development in the state; to encourage greater understanding and communication between artists and the public; and to promote "economic adjustment between artists and employer." Since the employer in this case was the federal government, the third objective reflected a determination to lobby for reasonable relief compensation and job security.³⁶

The union was active from the beginning. In late 1935 it demanded that artists be paid a rental fee whenever their works were exhibited, just as musicians were paid to perform. Although this venture achieved no success, there was a victory in 1936. The union joined others protesting plans to send an art exhibit to the Olympics in Nazi Germany, and the government reconsidered and dropped the idea. In the following year, when relief workers faced the specter of budget cuts that would lead to layoffs, the union protested without success. Then, in the summer of 1939, another round of federal budget cuts resulted in layoffs, strikes,

and protests nationwide. The Minnesota artists joined in. In addition to issuing written demands for redress, the union took to the streets, setting up picket lines around the WPA state headquarters in St. Paul and at the state capitol. Fossum and many others were later arrested and temporarily jailed. At length the charges were dropped, and the artists were restored to WPA employment.³⁷

Another incident, serio-comic in nature, could have caused considerable difficulty like the fan-dancer fiasco but was not allowed to get out of hand. In 1938 E. R. Youngren, a St. Paul physician, discovered that the FAP art classes were employing nude models. He conducted a personal investigation and became convinced that women were brought in from other WPA projects to pose. Furthermore, the doctor believed that relief artists were advertising that for one dollar anyone could visit the classes to watch. Outraged, he complained to U.S. Attorney Victor E. Anderson, Senator Henrik Shipstead, the local police, and even to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Youngren could not be ignored. The investigation that followed revealed that, while nude models were used, all was on a strictly professional basis. There was no further uproar, but just to be on the safe side, the practice was suspended.³⁸

THE SCALING DOWN of all non-defense-related activities of the Work Projects Administration began on December 8, 1941, immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor. All art, music, and writing projects were folded into the war services section, itself a subdivision of the WPA Services Division. By the spring of 1942 practically all cultural programs had ceased to exist. Only those with sound state or local support remained to be terminated when the WPA art program officially ended on June 30, 1943.³⁹

³⁶Johnson, *Accomplishments*, 13.

³⁷Fossum transcript, 1-2; *Minnesota Artist's Union Bulletin*, Oct. 15, 1937, p. 1-2, Oct. 8, 1938, p. 2, and Syd Fossum, "State of the Union," *Minnesota Artist* (succeeded the *Bulletin*), Nov. 1938, p. 1, Dec. 16, 1938, p. 2, microfilm copies in MHS; Eivar Heiberg to: Holger Cahill, Nov. 9, 1936, June 11, July 12, 1937; Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 31, 1937; Harry Hopkins, June 7, 1937; Ellen Woodward, June 11, 1937—all Art, NARG 69; Herman Erickson, "WPA Strike and Trials of 1939," *Minnesota History* 42 (Summer 1971): 202-14.

³⁸*St. Paul Dispatch*, Mar. 3, 1938, clippings scrapbook, Art, NARG 69; E. R. Youngren to Harry Hopkins, May 11, 1938; Victor Christgau to Ellen Woodward, Mar. 2, 1938; Victor Anderson to Mildred T. Law, Feb. 2, 1938; Christgau to Anderson, Feb. 2, 1938; Anderson to Law, Jan. 28, 1938; Minnie H. Moore to C. A. Hackert, Dec. 27, 1937; Youngren to Henrik Shipstead, Mar. 15, 1938; Aubrey Williams to Shipstead, Mar. 23, 1938; J. Edgar Hoover to Roger J. Bounds, Feb. 14, 1938—all Art, NARG 69.

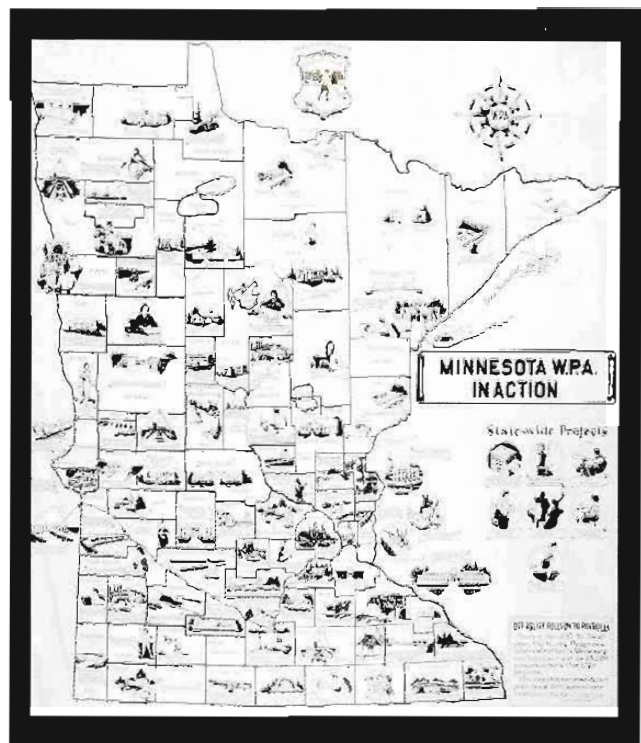
³⁹McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 318-20.

What conclusions can be drawn from studying Federal One and its successors at the state level? Originally conceived as a component of the work-relief program, the WPA art projects soon broadened in scope to reflect cultural and nationalistic goals. The programs would provide work for unemployed artists and performers and provide entertainment to a broader segment of the population than had ever had access to such material before. At the same time, the projects would encourage American art forms and promote the American way of life. Many project administrators and observers from the national to the local level soon became committed to this concept. Many also thought that the art projects should be made permanent, although conservatives disagreed sharply.

Unfortunately, the experiment soon proved to be a bureaucratic and administrative nightmare with difficulties that transcended these positive features. Research on the projects in several states reveals that, while details varied from place to place, the pattern was essentially the same.¹⁰ There were, to be sure, artists in need of assistance and people in need of cultural enrichment, but bringing them together was difficult. The identification of bona fide artists, performers, and writers was a major problem, while limited budgets, selection quotas, frequent complaining, and constant changes and pressures from Washington placed heavy burdens on project directors, who were often hard pressed to operate their programs at all—let alone do something culturally significant.

Certainly, there were successes, in Minnesota and across the nation—witness the popularity of many programs, especially the symphony and art-center movements. The Walker Art Center and University Museum, the book reprints, and the art either in situ or in museum collections around the state are a part of the WPA legacy. But in general the reality never matched the ideal. One lesson Federal One taught was that an

¹⁰See Hendrickson, "Federal Arts Projects in Iowa," 24–38, "Federal Music Project in Oklahoma," 361–75, and "WPA Arts Projects in Texas," 3–13.



Poster by FAP artist Carl Lindahl, 1936, advertising WPA accomplishments statewide

effort to use a limited work-relief program as a vehicle for cultural enrichment could produce only limited success. Another was that, however noble the idea, any program of government support for the arts is fraught with danger. Without doubt, Federal One pointed out the need for broadened support of the arts and left some tangible results. But it did not demonstrate conclusively that government sponsorship of the arts was a viable proposition—either during the Great Depression or for posterity.

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