

**THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION IN PORTLAND, OREGON:
AN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND SURVEY REPORT, 1935-1942**

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Abstract

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The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was established in 1935 by Presidential executive order to provide jobs for unemployed workers during the Depression. The central office of the WPA in Washington, D.C. established policies, issued directives, and distributed funding, but state offices oversaw implementation of the program and the work relief projects. The state office in Oregon operated out of Portland. Between 1935 and 1942, the WPA in Portland employed approximately 25,000 workers, including men and women in a variety of construction, engineering, and service projects. This study briefly surveys the history of the WPA in Portland, Oregon, describing the activities undertaken by WPA relief workers, and then focusing on the local debate over the merits of the WPA. It concludes with a cultural resource survey of thirty-two buildings, structures, and objects created by WPA relief workers in the city of Portland. Each cultural resource is identified by a survey form, a map, and at least one photograph.

The records of the WPA (Record Group 69) housed at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. proved crucial for reconstructing the history

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of the WPA in Portland. The Oregon State Library in Salem, Oregon, and the Portland Archives and Records Center in Portland, Oregon, contained useful reports, bulletins, and correspondence regarding the activities of the agency. Local newspapers, particularly the Oregonian, provided additional information. Secondary sources relating to the New Deal era yielded further insights into the WPA and its critics, supporters, and policies.

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HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The Great Depression dealt Portland, Oregon, a severe blow. Portland, along with the rest of the Pacific Northwest, experienced unprecedented levels of bankruptcy, unemployment, unpaid mortgages, and delinquent taxes.¹ While historians typically identify the crash of the New York Stock Exchange in October of 1929 as the start of the depression, it is evident that in many parts of the country, including Portland, hard times had existed long before Wall Street took its dramatic plunge. The timber industry, the basis of much of Portland's economy, had been mired in economic doldrums for several years. As early as 1927, timber mills in the Portland area began to shut down, laying off large numbers of workers.² Eventually ninety percent of the timber companies in the state teetered on the edge of bankruptcy.³

The year 1927 also saw the failure of the prominent Northwestern National Bank of Portland. The Oregon Journal reported a chaotic scene in which "frantic depositors swarmed in and around it [the bank], clamoring for their money. The drawn and serious faces of depositors around a bank,

¹Carlos Schwantes, The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 302.

²E. Kimbark MacColl, The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915-1950 (Portland, OR: Georgian Press Company, 1979), 368-69.

³Schwantes, The Pacific Northwest, 302.

struggling to get their money, is a pitiful sight."⁴ Several more bank failures would follow.⁵

Especially alarming was the unemployment problem, which the growing incidents of homelessness served to dramatize. "Hooverilles" sprouted up throughout the city. Over 330 people lived in a shantytown in Sullivan's Gulch that stretched from Northeast Grand Avenue to Northeast 21st Avenue. Another 100 lived under the west end of the Ross Island Bridge.⁶

In response to the growing economic crisis, concerned citizens, private charities, and local and state government agencies stepped in to provide relief. A local dairy owner, for instance, pledged a weekly ration of buttermilk to a group of unemployed workers on the east side of the city.⁷ A local charity, operating out of a church basement, provided sandwiches to the destitute.⁸ The city council approved a special bond election in order to generate emergency employment opportunities through the funding of public works projects.⁹

⁴Oregon Journal, 30 March 1927, p. 1.

⁵MacColl, The Growth of a City, 379-405.

⁶Oregonian, 27 February 1933, p. 1; Oregonian, 1 February 1933, p. 4. The Portland Hooverilles functioned as highly organized, semi-autonomous communities. Inhabitants of the Sullivan's Gulch shantytown elected their own mayor, and designated another man to oversee policing duties, including enforcing the ban on alcohol. The shantytown also operated its own commissary that distributed donated food and clothing throughout the community.

⁷Oregonian, 27 February 1933, p. 1.

⁸Oregonian, 12 September 1935, p. 2.

⁹MacColl, The Growth of a City, 455-56.

Meanwhile, the state government, in the words of one historian, "had neither the resources nor the creative leadership to meet the challenge" of the economic crisis.¹⁰ Republican Governor Julius Meier, whose background in business led him to focus his attention on cutting costs and balancing the budget, repudiated the notion that the state should embark on an emergency assistance program. Meier argued that relief was the responsibility of charities and local government.

Mounting pressure from constituents and local government officials eventually forced Governor Meier to modify his hands-off approach to relief. In December 1930 he created the State Emergency Employment Commission, which was later replaced by the State-Wide Relief Council. The move on the part of Meier amounted to nothing more than a token gesture. Neither agency had the authority to provide relief funding; rather, they primarily functioned as advisory boards, coordinating relief efforts among counties. Finally, by the fall of 1932, the Relief Council reported that the counties no longer had the financial ability to provide unemployment relief.¹¹

Portlanders painfully realized that the economic crisis surpassed the normal ability of their institutions to provide relief. The depression had exhausted the emergency relief funds of Multnomah County and Portland.¹² Charities were similarly overwhelmed. Despite the best efforts of these

¹⁰Robert Burton, "The New Deal in Oregon," in The New Deal (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 357.

¹¹Burton, "The New Deal in Oregon," 357-58.

¹²Ibid.; "Rocky Butte Scenic Drive Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, Salem, OR., sec. 8, p. 6.

charities, the crush of the hungry and the homeless had overtaxed the resources of many Portland area relief agencies. The Oregonian, for instance, reported that a young man and his pregnant wife could not find adequate care in Portland's relief shelters. The article recounted how the couple visited numerous missions, having to walk a distance of ninety-two blocks throughout the city, in order to receive a meal, which in the end consisted of nothing more than two jelly sandwiches.¹³

Portlanders began to look to the federal government for assistance. Even Governor Meier, despite his public assurances that the state had "practically everything necessary to meet the existing emergency," underwent a change of view. A short eight days after his overly optimistic assessment of the situation, the governor privately contacted President Hoover to request federal aid. "We must have help from the federal government," Meier pleaded, "if we are to avert suffering . . . and possible uprisings."¹⁴

Hoover responded to the depression in a limited and cautious manner. In contrast, Franklin Roosevelt promised "bold, persistent experimentation" to bring the country out of the economic crisis.¹⁵ In his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, the triumphant candidate pledged a "new deal for the American people."¹⁶ The phrase "New Deal" would become synonymous with his legislative agenda of relief, recovery, and reform initiatives. Central to the New Deal were

¹³Oregonian, 12 September 1935, p. 2.

¹⁴Burton, "The New Deal in Oregon," 358.

¹⁵William Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 5.

¹⁶Ibid., 8.

numerous agencies aimed at reducing unemployment, including the Public Works Administration (PWA), Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and Civil Works Administration (CWA).

During the early years of the New Deal the PWA represented Roosevelt's primary weapon in the war against unemployment. Backed by a previously unheard of \$3.3 billion appropriation, the agency sought to "prime the pump" of the national economy through a massive public works program.¹⁷ Officials anticipated that the stimulation of the construction industry would in turn provide jobs for unemployed men. Unemployed women, in the meantime, had to wait; the PWA omitted women from its projects.¹⁸

Efforts by the federal government in the early 1930s to provide relief and work for the unemployed had not produced the results that President Roosevelt or the nation had anticipated. Pressure mounted on the federal government to take more dramatic action. Cities across the nation witnessed riots as unemployed workers clamored for increased levels in relief spending. Demagogues such as Louisiana Senator Huey Long and Michigan's Father Charles Coughlin attracted national followings as the public, frustrated with the glacial rate of the economic recovery, flocked towards their radical plans to end the depression.¹⁹

In response to these pressures, Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1935. This act authorized the Roosevelt

¹⁷Robert McElvaine, The Great Depression (New York: Times Books, 1993), 152.

¹⁸Nancy Rose, Put to Work: Relief Programs of the Great Depression (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 26.

¹⁹Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 95.

Administration to spend \$4.88 billion to aid the unemployed. The President used this funding to create several new relief agencies, including the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which Roosevelt established by executive order on May 6, 1935.²⁰

The creation of the WPA ushered in a new era of federal activism. While the PWA represented an unprecedented level of involvement by the federal government in unemployment relief, it did not, like the WPA, constitute the federalization of local relief. This was one of the major distinctions between the PWA and the WPA. The PWA awarded contracts to private firms, which in turn became responsible for hiring workers. In contrast, the WPA put relief workers directly onto the federal payroll.²¹

The WPA consisted of several administrative layers. Beneath the national headquarters in Washington, D. C. were the regional, state, and district offices. The state offices played crucial roles in the organization of the agency. State offices prepared project applications for consideration and placed the approved projects into operation. As the largest city in the state and as the site of the state office, Portland was the hub of WPA activities in Oregon.²²

The WPA moved quickly in order to implement its program at the state level. President Roosevelt immediately appointed Emerson J. Griffith to head the WPA in Oregon. Born in California and educated on the east coast, Griffith came to Portland in 1913 to manage the local office of the

²⁰Federal Works Agency; Final Report of the WPA Program, 1935-43 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946), 7.

²¹Rose, Put to Work, 26.

²²Oregonian, 6 July 1935, p. 1.

Associated Press. After leaving Portland to pursue business interests in Seattle, San Francisco, and New York City, Griffith returned in 1924 to establish Griffith Transport Company, a highly successful brokerage office and steamship agency.²³

Throughout his career Griffith proved to be a loyal Democrat. In 1928 he served as the president of Oregon's Al Smith for President Campaign. Griffith also campaigned for Roosevelt. During the 1932 election he headed the Roosevelt for President League in Oregon, while also serving as the Financial Director of the Democratic National Committee in Oregon.²⁴

Griffith's dedication to Roosevelt made him an obvious choice for a political appointment. His hard work and organizational skills had impressed Roosevelt's campaign director, James Farley, who in turn recommended to Roosevelt that he appoint Griffith to head the Oregon WPA.²⁵ Along with tremendous power, the position also included a comfortable yearly salary of \$5,600.²⁶

The responsibility of filling subsequent positions within the Oregon WPA fell to Griffith. His selections of department heads read like a "Who's Who" of Portland. John Albright, a railroad executive with Union Pacific, became the deputy administrator.²⁷ Henry Hughes took temporary

²³Oregon Voter, 20 July 1935, pp. 58-60. Despite his prominence in commerce and media, Griffith was perhaps best known as a novelist. He and his wife co-authored numerous works of fiction, including a popular mystery novel titled The Monkey Wrench.

²⁴Oregon Voter, 20 July 1935, p. 60.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Oregonian, 19 January 1941, sec. 1, p. 4.

²⁷Reuben Norman, ed., Capitol's Who's Who for Oregon: 1948-1949 (Portland, OR: Capitol Publishing Company, 1948), 22.

leave as president of Hughes and Company investment bankers in order to serve as director of finances.²⁸ Robert Dieck, an Ivy League-educated civil engineer, was appointed director of projects.²⁹ The head of the personnel division went to James Dedman from the Portland office of Pacific Telephone Company.³⁰ Walfred Shuholm, who had worked with the state relief commission and also served as a business representative for the Portland plumbers' and gas fitters' union, became director of labor management.³¹ Griffith appointed Mary Jane Spurlin director of women's work. Spurlin, who had a remarkable background as a lawyer and district judge, gained fame as the only woman in Oregon to have served on the District Court bench.³²

The arrival of the New Deal in Portland generated tremendous excitement throughout the city. The local press carefully monitored the activities of the WPA, updating the public on how much money was appropriated and what projects had been approved. A large picture of a grinning, debonair E. J. Griffith graced the front page of the Oregonian as headlines announced the beginning of the WPA in Portland.³³ Even individual citizens seemed to get into the spirit. One local businessman ran an advertisement in the paper offering potential customers "a New Deal" in real estate prices. The advertisement picked up on Roosevelt's own

²⁸Oregonian, 6 July 1935, p. 1.

²⁹Ibid.; Norman, ed., Capitol's Who's Who for Oregon, 151.

³⁰Oregonian, 6 July 1935, p. 1.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.; Norman, ed., Capitol's Who's Who for Oregon, 526.

³³Oregonian, 6 July 1935, p. 1.

optimism and promised a rosy future in the real estate market. "Buyers are more optimistic: a new president, spring is here," the advertisement proclaimed.³⁴

Against this background of optimism, the local WPA began to lay the groundwork for the implementation of its work relief projects. At the most basic level, WPA projects were organized into two categories: engineering and construction projects, or "blue collar" projects, and service projects, or "white collar" projects. Engineering and construction projects involved building roads, bridges, dams, public buildings, and airports as well as the development and improvement of parks and school playgrounds. Service projects included art, music, theater, and writing programs along with social welfare programs and the historic records and buildings survey.

The projects carried out during the first years of the WPA were very labor intensive, designed not so much to produce useful public improvements, but to employ the optimum number of unemployed workers. The Oregon WPA admitted in its final report that in the beginning, "a relief viewpoint was placed ahead of sound operating principles."³⁵ This was certainly the case in Portland.

In their haste to enact the program, WPA officials frequently failed to properly organize the operation of the projects. In order to provide maximum employment opportunities, the projects emphasized the use of hand tools over more efficient power equipment. Often the number of

³⁴Oregonian, 5 March 1933, p. 5.

³⁵William Pidduck, ed., The Final State Reports, 1943, Archives of the Works Progress Administration and Predecessors, 1933-1943, series 1. (Sussex, England: Harvester Press Microform Publications, Ltd., 1987), 11.

workers assigned to a given project far exceeded what was necessary. The situation became so bad that in some cases there were simply not enough tools to go around for all the workers.³⁶

Many of the early projects focused on the improvement and development of city parks. This type of work proved to be ideal for the WPA; large numbers of unskilled workers could be employed while the output for construction materials could be kept to a minimum. Armies of relief workers descended on city parks and municipal golf courses to build rock walls, fences, comfort stations, trails, and footbridges. Workers cleared underbrush and graded landscapes to establish new parks. The work performed at Macleay Park is indicative of the character of the Portland WPA during its early years. For a six month period beginning in 1935, 164 men worked at the park, clearing the heavily wooded site of underbrush, snags, and stumps while constructing several miles of trails and access roads. In the end the WPA spent over \$61,000 on labor costs. Funding for equipment and materials, in contrast, totaled a paltry \$611.³⁷

Road construction and improvements attracted more funding than any other type of project. Like the work performed in the city parks and golf courses, the WPA favored these projects because they were labor intensive, employed large numbers of unskilled workers, and could be completed with hand tools. Photographs of these projects typically show dozens of laborers crowded into a work site using rakes and shovels to resurface the

³⁶Ibid., 7.

³⁷City of Portland, Oregon Department of Public Works, "Works Progress Administration, City Projects," Public Works Relief Projects, 1930-1942, Record Group 8401-12, Portland Archives and Records Center, Portland, OR.

roads.³⁸ By 1939 WPA workers had graded and resurfaced in excess of 500 miles of roadway in the Portland area.³⁹

As the Portland WPA grew into its role as an administrator of work relief and local sponsors became more familiar with the potential of WPA grants, the organization, efficiency, and quality of the projects improved. Work on roads and parks remained popular projects among WPA organizers; however, the WPA began to undertake larger and more complex projects. Building construction, for instance, became more widespread. Nevertheless, the emphasis of the WPA always remained on projects which employed large numbers of unskilled workers and involved minimal expenditures for materials and equipment.

In terms of total cost and the number of relief workers employed, the two largest, single construction projects undertaken by the Portland WPA were the development of Rocky Butte Scenic Drive and the new municipal airport. Rocky Butte, located in the north^{EASTERN}western corner of the city, is a knob 400 feet in elevation that offers sightseers dramatic views of Portland, the Cascade Mountain Range, including Mt. Hood and Mt. Saint Helens, along with the mouth of the Columbia River Gorge. Talk of developing Rocky Butte had circulated among city planners for several decades. Finally, in the early 1930s, the nearby Hill Military Academy donated several acres of land for the expressed purpose of developing the area for public use. In 1934 relief workers, using emergency funds from the state, began to build a road to the top of the butte. Shortly thereafter,

³⁸E. J. Griffith, "Report of the Works Progress Administration in Oregon, Third Congressional District," Oregoniana Collection, Oregon State Library, Salem, OR.

³⁹Ibid.

the WPA took over operations, completing the road and building an impressive stone viewpoint at the crest of the butte. The WPA eventually finished the project in 1939 at a cost of over \$500,000.⁴⁰ At the height of the project an average of 200 workers, ranging from supervisors to unskilled laborers, were employed on the site.⁴¹

The final product was an outstanding example of WPA work and the rustic architectural style that Depression era public works projects frequently adopted. Buildings, structures, and landscape improvements associated with rustic architecture relied heavily on native building materials; thus, throughout Portland, basalt stone--extracted from a quarry on Rocky Butte--figured prominently into the projects that adopted the rustic style. The use of simple hand tools is another defining trait. In this regard, the work of the stone masons at Rocky Butte and elsewhere was very much in keeping with the rustic style. Of course the WPA endorsed the use of hand tools for reasons other than attempting to achieve an Arts and Crafts ideal. Hand tools, while obviously lacking the efficiency of modern power equipment, helped the WPA maximize the employment opportunities for relief workers. Rustic architecture also strove to be as compatible and congruous as possible with the natural surrounding. In part this goal was achieved by using local building materials, but it was also realized by applying proper scale and avoiding unnaturally straight lines and excessive sophistication.⁴²

⁴⁰"Rocky Butte Scenic Drive Historic District," sec. 8, p. 6.

⁴¹Ibid., sec. 8, p. 12.

⁴²Carol Ahlgren, "The Civilian Conservation Corps and Wisconsin State Park Development," Wisconsin Magazine of History 71 #3 (1988): 186.

In capturing the essence of the rustic style, the design of Rocky Butte emphasized the use of indigenous building materials, as well as an approach to construction that linked the structures to their natural setting. Architects working on the Rocky Butte project kept the roadway and its accompanying structures in a proper scale while avoiding elaborate, decorative features and rigid lines that would otherwise clash with the surroundings. Indeed, the narrow, winding roadway to the top of the butte appears to be an almost natural occurrence as it hugs the contour of the hillside. The use of native basalt stone in the construction of the tunnel, guard rails, retaining walls, and viewpoint structure is similarly compatible to the setting.

Another characteristic of the Rocky Butte project that links it to the rustic style is its celebration of craftsmanship. In his landmark study of rustic architecture, Albert Good observed that the style "gives the feeling of having been executed by pioneer craftsmen with limited hand tools."⁴³ This feeling is certainly evident at Rocky Butte. The project called for the widespread use of hand cut stone, a process which called for specially trained laborers. Few of the hirees possessed masonry skills, but they learned on the job, working side-by-side with workers who had a background in masonry. Eventually about twenty masons worked on the project.⁴⁴

Ralph Curcio, a Italian immigrant who learned masonry in his native country, oversaw the stone work on the butte. Curcio had already left his

⁴³Albert Good, Park and Recreation Structures (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 1: 5.

⁴⁴"Rocky Butte Scenic Drive Historic District," sec. 8, p. 12.

mark on Oregon as a stone mason through his work on the Columbia River Gorge highway, Vista House, and Multnomah Lodge.⁴⁵ Curcio employed many of the same techniques on the Rocky Butte project that he used on the Columbia River Gorge highway. Rocky Butte features stone walls and guard rails made of scrupulously fitted basalt, arranged in patterns reflective of the stone work in the Gorge.

The basalt used in the project came from a quarry on the east side of the butte. The quarry provided much of the basalt for other WPA projects in the area, including, the construction of Rocky Butte Jail (since demolished), tunnels on Cornell Road and Burnside Street, comfort station at Overlook Park, and countless retaining walls, guard rails, and stone bollards that line Portland streets. The quarry also served as an important source of stone for the Timberline Lodge project, a massive, WPA-built ski lodge located at Government Camp on Mount Hood.⁴⁶

The construction of the new airport, while lacking the artistic craftsmanship of Rocky Butte, was Portland's most significant public works improvement during the New Deal. Since the late 1920s the city had relied on the woefully inadequate Swan Island airport. Portland voters, recognizing the need to build a larger airport capable of handling heavier air traffic, approved a bond issue allowing the city to purchase a parcel of land adjacent to the Columbia River as the site for a new airport. The WPA responded in kind with a grant for \$1.3 million.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Ibid., sec. 8, p. 11-12.

⁴⁶Jim Knapp, interview by David Lewis, 6 March 1987, Tape recording, personal collection of interviewer, Portland, Oregon.

⁴⁷MacColl, The Growth of a City, 502-04.

Officials of the WPA and Port of Portland, the local sponsor of the project, faced enormous difficulties in preparing the site for construction.⁴⁸ The low lying area did not drain properly, and because of its location near the Columbia River, flood waters frequently covered the site, compounding the drainage problems.

In hopes of alleviating the drainage problem, the WPA initiated a massive earth moving project.⁴⁹ Workers covered the area with four million cubic yards of sand dredged from the river. In addition, workers constructed a series of dikes to control flooding from the river. With the drainage problem addressed, two runways capable of serving the most modern aircraft of the day were built. Workers completed the project in 1941. All told, the airport project steadily employed over one thousand men.⁵⁰

Aside from such massive public works projects like Rocky Butte and the airport, few opportunities existed in the Portland area by which large numbers of unskilled workers could be employed. Again, the WPA turned towards road building as the solution. The WPA joined the State Highway Department in building the ambitious Wolf Creek and Wilson River highways.⁵¹ Engineers considered the undertaking, which involved carving passable roadways out of the side of steep coastal mountains, to be

⁴⁸Griffith, "Report of the Works Progress Administration in Oregon."

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰"Progress" [Monthly Bulletin of the Oregon Works Progress Administration], September 1936, Oregoniana Collection, Oregon State Library, Salem, OR.

⁵¹Oregonian, 27 December 1936, sec. 1, p. 3.

one of most difficult highway building tasks in the United States.⁵² When completed, these highways provided Portlanders with a new, more direct route to the Oregon Coast. The opening of the new highways not only improved access to the coast, but also dramatically changed the economies of small, littoral communities such as Seaside, Cannon Beach, and Tillamook. The unprecedented influx of recreational motorists established the groundwork for the development of a tourist-based economy along the Oregon coast.

Relief workers employed on the highway-building project gathered early in the morning under the Vista Avenue Bridge, where WPA trucks drove them on the approximately three hour journey to the work sites west of Portland.⁵³ As work on the Wolf Creek Highway progressed, it became more economic to house workers from Portland at work camps rather than transport them in from the city. The WPA secured Sunset Camp, an abandoned CCC camp located on the Wolf Creek Highway approximately thirty miles west of Portland, as a base of operations for the project. Soon two large camps were constructed just beyond Sunset Camp. These camps eventually housed 1,500 workers.⁵⁴

Along with road workers and engineers, the engineering and construction division of the Portland WPA hired highly trained artisans. These craftspersons included a crew of iron workers that produced works of ornamental wrought iron for a number of projects throughout Oregon.

⁵²Oregonian, 9 September 1938, p. 3.

⁵³The WPA only paid for the first hour of the commute to the work sites.

⁵⁴Pidduck, ed., The Final State Reports, 7.