



The Works Progress Administration:



the legacy of New Deal work programs in Indiana

RESOURCE MATERIAL and SUGGESTED READING

Indiana: a Guide to the Hoosier State Federal Writers Project
A Guide to the Calumet Region Indiana Federal Writers Project
Violins & Shovels: the WPA Arts Projects Milton Meltzer
The New Deal, a Documentary History ed. William E. Leuchtenburg
Hard Times Studs Terkel

Indianapolis: 1982

COVER: observation tower, Washington Park, Michigan City

text and photographs by Glory June



Broadripple Post Office, Indianapolis

WPA Recreational Projects in the Hoosier State



sponsored by the UAW Community Action Program
of Greater Marion County
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entrance, Petro Park, Mishwaka

Ask anyone in passing about the WPA, the Roosevelt administration's work relief program of the latter 1930's, and chances are, *if he's heard* of it at all, the answer will be negative with tales of workers leaning on their shovels, "boondoggling", "make-work". Ironically, the Works Progress Administration is one of the New Deal agencies that left us the most tangible record of its success. Nearly 50 years later, we still use the fruits of WPA labor. Instances of shirking or corruption in the WPA were far less rampant than in government today; unquestionably, an amazing amount of work was accomplished. Evidence proves there was far less waste than on projects nowadays, public or private. Popular history has not been kind to the WPA; it is time to set the record straight.

The 30's were called, by WPA muralist Edward Laning, "our Golden Age, the only humane era in our history, the one brief period when we permitted ourselves to be good. Before that time all was Business, and after, it has all been War." While nostalgia may have gilded Mr. Laning's memory, the decade offers lessons for a later age of tightened belts.

The Great Depression, which had continued to worsen since the 1929 stock market crash, had the United States in the grip of utter desolation. President Hoover and his economic advisors did little, for they were of the belief there was little they *could* do; the Depression had to "work itself out". Even Tin Pan Alley had to admit that life was not "a bowl of cherries", and offered "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" as a more

suitable theme song for those terrible years. Maybe because there was little historical precedent for the government stepping in, outwardly the people as a whole remained surprisingly docile about the depression, with few succumbing to the rhetoric of either extreme, and few outbursts from the "little man". Jobless, starving World War I veterans did march peacefully on Washington in 1932, demanding their rightful bonus money then, when they needed it, not 20 years hence, but in a shameful display they were driven out by soldiers under General MacArthur. However, people as a rule were more subtle in their protest; despairing transients looking for work ironically called their wretched camps outside most cities "Hoovervilles".

Naturally the American people in 1932 were fed up and willing to listen to a man who appeared to have some answers, and swept Franklin D. Roosevelt into the Presidency. He didn't waste any time. An incredible number of programs went into effect in his first 100 days in office, among them the Federal Emergency Relief Agency, specifically to aid the unemployed. So great was the emergency that a large portion of FERA money had to be doled out as direct relief, but Harry Hopkins, whom Roosevelt had appointed director, believed from the start that the government had a responsibility to provide jobs to those who were unemployed through no fault of their own, and began a rudimentary work relief program. By the fall of 1933 it was clear the government was not getting men back to work fast enough, so Hopkins convinced FDR to establish the temporary Civil Works Administration (CWA), designed to carry the unemployed through the winter. CWA was criticized from one side as merely "make-work"—though of course, the idea of it was to get a lot of men back to work quickly—and from the other side as insufficient, since it ended in March 1934. The FERA, still in effect, established a stronger work relief program after this time, and many FERA and CWA projects, especially roads and parks, were later completed by the Works Progress Administration.

Two other federal agencies related to work programs also had come into existence during FDR's first frantic days, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Public Works Administration (PWA). The latter was frequently confused with WPA because of the similar initials and because on occasion they dealt with similar projects. But the PWA was strictly construction—and only large-scale projects over \$25,000, a hefty sum then—of public buildings and works such as hospitals, schools, courthouses, dams, waterworks, and also slum clearance and public housing. Indianapolis boasted one of the most beautifully designed housing projects in the country in Lockefield Gardens, now abandoned. The Public Works Administration did give work to the unemployed on their construction jobs, but to be out of work was not a requirement to be hired.



group camp, Versailles State Park

The CCC was possibly Roosevelt's most successful New Deal innovation. The idea was to save our natural resources while saving our youth. Jobless young men from 16 to 23 were trained and put to work in parks and forests. They lived in camps and were required to send a portion of their monthly earnings to their families. Critics found it difficult to condemn a program that had young men growing healthy in the Great Outdoors while helping the country besides.

shelter, Muscatatuck County Park





Naval Armory, Indianapolis

Meanwhile, Franklin D. Roosevelt was ready to put Hopkins' work relief program into effect. In 1935, FDR told Congress that the dole was "a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit....I am not willing that the vitality of our people be further sapped by the giving of cash, of market baskets, of a few hours of weekly work cutting grass, raking leaves, or picking up papers in the public parks. The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief." The Works Progress Administration with Harry Hopkins in charge began that summer to provide *work* to employable persons in need, and to reduce the relief rolls. If at all possible, the skills of the person were applied to the job. Indiana's WPA program took off immediately with projects sponsored by local governments, and soon filled its quota with the formerly-unemployed, greatly easing the county relief loads.

Naval Armory, Michigan City



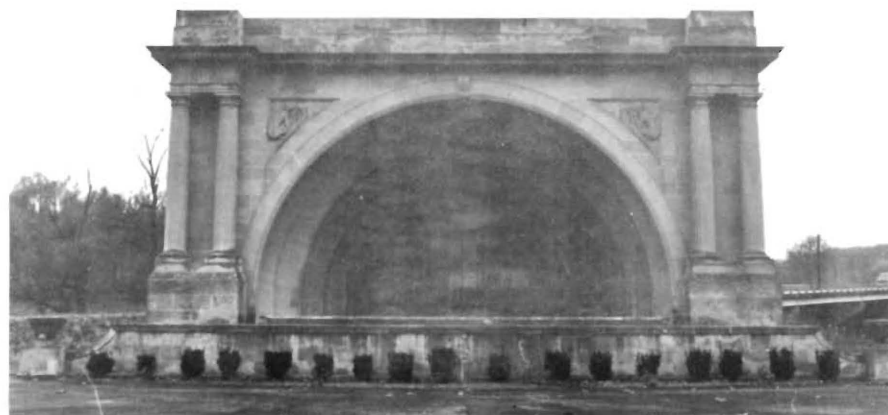


stage, Linton City Park



bandshell, Morrison Park, Shelbyville

bandshell, Otis Park, Bedford



So widespread was WPA activity that it is difficult to comprehend how a large segment of the public could be unaware of its positive impact even then. The largest expenditure of WPA money and manpower in Indiana went to roads in the farm-to-market program, and for streets and sidewalks in the towns. It is not impossible to find a stretch of pavement stamped "built by WPA" even today. The Works Progress Administration built or improved waterworks and sewer systems, armories, school buildings, city halls, airports (a necessity of the new age), and all manner of public buildings. They conducted classes in arts and crafts, and training programs in various vocational skills. The WPA Women's Division employed thousands in their sewing project, and the fruits of their labor went to those who were needier still. They rebound books in libraries that, because of the Depression, were unable to buy new books. County records were collected and organized into more usable files. No skills were ignored; actors, directors, and theater technicians produced plays and took them on the road to people who had never seen a live professional performance. Musicians, too, were employed in this manner. Music was also a large part of the WPA's recreation program. Writers worked in public relations jobs in the WPA programs, and in every state produced a guidebook, but it was widely agreed that *Indiana, a Guide to the Hoosier State* was among the best of these. It is available today in many public libraries, still over 500 pages of fascinating reading. For perhaps the first time, art went public; art *about* people was brought *to* the people in the murals that were painted in public buildings everywhere, and the sculptures that graced their lobbies and courtyards.

pavilion, McCormick Park, Fort Wayne



And the Works Progress Administration met the newly-voiced needs of the people for a more satisfying life through recreation. Due to new labor laws creating shorter hours, even those who were employed now had more leisure time than ever before. A burgeoning recreation movement urged that this time be used "advantageously", and so the WPA complied with this notion, converting old buildings or constructing new community/recreational centers where classes for all ages were held, plays and concerts performed, and indoor sports enjoyed. These buildings ranged from purely functional gymnasiums to some very attractive structures of architectural merit. Imaginative uses of native materials were frequent, for the federal money granted for projects under the WPA was meant to cover wages; the local sponsor generally provided the land, tools, and materials. With the depressed economy little money was available for purchasing, obviously, so sponsors relied heavily on donations, especially of land, and materials at hand. In the Bloomington-Bedford area we find abundant limestone and sandstone construction; up north, glacial fieldstone. Native timber was used extensively in southern Indiana, in many cases with exquisite craftsmanship.

Nachand Fieldhouse (Jeffersonville Community Center)





former community center, Little York

community center, Monticello





boathouse, Lincoln Park, Mishawaka

The CCC had been improving and expanding state parks and forests from its inception, building roads, constructing picnic and camping facilities, planting trees, building low dams. WPA workers joined them in this type of work on projects sponsored by the State Department of Conservation (now Natural Resources). The Works Progress Administration was praised highly for helping to advance Indiana's conservation programs in soil erosion control, bird and game preserves, fish hatcheries, and flood control. Thousands of low dams were built; larger dams, the vast majority of them earthen, formed over 400 new lakes in Indiana, from those more rightly called farm ponds to substantial bodies of water of three to four hundred acres. Many still exist but most now appear to be privately owned. Some disappeared over the years; some were likely swallowed by the Army Corps of Engineers vast reservoir projects of the 60's. But these lakes and the other Department of Conservation work performed by the WPA made the simple pleasures of the outdoors—fishing boating, swimming, camping, hiking—available to thousands of Hoosiers, especially in the southern half of the state where natural lakes are scarce.



entrance, Wythogan Park, Knox

The WPA fulfilled people's need to play. These projects were among the most successful, because, as the head of the WPA Recreation Section, Joseph Baker, noted, "recreation projects are flexible and can offer employment where there is greatest need; most of their expenditures go directly to local unemployed labor; they do not compete with private enterprise, and most important of all, they make permanent contributions to better living conditions and increased opportunities for more abundant living."

entrance, Baker Park, New Castle





duck pond, Leeper Park, South Bend

All the roads WPA helped create the need for a new concept, the roadside park. Indiana was among the leaders in developing this type of facility, largely with WPA or CCC labor. Fairgrounds, including the State Fair, were improved or expanded to accommodate the larger crowds.

Norwayne Field, North Judson





Peru Municipal Golf Course

Every possible kind of recreational facility was constructed by WPA, even such delights as skating ponds, ski slopes, and snow slides for children's sledding (one is still enjoyed in North Judson.) Zoos were expanded; many parks sported monkey islands or duck ponds. Community centers nearly always included—or often were little more than—gymnasiums, especially if they were attached to schools. The WPA built hundreds of athletic fields in Indiana for softball, baseball, and football, from simple graded spaces to quite elaborate stadiums, frequently, but not necessarily, adjacent to high schools. Some sports previously considered the domain of the country club set were given wide public access as WPA workers built or expanded tennis courts, golf courses, and swimming pools in towns all across the state. Many of the bath houses erected for these were quite elaborate and still stand, though many have been abandoned, largely due to rising vandalism. South Bend's Rum Village Park bath house, vaguely inspired by Roman ruins, is one of the finest; a particularly nice fieldstone structure stands in New Castle. For children, almost every WPA park project included a concrete wading pool, but these are rather difficult to find today, as they were closed down with the polio scare of a few decades ago, and most torn out. All these increased recreational opportunities and facilities combined to make parks *really* for the people which were great sources of community pride.

bath house, Roberts Park, Connersville

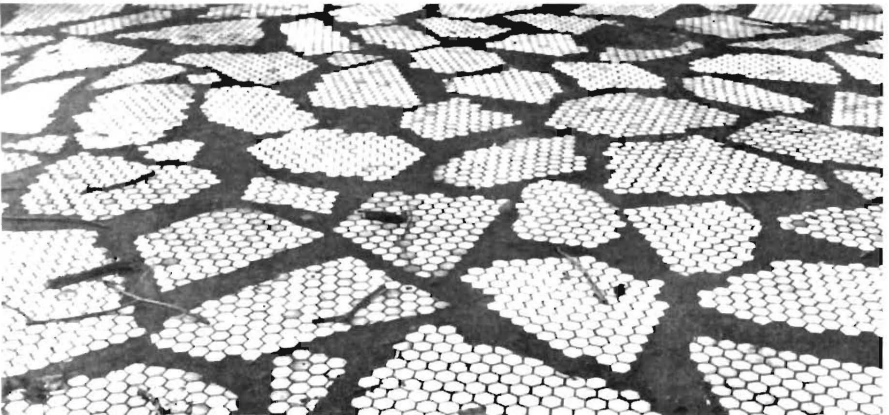




detail of rock garden/cascading fountain, Battell Park, Mishawaka

Many city parks were showcases for the imaginative use of native materials. Cascades Park in Bloomington contains drinking fountains, shelters, and picnic tables of limestone slabs. Battell Park in Mishawaka may well represent the epitome of fieldstone creativity, with its rock gardens, fountains, loveseats, and urns. Michigan City's Washington Park is filled with fences, walks, benches, and shelters all of salvaged material, and crowned with a magnificent limestone-faced observation tower with a framework that is a discarded railroad structure. WPA workers were frequently called upon to demolish old public buildings, carefully saving the bricks and stone and anything else for future reuse. In Oolitic, a deserted train depot was moved about three blocks to the grounds of the high school, where it was faced with limestone and converted to a bandroom. In Huntington an abandoned limestone quarry, seemingly useless land, was transformed into a beautiful sunken garden with lagoons, bridges, and fountains. Swampy mosquito-ridden sections of the St. Joseph River that flows through South Bend-Mishawaka

floor of picnic shelter, Washington Park, Michigan City



were filled in with discarded chunks of concrete to form islands surrounded by retaining walls of the same salvaged material cemented together. Variations of this were used for erosion and flood control along rivers throughout Indiana. Economic necessity required this inventive use of materials from the region's natural sources and and recycled manufactured material, and it is obvious even today that practicality did not preclude, but rather inspired, creativity with attractive—and useful—results. All in all, it is difficult to comprehend the intensity of the criticism leveled against the Works Progress Administration. That it cost more per unemployed person in actual cash outlay than direct relief is true, but irrelevant. With WPA, the government got a return in labor on its investment, the local community benefited, money was put into circulation and came back to the government via taxes, and a worker's pride was left intact. Nothing else fulfilled all these needs so well. As WPA director Harry Hopkins enthusiastically maintained: "only a work program can answer ...all aspects of the unemployment problem. Only a job can answer the problem of a jobless man; only a wage will increase purchasing power, for a basket of groceries starts no dollars circulating; only through work can these people make their contribution to our national well-being." One can argue points of administration, wages, hours, and eligibility, but the logic behind such a program is irrefutable.

bench of salvaged concrete, Washington Park, Michigan City





island, Leeper Park, South Bend

The 30's, whether or not our "Golden Age" of humanitarianism, left us a tangible record from which we may draw examples and comparisons for today. Those troubled times gave us lessons for our own, and the WPA may be worth studying not merely as an innovative and controversial notion buried in history, but for its useful application to contemporary problems. The past is prologue; our yesterdays determine our future. Let us take heed.

viewing stands, St. Joseph River, South Bend



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A 26-minute slide-tape show produced by Glory June on this subject is available from the Resource Center of ICH. For details call the Center at 317-925-5316.

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