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SPRING 2011

Volume 26 No 3

THE WPA: PUTTING THE NATION TO WORK IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

THE WORKS PROGRESS
ADMINISTRATION WAS PRESIDENT
FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT'S BIGGEST
NEW DEAL JOBS PROGRAM. IT STILL
DRAWS CONTROVERSY TODAY.

The Great Depression of the 1930s caused massive unemployment. Before the stock market crash in 1929, the unemployment rate was 3.2 percent. Following the crash, it shot up. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office as president in 1933, a quarter of the workforce, 12 million Americans, had lost their jobs.

The financial crisis in 1929 caused employers to cut production

and lay off workers. Without a paycheck, unemployed workers sharply reduced their spending, which in turn led to more business cutbacks and job losses. No broad social safety net existed, such as unemployment insurance, Social Security, and welfare. Limited aid was available from private charities and local governments.

In 1932, FDR was the Democratic governor of New York when he decided to run for president against Herbert Hoover, a Republican. FDR directed his campaign to "the forgotten man" and promised "a new deal for the American people."

Roosevelt defeated Hoover, winning strong Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. In his Inaugural Address, FDR declared, "Our greatest primary task is to put people to work."

During his presidential campaign and early days in office, FDR called for cutting spending to balance the federal budget. This had been the traditional government response to economic depressions. But with a quarter of American workers jobless and the

economy at a standstill, FDR soon decided that the economic emergency required massive federal action. This became the basis of his New Deal.

During the New Deal, Roosevelt together with Congress passed dozens of major laws to help bank depositors, stock investors, farmers, business owners, and others recover from the Great Depression. None of his New Deal programs was more dramatic than his federal jobs programs to put the nation back to work.

Early Work Relief Programs

By 1933, four years after the Great Depression began, the needs of the unemployed, homeless, and hungry overwhelmed charities and state relief efforts. Most local governments attempted to provide "direct relief" to those in need. This usually involved small cash aid and vouchers (similar to coupons) for food, clothing, >

and rent. As the Great Depression worsened, however, local governments struggled to help even the neediest families, let alone all those who were unemployed.

Roosevelt always preferred "work relief." As governor of New York, he had set up the first and largest state work relief program, putting the unemployed to work, mainly building roads. Roosevelt believed it was important for the unemployed to get back to work quickly, not only to earn a paycheck again, but also to keep up their skills and restore their sense of self-respect.

Within his first year in office, the New Deal created four federal work relief programs:

- **Civilian Conservation Corps:** CCC employed unmarried young men from families on direct relief to improve national parks and forests.
- **Federal Emergency Relief Administration:** Through FERA, Congress provided grants to states that contributed matching funds to employ jobless workers. Most FERA workers enjoyed the first federal minimum wage (30 cents an hour).
- **Public Works Administration:** PWA financed local government construction projects like schools, hospitals, bridges, harbors, and airports. Much of the funding went to construction materials and heavy equipment, so the PWA was not as labor intensive as other New Deal work relief programs.
- **Civil Works Administration:** Fearing increased suffering as winter approached, FDR established CWA in November 1933. CWA temporarily employed over 4 million unemployed workers.

The Beginning of the WPA

The temporary CWA work relief program ended in 1934. By that summer, more than a year into Roosevelt's presidency, the nation's economy had improved little. The unemployment rate had dropped only three points.

U.S. Unemployment 1929-1943

YEAR	NUMBER	PERCENT
1929	1,550,000	3.2
1930	4,340,000	8.9
1931	8,020,000	16.3
1932	12,060,000	24.1
1933	12,830,000	25.2
1934	11,340,000	22.0
1935	10,610,000	20.3
1936	9,030,000	17.1
1937	7,700,000	14.3
1938	10,390,000	19.1
1939	9,480,000	17.2
1940	8,120,000	14.6
1941	5,560,000	9.9
1942	2,660,000	4.7
1943	1,070,000	1.9

Source: Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other conservative groups complained that the government jobs programs were unfairly competing with private enterprise. In addition, federal spending had soared, causing huge budget deficits. In the eyes of these critics, New Deal policies were undermining business confidence to invest and hire, thus holding back economic recovery.

Many of FDR's advisors, however, argued that only a bigger and ongoing federal work program could pump enough money into the economy to stimulate private business to begin hiring again. But Roosevelt hesitated, hoping the economy would recover soon.

Despite persisting high unemployment, FDR had won the confidence of most Americans. In the 1934 fall midterm congressional election, Democrats picked up even more seats in the Senate and House of Representatives.

In his 1935 State of the Union Address, a politically strengthened Roosevelt declared, "Work must be found for able-bodied but destitute [needy] workers." He again emphasized restoring worker "self-respect, their self-reliance and courage and determination."

Roosevelt outlined his ideas for a much larger work relief program aimed at the most desperate unemployed. Work under this program must be "useful" and what "the nation needs and cannot afford to neglect," he said.

Roosevelt promised his new jobs program would not compete with private businesses. He said wages should be larger than direct relief but smaller than what private employers paid. He also wanted a high percentage of the funding spent on labor rather than materials and equipment.

On April 8, 1935, Congress approved \$4.8 billion for additional work relief. FDR then created by executive order the Works Progress Administration (later renamed the Works Project Administration). The president introduced the WPA to the public in a radio "fireside chat." He said he soon expected to see "the dirt to fly." Project applications from state and local governments and federal agencies flooded into the WPA.

The WPA established a "security wage" of up to almost \$100 per month, based on the worker's region and skill level. The average WPA wage was below that set by private employers. The WPA set maximum hours of work in order to employ more workers. The new program also employed workers for no more than 18 months unless certifying them as needy.

The WPA established special divisions for youth and women. The WPA's National Youth Administration provided part-time jobs for high school and college students to keep them in school. The Division of Women's and Professional Projects provided funding for typists, teachers, nurses, librarians, and other non-manual labor workers.

WPA wages for women lagged behind those for men. Most assumed men were the head of households and should get top priority for well-paying jobs.

Black Americans, underrepresented on the WPA job rolls, faced hiring quotas and racial segregation. The WPA usually put them in low-paid unskilled jobs regardless of their education and training.

WPA Projects

Road building was the most common work. But WPA workers also built many other things—water and sewer systems, college sports stadiums, rural airstrips, electric power lines, parks and public swimming pools. San Antonio, Texas, got its now-famous River Walk. The Statue of Liberty got a makeover. WPA workers also put up tens of thousands of public buildings—libraries, hospitals, firehouses, city halls, and many schools.

Some WPA construction projects like golf courses and yacht marinas drew controversy because they seemed to benefit the wealthy. Probably the most spectacular of these projects was the Timberline Lodge on Mt. Hood near Portland, Oregon. Local people hoped an upscale ski lodge would draw business into the area. Hundreds of WPA workers built access roads, the lodge, and even its furniture. It is still operating today.

The WPA ranged far beyond construction. It expanded "production-for-use" projects pioneered by FERA. These projects included women's "sewing rooms," vegetable gardens, canning, furniture making,

shoe repair, mattress making, and school lunch programs.

The WPA could not compete with private business by selling any of the goods made in its projects. Instead, they distributed the goods free to those on direct relief. Even so, businesses complained that this took trade away from them.

The WPA also found work for professionals and white-collar workers. These jobs included recording folk songs, indexing deeds, providing health services, and operating museums, libraries, and archaeological digs.

In Kentucky, nearly 100 women rode horses into remote poor areas to deliver library books to families and schools. WPA "packhorse librarians" were soon reaching thousands of rural people without access to libraries in many other states.

Probably the most controversial WPA program was the Federal Art Project. This provided employment for artists, musicians, writers, and theater companies, putting thousands to work. They created murals, sculptures, and posters and taught art and music classes. Musicians, singers, dancers, and theater companies performed, often free to the public. The most famous writing project developed guidebooks for each state

and many cities. Critics complained that many of these projects tended to support the labor movement, leftist causes, and particularly the Democratic Party. This was true in some cases, but most projects were free of politics.

By the end of 1936, WPA projects employed millions of workers across the United States. When floods, hurricanes, fires, and other natural disasters struck, WPA workers helped in the recovery.

The End of the WPA

In the presidential election year of 1936, conservative Republicans and business groups attacked the WPA as a socialist experiment bankrupting the country. FDR struck back against what he called the "business and financial monopoly." In November, he won reelection in a landslide victory.

By 1937, unemployment was down to 14 percent. This was more than 10 points lower than it was when FDR entered the White House in 1933.

Henry Morgenthau, Roosevelt's secretary of the treasury, recommended cutting spending and balancing the federal budget. Morgenthau argued this policy would gain the confidence of businesses to invest in the

economy and create jobs. Harry Hopkins, head of the WPA, opposed this policy. He argued for more work relief spending to reduce unemployment further and stimulate the economy.

Never comfortable with the huge budget deficits, Roosevelt sided with Morgenthau. Along with other cuts, he reduced WPA spending by two-thirds. This ended the jobs of over a million WPA workers. With fewer paychecks in the economy, private businesses cut back and laid off employees. By 1938, unemployment was back up to 19 percent.

Roosevelt quickly reversed course, resumed deficit spending, and expanded the WPA's rolls to more than 3.5 million workers. This reduced unemployment somewhat and ended the so-called "Roosevelt Recession," but not the Great Depression itself.

Opposition continued to build against the WPA. Many worried that it added to the national debt, which had tripled under FDR (it was \$16 billion under Hoover in 1931 and \$40 billion under FDR in 1939).

FDR raised corporation taxes and the income tax on wealthy individuals to help pay for the WPA and other New Deal programs. Conservative critics claimed this prevented private businesses from hiring more workers, thus prolonging the Great Depression. These critics also pointed out that despite the WPA's record of creating jobs, the nation's unemployment rate had never gone lower than 14 percent under Roosevelt.

WPA opponents also charged that many projects were wasteful boondoggles. Also, despite efforts by the WPA to separate itself from politics, complaints mounted that some project managers pressured workers to contribute to the Democratic Party. In addition, conservatives in Congress began to investigate radicalism in the Federal Art Project.

In the 1938 midterm congressional election, the Republican Party surged

back. It gained 81 seats in the House and eight in the Senate. Although the Democrats still commanded majorities in both houses of Congress, Republicans and conservative Democrats joined to cut WPA funding. The following year, the Hatch Act was passed, outlawing political activity by federal employees. This was aimed at preventing future WPA abuses.

By 1939, war had erupted in Europe and Asia. The WPA began to take on military projects, such as building training camps and airfields.

When the U.S. entered the war in 1941, federal deficit spending skyrocketed to pay for tanks, planes, and other war production. Factories were hiring again while many men entered the military. As a result, unemployment dropped swiftly.

With unemployment at 1.9 percent, Roosevelt closed the WPA in June 1943. From 1935 to 1943, the WPA spent more than \$10 billion and employed over 8 million jobless workers, most of them from the direct relief rolls. The WPA was the most massive government jobs program the nation had ever seen.

The WPA left behind:

- 650,000 miles of roads and 78,000 bridges
- 125,000 public buildings (one-third of them schools)

- 800 airports
- 8,000 parks and 2,100 public swimming pools
- 475,000 works of art

WPA workers also provided services such as serving 900 million hot school lunches, performing 225,000 concerts, and operating 1,500 nursery schools. When Roosevelt ended the WPA in the middle of World War II, he said it had "earned an honorable discharge."

FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. What was the difference between "direct relief" and "work relief" during the Great Depression? Why did FDR favor "work relief"? Which, if any, do you think is better? Why?
2. WPA projects took place in every county. Are there buildings or other WPA projects that still exist in your county? (Consider visiting a site, taking pictures, and writing a description of its original and current use.)
3. How did the New Deal and its critics differ over the best way to reduce unemployment and end the Great Depression?