WPA: An Important Chapter in U.S. and Kentucky History

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WPA: AN IMPORTANT CHAPTER IN U.S. AND KENTUCKY HISTORY
What was the WPA?

- Established in the mid-1930’s by executive order as the Works Progress Administration
- Offered work to the unemployed through construction programs
- Provided food, clothing and housing assistance
- Underwrote arts, drama, and literacy projects
Reversing the “Spiral of Depression”

- More than 8,500,000 people employed
- 1,410,000 projects
- $11 billion spent

Staff of the Federal Writers’ Project. Photographer unknown. Photograph, 1938. Courtesy of the National Archives.
Eight Years of Work in Kentucky

Highways, roads, streets = $117,565,194
Buildings = $25,817,417
Water, sewer and other utilities = $12,337,072

8,165,400 garments
11,590,384 lunches
1,164 schools
14,026 miles of highways, roads, streets
2009: IMLS AWARDED 3 YEAR GRANT TO ASERL TO SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT OF ASERL’S COLLABORATIVE FEDERAL DEPOSITORY PROGRAM (CFDP)
COLLABORATIVE FEDERAL DEPOSITORY PROGRAM (CFDP)

- Workable solutions for addressing the cost of managing, preserving, and providing access to large collections of Federal government publications
- Creation of comprehensive collections: Centers of Excellence
ASERL Documents Disposition Database

WONDERFUL TOOL!

- Disposition of items
- Acquisition of items
  - Library submits its needs (itemized, by SuDoc number, or by descriptive terms)
  - Daily notification of items matching our needs
  - Efficient way to claim items
UK Libraries serves as a Center of Excellence (COE) for Works Progress and Work Projects Administration (WPA) publications
Centers of Excellence

RESPONSIBILITIES:

- Inventory holdings
- Ensure accurate cataloging & holdings records
- Seek to fill holes in collections
- Replace damaged or lost pieces
- Provide active preservation for the collection
- Create bibliography of all WPA titles, owned and not owned
Centers of Excellence

RESPONSIBILITIES (continued)

- Digitize holdings or link to available public domain digital copies
- Participate in ILL/Document Delivery agreements
- Provide expert reference service
- Promote the use of their collection.
UK Libraries Digitization Effort

- Documents from 7 southeastern states have been digitized to date
- Digital images of Kentucky-related WPA documents are available online:
  - InfoKat records contain live link to digitized document
  - Digital images for Kentucky–related WPA documents are available online via Explore UK

History of the WPA

The Works Progress Administration was created by the order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and was funded by Congress through the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act in April of 1935. The Works Progress Administration was renamed the Work Projects Administration (WPA) in 1939 and was the largest agency in the New Deal, employing millions to construct public buildings and roads, and operate arts and literacy projects. Almost every community in the United States had a public building, road or bridge created by the WPA.

The approximate total amount spent from 1936 to 1943 was over $11 billion which especially benefited rural and western populations.

During the Great Depression the WPA provided some skills training and almost 8 million jobs to the unemployed. These jobs, however, were limited to one person per household. Approximately 15 percent of the households were headed by women. The average age of the workers was 40 years old.

Libraries benefited greatly from the WPA. Construction and renovation projects on libraries alone employed over 27,000 people by 1940.

The University of Kentucky’s WPA collection becomes a Center of Excellence

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) collection at the University of Kentucky dates from the early 1930s to the late 1970s and is becoming more comprehensive thanks to the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL), and the Collaborative Federal Depository Program (CFDP). UK has been given the opportunity to develop a Center of Excellence for the WPA through an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant. As a Center of Excellence, UK is developing a collection of archival pieces that are non-circulating and will preserve the WPA publications in their original format. The libraries are also acquiring extra copies for use by researchers. Currently, UK’s collection has over 2,000 items published by the Works Progress Administration.

The WPA published many American Imprints Inventories, which are quite fascinating historical accounts of library collections in each state. The Supplemental Check List of Kentucky Imprints 1788-1820: American Imprints Inventory No. 38 lists the titles of books published about or in Kentucky. This particular book lists the holdings of 50 libraries around the United States.

The University of Kentucky’s collection has many items that chronicle Kentucky’s involvement and history with the WPA such as:
End of Grant Celebration!

The University of Kentucky Libraries presents:

Putting America Back to Work during the Great Depression:
Preserving and Improving Access to the Works Progress Administration Records for the Future

Keynote speaker:
David S. Ferriero, Archivist of the United States

Panel discussion: Professionals from the University of Kentucky, the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries, and the National Archives and Records Administration.
Reception to follow.

Wednesday, September 5, 2012
1:30 PM
William T. Young Library
Program is free and open to the public.

WPA exhibits on display in William T. Young Library and Special Collections, A.I. King Building through September.
Exhibits

- Special Collections, M. I. King Building
- William T. Young Library
Exhibits

- VERY SPECIAL EXHIBIT!
  - Video display currently showing in William T. Young Library’s Hub
  - Created by our next speaker, Angelia Pulley!
Making the Images Public

- Student Internship to gain practical experience for Undergraduate credit
- Research of the WPA and IMLS Grant
- Objective: to create a visual presentation of the WPA in Kentucky
- Primary source: the Goodman-Paxton Photographic Collection, 1934-1942 from the University of Kentucky’s Special Collections
Quick Facts: Goodman Paxton Photographic Collection, 1934-1942

- 5,699 black and white photographic prints
- Images document the accomplishments of the WPA within Kentucky
- Construction roads, bridges, sewers, hospitals, libraries, schools, courthouses, and municipal buildings
- People enrolled in training and work programs
- The collection was donated by Edwin J. Paxton to the University of Kentucky in 1964
- Photographs taken under the direction of Goodman for the WPA in Kentucky
Who is George H. Goodman?

- George H. Goodman (1876-1961)
- In 1900, founded a mail order whiskey business which continued until the enactment of the 1919 Volstead Act (Prohibition)
- In 1922, purchased the Paducah News-Democrat
- In 1929, he sold the News-Democrat to Edwin J. Paxton
- 1934-1941, Goodman served as the director of the Works Progress Administration in Kentucky
- 1942-1946, he served as director of the office of Price Administration
George H. Goodman

“George H. Goodman and General Adna R. Chaffee emerging from new Air Corps barracks”

Box 30 item 4849
George H. Goodman

“Brigadier General Daniel VanVoorhis and George H. Goodman at Godman Field”

Box 30 item 4850
Who is Edwin J. Paxton?

- Edwin J. Paxton (1877-1941)
- Son of William F. Paxton who launched *The Evening Sun* by buying the assets of the *Paducah Standard*
- 1929, Edwin took over as editor and bought out the rival *News-Democrat*
- After the merger, the newspaper became *The Sun-Democrat* and later changed to *The Paducah Sun* in 1978
Edwin J. Paxton

A casual pose of E. J. Paxton with a newspaper seated in a parlor.
Edwin J. Paxton

E. J. Paxton embracing a young couple
WPA State Office Headquarters

Gibbs-Inman Building, 9th Street south of Broadway, Louisville, KY
Creating a visual presentation

- Themes
  - Packhorse Librarians
  - Construction
  - WPA training centers and jobs
Photograph selection

- **Criteria**
  - Do you recognize WPA streets, buildings, schools?
  - Photograph’s ability to tell a story
  - People: facial expression, action pose
  - Objects: tools, machinery, products
  - Unrealized significance for Kentucky
  - Potentially provoke the viewer to ask a question
Recognizable?
Tells a story
People, expression, pose
Objects, machinery, product

Shaping wire supports for concrete sewer mains and hand chiseled limestone blocks
Provokes a question

What is this space?

How has this landscape changed?
Unrealized significance to Kentucky Swamp-draining project for malaria control

State Board of Health laboratory technicians
A WPA-sponsored adult education class in Milwaukee, WI. Undated. From the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).
Thank you!

- Mary McLaren
- Jennifer Bartlett
- Angelia Pulley

Digital images of Kentucky-related WPA publications are available online at Explore UK: