NEW DEAL WORK PROJECTS AT THE MILWAUKEE PUBLIC LIBRARY

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"Give a man a dole and you save his body and destroy his spirit; give him a job and pay him an assured wage and you save both the body and the spirit."¹ This statement by Harry Hopkins reflects the philosophy of the New Deal, its creator Franklin D. Roosevelt and like-minded social thinkers such as Homer Folks. Thus, an important purpose of the many work-relief bureaus was to "substitute work for relief"² so as to restore feelings of self-esteem to the unemployed.

Some authorities would contend that the unprecedented intervention of the Federal government caused a revolution in the State-Federal relationships, not to mention waste and inefficiency, which is summed up in the word "boondoggling." The New Deal did effect a revolution in the nature of the government and there was undoubtedly a great deal of waste and inefficiency. But to emphasize only these negative aspects would seriously distort the picture. In seeking to save the capitalistic system from collapse, the New Deal made unstinted efforts to salvage human resources.

Many people today are familiar with the New Deal's accomplishments through an awareness of its physical outcroppings—the dams, airports and parks that dot America's landscape. But the New Deal also played a sizeable role in fostering cultural and scholarly programs which became known as "white collar" jobs because they provided work to such unemployed professionals as musicians, artists, and clerks. This article will discuss the origins, nature and results of the "white collar" enterprises of the Civilian Works Authority (C.W.A.), the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (F.E.R.A.) and the Works Projects Administration (W.P.A.) which were administered through the Milwaukee Public Library.

From 1933 until 1942, the Milwaukee Public Library and the New Deal were closely linked. Many New Deal programs were of marginal significance, making no lasting impact on the Library and contributing nothing of consequence to the cultural heritage of the community. Among these was the National Industrial Recovery Act or the N.R.A., as its administration came to be called. The
N.R.A. was an attempt at industrial self-regulation coupled with a Federal works program. But as it affected the Library, N.R.A. activity was confined to the regulation of hours in the bindery and adherence to certain purchasing policies and guidelines. By themselves these agreements were unimportant. Yet, in another respect, they signalled a readiness on the part of the Library to enter cooperative undertakings with the Federal government.

Of greater consequence were the varied programs of the C.W.A. and the F.E.R.A. They ranged from the mundane though necessary repair and painting of branch and main libraries to artistic and bibliographic projects such as the reorganization of the card catalog and the restoration of books. These latter projects involved the recopying of 287,500 cards and their redistribution throughout the catalog, and the repair of 17,840 books. These C.W.A. undertakings gave employment to forty-eight persons including six librarians and forty-two clerk typists. Unfortunately, the task was never completed, possibly due to a shortage of funds but more likely because the expenditure of money on library programs per se was not yet encouraged. “Blue collar” maintenance work received higher priority. Nonetheless, the work that was completed was considered an important contribution. Moreover, the catalog reorganization was significant in that it represented a departure from the typical roof repair projects which had characterized so many C.W.A. library activities. A valuable precedent was thus created for the more expansive white collar programs of the F.E.R.A. and later the W.P.A.

One such white collar undertaking was an F.E.R.A. music project. The plan entailed the copying and duplication of “good music” in manuscript form. (Fig. 1). In all, 755 selections were completed on master sheets and 67,256 sheets were dittoed. Selection was made on the basis of demand and also on the advice of recognized musicians in the city, among them Herman Smith, supervisor of music in the Milwaukee Public Schools, and Milton Rusch of the Milwaukee State Teachers College. In addition to employing twenty to thirty jobless musicians, the plan enabled the Library’s Art and Music Room to meet a borrower demand beyond the capacity of normal library appropriations. The project resulted in what was described as a “splendid collection” that was made available to the general public and also to small churches for use on Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. It was thought that if the work were continued, it would, in the words of library director Mathew S. Dudgeon, “eventuate in the Milwaukee Library having
the finest collection of good music in any library in the country.”\footnote{11}
While a “strict constructionist” might ponder the constitutionality of these displays of government “aid” to religious bodies, none could question the pragmatism of the undertaking. It helped the Library to meet a public need; it put unemployed musicians back to work; and it was the first successful attempt at employing the white collar worker within the Library.

Many C.W.A. and F.E.R.A. projects were haphazardly planned, inadequately funded, or faced with bureaucratic impediments. This was particularly true of the C.W.A. and applied not only to the reorganization of the card catalog, and to book repairs but to “blue collar” programs as well.\footnote{12} The Library also attempted to use F.E.R.A. funds to finish repair jobs which had not been completed by the C.W.A.\footnote{13} One can surmise that the C.W.A., in providing relief, had embarked upon a murky area in Federal-local relationships, undefined and unprecedented. Consequently, programs such as the catalog reorganization were eliminated because of uncertainties as to whether Federal funds could be used solely for library-related work. Moreover, the C.W.A. was a short term effort of only five months. The above limitations were not
peculiar to the Milwaukee Public Library but were characteristic of most C.W.A. and F.E.R.A. programs throughout the country. Hiring restrictions, for example, limited library work almost exclusively to "blue collar" projects.¹⁴

On the other hand, both the C.W.A. and the F.E.R.A. allowed the Library to satisfy patron demands which would have been impossible with the Library's restricted financial resources. It is interesting to note that such library projects did not constitute "made work", as even the maintenance jobs were long overdue, or, like the catalog reorganization, had been planned years in advance. They did not constitute "boondoggling" as that word is generally understood.

The W.P.A., the third New Deal bureaucracy to operate within the Library, was the most successful in terms of duration, lasting contributions and sheer variety of programs. Undoubtedly much of the W.P.A. success in the Milwaukee Public Library can be attributed to the fact that both local and Federal officials learned a great deal from their past mistakes.¹⁵ There was not the same pell-mell rush to put people to work as was typical of other works programs. Rather, the W.P.A. possessed what one writer has called a "unity of purpose" and a "continuity of operation"¹⁶ which lent a characteristic stability to all of its undertakings.

Initially, W.P.A. programs were characterized by the stock-in-trade manual labor projects. But they were important. Consider, for example, the repair of books. During 1935-1936 alone 422,841 books were renovated¹⁷ and tens of thousands more in the years following. (Fig. 2). In fact, the enormity of the book binding project was such that Dudgeon noted that he knew of no bindery prepared to do that amount of work.¹⁸ In any case, the limited city budget which had already reduced Library expenditures by twenty-five per cent simply would not allow for sending books out for repair.¹⁹ The binding project takes on an added significance, when it is considered that thousands of volumes were in "desperately bad condition" and some collections near collapse.²⁰ To prevent deterioration, W.P.A. workers shellacked and varnished the covers of all new books and reinforced their bindings, thereby doubling the books' durability. Similar procedures were applied to older books. Without this conservation policy, the library might have experienced a net loss of over 100,000 volumes.²¹ Richard Krug, who succeeded Dudgeon in 1941, fully appreciated the W.P.A.'s contribution when he wrote to a W.P.A. supervisor, "I cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of the W.P.A. menders and
book repairers to the library,” further noting that the the institution could not have assumed such a burden by itself. The total Federal contribution to the project came to $877,475, which was really a small price considering what was gained.

As the W.P.A. gained momentum, it branched out into areas which suggested imagination and special concern for the needs of artists, businessmen, and scholars. White collar work became dominant and questions of whether money could be used for library work *per se* were no longer raised. Included were bibliographic and indexing undertakings of major proportions: the indexing of the federal censuses for 1860 and 1870, a Union List of Serials, and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* Newspaper Index.

The census indices were important for several reasons: They could be used to establish eligibility for citizenship and for pensions. They were also of historical value at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Undoubtedly, they aided many genealogists doing research in family history. Hitherto it had been difficult and time consuming, if not impossible, to locate the name of a forebear because names were entered in the order in which the census taker visited the homes. But the 70,000 index cards which the project created were alphabetically arranged with a citation to the volume and page where the name could be found. Almost forty years after
its creation, the census indices located in the Local History Room of
the Milwaukee Public Library remain an important research tool,
both for the amateur genealogist and especially for the Milwaukee
County Genealogical Society.

Unquestionably the most significant W.P.A. venture in the
Milwaukee Public Library was the Milwaukee Sentinel Newspaper
Index, jointly sponsored by the Library, the Milwaukee State
Teachers College, and the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors.
It was hoped that the Index would “supply an unbroken chain of
information from the earliest days to the present day.” 26 The
Milwaukee Sentinel was chosen both because it was the earliest
newspaper in circulation and because it provided the best
continuity and had the largest number of issues available.

Newspaper indexing was a common W.P.A. library project
throughout the United States. The Cleveland Public Library had its
Annals of Cleveland. But the Sentinel Index was unique in that all
information about a person or subject appeared under one entry and
thus saved the researcher the bother of having to consult a number
of volumes, as in the Annals. Like the Annals, the Sentinel Index
was never completed. Only the years 1837–1879 were finished. The
library was left holding over 750,000 cards, 70,000 feet of
microfilm, and several thousand unfinished entries. 26 Although
incomplete, the Index stands at the pinnacle of W.P.A.
achievements. It remains today as a major aid for the historian, the
student and the genealogist doing research on Milwaukee and
Wisconsin. 27

The Union List of Periodicals was the last link in the triad of
bibliographic projects. The plan was a cooperative undertaking of
the Municipal Reference Library in City Hall, the Milwaukee
Public Library, and the Milwaukee chapter of the Special Libraries
Association. The Reference Room of the Milwaukee Public Library
played an important role in assembling and coordinating the list.
The purpose of the Union List was to increase bibliographic access
to expensive business magazines, proceedings, and other
periodicals which were owned by several business libraries in the
city and by the Milwaukee Public Library. This could be done by
compiling a list of libraries that held certain titles. It was felt that
the List would have the dual advantage of pooling resources but
allow the libraries to retain their own identities. The outcome of the
project, a 250 page book which gave the libraries access to 5,000
reference sources, was indeed a marked improvement from the
previous average of 44 magazines in each library. 28 Aside from its
obvious value of broadening the base of what were frequently very specialized publications, the Union List demonstrated the innovative ways in which the W.P.A. and its co-sponsors were able to respond to the needs of Milwaukee’s businesses and industrial economy.

A second major division of white collar work consisted of a variety of art and music programs, from the preparation of music scores to live performances. The library’s role rested upon its willingness to be sole sponsor as well as to cooperate with other agencies. For example, W.P.A. bands gave live performances at the Library.29 The significance of these concerts should not be overlooked as they undoubtedly served to relieve some mental anxietes, furthered social contacts and perhaps helped people temporarily to forget their economic plights.

Copying of music was another program carried out by the Federal Music Project. The plan was essentially a continuation of the W.E.R.A. project noted earlier but far more extensive in that it attempted to raise the cultural level of the community. For example, it provided for the teaching of music to under-privileged groups and for lectures, forums and panel discussions on “music as an art and as a social agency”30. The copying itself was a success both locally and nationally. Worked out by the Library’s capable director, M. S. Dudgeon, it employed up to sixty eight musicians who copied scores on which the copyrights had expired. Some of the scores were rare and old compositions lent to the library by local musicians who had extensive musical libraries.31 Exact figures as to how many pieces were copied, vary and were admittedly difficult to tabulate. But one report noted that from 322 selections there were made 5,999 masters and 42,386 dittos.32 The scores were kept in the library and lent to the public on the same basis as library books. From 1939-1941, over 2900 selections were circulated.33 That the music attained the highest standards of excellence is evidenced by the fact that Bach’s Chorales were used by the Music Educators National Conference and the State Teachers Convention.34 Moreover, the project attracted attention from other parts of the Midwest. Librarians came from Ohio, Michigan and Indiana to observe what was being done in the Library.35

The music copying project was important because of the quality of the work, the people it employed, and the cultural heritage it created for the Library. Almost thirty years after its completion, Richard Krug could still affirm that the W.P.A. orchestration copying project was “a valuable part of the library’s music collection.”36
Library exhibits on practical how-to-do-it skills such as etchings, woodcuts, lithography, and air brush art were yet other facets of W.P.A. "art" work. These exhibits were important because they furnished employment and because they indicated a reluctance to give narrow interpretations to the idea of art. Once again, the pragmatic and innovative character of the New Deal carried the day.

W.P.A., like many New Deal recovery and reform agencies, fell victim to World War II. Yet it is interesting to note the degree to which the onset of war shaped the character of some later W.P.A. programs. As war clouds hovered over Europe, America's munition plants began to tool up as the "arsenal of democracy." F.D.R.'s image as "Dr. New Deal" was replaced with "Dr. Win-the-War." Similarly, the W.P.A. played important roles in national defense both in the construction of war material and in serving as an information source, once America entered the conflict. Playing a part in the latter capacity was the War Information Center of the Milwaukee Public Library.

The War Information Center was established by the Library in conjunction with the W.P.A. to deal with a variety of war-related questions which "cut across the normal divisions of library work." Its functions were threefold: to supply information about the war's progress on both home and fighting fronts; to keep records of Milwaukee's part in the war effort; and to cooperate with the Victory Book Campaign.

These activities were influenced by the trends of the war. In the initial stages of the conflict, the thrust of the Center was toward civilian defense. Thus, it maintained lists of air raid wardens in Milwaukee County, indexed a twelve volume set of Milwaukeeans who had served in World War I, clipped newspapers for information related to the city's war efforts, and maintained index cards on Milwaukee County men and women in the service. As more and more Americans faced the prospects of induction, as the public wanted to know about areas in which their countrymen were fighting, or the names of important allied and axis military personnel, the center's work gravitated toward the military aspects.

When one views the multitude of tasks to which the War Information Center addressed itself, it is easy to understand the disappointment that followed the closing of the Center, a victim of the W.P.A.'s dissolution in 1942. The quality of its contributions is the more surprising in that it was staffed by fourteen people with
little or no library experience.\textsuperscript{42} So successful was the Center that it received national recognition from the National War Office of Civilian Defense and the American Library Association for its community activities.\textsuperscript{43} The Board of Trustees made a concerted effort to save the Center by operating it under Library auspices because of its informational services and because it was the only department in the county that kept a systematic record of Milwaukee's role in the war.\textsuperscript{44} But these efforts came to nothing. Support within the Board of Estimates was lukewarm at best.\textsuperscript{45}

With the closing of the Center, the work of the New Deal in the Library came to an end. Its overall accomplishments were important both then and now. Its services permitted the Library to fulfill some normal obligations to the public which had been curtailed by depression budgets, and some of the projects, notably the \textit{Sentinel} Index, went far beyond the normal expectations of library service. Some of the W.P.A. work survives to this day. The Local History Room has thousands of war related photographs left from the War Information Center; the census indices are a continuing boon to genealogical workers; and one could scarcely imagine not using the \textit{Sentinel} Index for research on Milwaukee and State history prior to 1879.

Surprisingly, all of these achievements were carried out with an absence of serious friction. There were no fights over "turf," as it were, between W.P.A. and library personnel. Rather the relationship was one of "unusual cooperation."\textsuperscript{46} Perhaps this harmony can be attributed to the leadership provided by the city librarians, Matthew Dudgeon and Richard Krug. Both men had excellent administrative backgrounds which created a "can-do" atmosphere.\textsuperscript{47} Interestingly enough, both had law degrees and no formal training in librarianship. One should also consider that the caliber of W.P.A. workers assigned to library projects was uniformly high. The depression had created a desperate employment situation which encouraged in many a desire for work and productivity. This positive outlook toward the W.P.A. projects was shared by Milwaukeeans in general. As one former W.P.A. supervisor has commented, "people wanted to work."\textsuperscript{48}

It is also worth noting that library participation in the New Deal was comprehensive in scope and not limited to one small or traditional aspect of library operations. This is best illustrated by pointing to some of the projects which never materialized. Among them were plans for a separate Sports Room; a Collection of Foreign Language Publications which would have operated like a union list;
and especially, a Circulation Survey Project which would have attempted to determine precisely how many people used the library and when.\textsuperscript{49} No evidence remains as to why these plans were never carried out. Yet they strongly indicate that everything within the library from circulation to technical operations was thoroughly appraised so as to improve services to all clients.

The increasing contributions of the C.W.A., F.E.R.A. and the W.P.A. to the Library take on a final significance, when one compares Federal expenditures for white collar projects in the Library with those in other city institutions. In 1935, the Library ranked eighth out of seventeen agencies, receiving but 0.35% of Federal appropriations. By 1942, it ranked second out of eleven, receiving 6.31%.\textsuperscript{50} This sharp increase reflects the diversification and expansion of white collar work and usefulness which allowed the W.P.A. to prosper even after the war had started. By way of comparison, the W.P.A. in the Cleveland Public Library was moribund by 1940.

One could conclude by saying that the white collar thrust of the New Deal was momentous because of its utility, the quality of its work, or because of its legacies to the community. But Harry Hopkins captured the true flavor and humanity of its intent in his frequently quoted statement that the unemployed white collar workers got hungry, and they too had to eat.\textsuperscript{51}

}\textsuperscript{1Quoted in William W. Breme, "Along the American Way": The New Deal's Work Relief Programs for the Unemployed, Jour. Amer. Hist. 62, 637, 1975.}
\textsuperscript{2William Leuchtenberg, \textit{Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal} New York, p. 124, 1963.}
\textsuperscript{3M. S. Dudgeon, Secretary of the Board of Trustees and library director to Joseph W. Nicholson, City of Milwaukee purchasing agent, Sept. 16, 1933; "Minutes of the Board of Trustees," Dec. 12, 1933; "Memo for Consideration of the Board," Oct. 10, 1935; Frank T. Boesel, Milwaukee N.R.A. Compliance Board, to M.S. Dudgeon, April 3, 1934. All citations in \textit{Proceedings of the Board of Trustees}, Hereafter cited as \textit{Proceedings}.}
\textsuperscript{5"Minutes of the Board of Trustees," Dec. 12, 1933, \textit{Proceedings}.}
\textsuperscript{6"Memo for Consideration of the Board," Apr. 10, 1934, \textit{Proceedings}.}
\textsuperscript{7Dudgeon to Stoeling, Dec. 2, 1933, \textit{Proceedings}.}


12 Both of these projects were revised under the F. E. R. A. See typescript, "Cataloging, Filing, Book Rehabilitation," July 17, 1935. Project 40-F7-150. Records and Catalog.


16 Stanford, op. cit., p. 2.


21 *Ibid*.


23 "W. P. A. Mending Project Copy" W. P. A. Mending Project. The project was not limited to book repair but also included the preparation of bibliographies, the cataloging of unclassified library materials and several other tasks. See Project 7787. Book Binding and Repair.


27 Clipping, Milwaukee Sentinel, Dec. 18, 1963, Milwaukee Sentinel Index File. In 1969 Dr. Herbert Rice began the awesome task of "editing, combining, alphabetizing, and interalphabetizing" the items for the years 1880-1890. For further information see his "The Milwaukee Sentinel Index," Milwaukee Reader and Calendar of Local Events, 30, Apr. 24, 1972.

28 Union List of Periodicals (Manual) preface, Mar. 20, 1939.
33"Art Department," Department Reports, 1941.
34"Art and Music Department," Progress Reports, 1942.
37"Art and Music Department," Progress Reports, 1942.
40"War Information Center," Progress Reports, 1942.
41Unidentified newspaper clipping, May 25, 1942, Milwaukee Public Library Clipping Collection.
42"War Information Center," Progress Reports, 1942.
45Minutes of the Board of Estimates, Dec. 9, 1942.
46Dr. Herbert Rice, former supervisor of Sentinel Index, communication to author, May 30, 1976.
47Interview, Harry Janicki, June 23, 1976; Interview, Kenneth Haagensen, former Project Director, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 25, 1976; telephone interview, Harry Friedman, former projects technical advisor for Sentinel Index, June 11, 1976. Dudgeon had served in various capacities as a lawyer, legislator and district attorney before becoming director in 1920. Krug had been Municipal Reference Librarian 1930-1939 and assistant city librarian from 1939-1941.
48Interview, Harry Janicki, June 23, 1976.
50City of Milwaukee W. P. A. Work Accomplished and Money Expended, 1935-36, 1942-43. In 1935, white collar work in the city bureaus ranked in the following order: School Board, Public Museum, City Comptroller,
Health Department, Tax Assessor, Fire Department, Vocational School, Public Library, City Treasurer, Building Inspector, Real Estate Division, Harbor Commission, Land Commission, City Clerk, Municipal Reference Library, City Attorney, Layton Art Gallery. In 1942, the order was Land Commission, Public Library, Civilian Defense, Health Department, Public Museum, School Board, City Comptroller, Municipal Reference Library, Building Inspector, City Treasurer, Tax Enforcement.