THE OKLAHOMA WRITERS' PROJECT:

1935-1942

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PREFACE

In 1933, when Franklin D. Roosevelt became president, he promised Americans a New Deal. Roosevelt's policies and programs represented a break from the American tradition of rugged individualism and laissez faire. With policies such as social security, subsidies to agriculture, and federal recognition of unions, Roosevelt introduced a new strain of liberalism into society. No longer would government refrain from participation in the economic and social arenas. Instead, according to Roosevelt's vision, government would become an active force in areas previously thought to be the domain of the private sector.

The federal government worked to rescue the millions of Americans whom the Great Depression ravished. To alleviate the dire conditions of these Americans, Roosevelt's focus turned to work relief. New Deal programs such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Civilian Conservations Corps, and the Works Progress Administration were manifestations of his conviction that the government must take some responsibility for the individual citizen. The President's New Deal programs offered employment for millions of jobless Americans. Most of this employment consisted of laboring in construction and public works projects. Roosevelt, and

Harry Hopkins, administrator for the WPA, also recognized the need for aid for unemployed white-collar professionals, intellectuals, and artists. Federal One, part of the WPA, was a product of the Roosevelt administration's concern for the artist and intellectual. In 1935, when it was initiated, Federal One encompassed the Federal Art Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Writers' Project.

The idealism and naivete of artists and writers on Federal One continually conflicted with the social and political realism of the Roosevelt years. Tensions between this idealism and reality shaped the operations and organization of the Federal Writers' Project. An analysis of the Oklahoma Writers' Project reveals the problems inherent in such government-subsidized art programs as Federal One. The focus of this study will be on the four administrations of the Oklahoma Writers' Project. Although the administrations varied in their style, management, and operations, they faced similar problems in dealing with the national offices in Washington. It is my contention that these difficulties which included politics and an inflexible bureaucracy stifled the freedom and creative atmosphere in which artists wished to work, and made progress on the program difficult if not impossible. If the project can be said to have failed, then these are the causes of that failure. The major problem for the Oklahoma Writers' Project, however, concerned the contradictions in the stated goals and purposes of Federal One.

Because the administration of Federal One lacked proper direction and clear intentions, the Oklahoma project could not easily accomplish its work. Besides struggling with the Washington office, the Oklahoma Writers' Project also had to please state WPA administrators and local politicians. In its early years, the program had to contend with some hostility from state leaders who disliked its direction and organization. This situation did improve with a change of administrators in 1940. Yet, even with these changes, political considerations greatly influenced the work of the project.

When he established Federal One, Roosevelt was more interested in insuring that the jobless make enough money for food and shelter than he was in creating a broadly based cultural program. According to government regulations for Federal One, between 75 and 90 percent of all employed on the projects had to be from public relief rolls. The Oklahoma Writers' Project experienced the dilemma that too often qualified writers were not on the state's relief rolls. State administrators for the Writers' Project constantly complained that may of those on the relief rolls did not have sufficient education or experience to be writers. The Oklahoma Writers' Project thus could not efficiently operate because it had great difficulty in complying with the government regulation concerning relief quotas. During its seven-year history, the project's leaders found it almost impossible to fulfill their goals because the government's

rules were antithetical to the program's purpose and mission.

The bureaucracy of the Washington office also plagued the Oklahoma project in other ways. Staff officials in Washington often sent the project leaders contradictory instructions. Comments from the national staff were baffling to the writers in Oklahoma. While one editor might praise submitted copy, another would severely criticize it. The Oklahoma writers wondered if the editors in Washington knew what they wanted. The editors in Washington really had little insight into or knowledge of the rather young state. They sometimes viewed Oklahoma as Steinbeck's Oklahoma from The Grapes of Wrath, and they wanted the state's copy to reflect this image. On occasion the editors would reject the work of eminent scholars from the state, claiming that these writers had not captured the essence of the spirit of Oklahoma.

Conservative politics in Oklahoma also served to hinder the progress of the state's Writers' Project. By the 1930s, conservative political forces dominated the state. The state's earlier tendency toward progressivism had died out by the late 1920s. In the 1930s, most Oklahoma politicians and administrators still adhered to the virtues of rugged individualism and free enterprise. Yet, these values often were in opposition to those espoused by some of the leaders of the Oklahoma Writers' Project. For instance, the first project leader, William Cunningham, was considered a Marxist with strong pro labor sentiments. Especially during the years 1935 to 1939, the work of project leaders reflected

a concern for the worker and the minority member. Under the direction of Cunningham, the project's staff assembled a handbook of cooperative labor movements in the state.

The leftist ideology of some members of the project paralleled the interests of many writers and artists throughout the country. Writers and artists of the 1930s attempted to exalt the heritage of the average American in their works. The classics Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and The Grapes of Wrath portrayed the nobility of southern sharecroppers during the bleakest days of the depression. But Oklahomans were not interested in the poor and downtrodden in their state. Many of Oklahoma's politicians scorned relief projects and equated unionism and liberalism with the rise of communism. Thus, as the Oklahoma Writers' Project failed to gain support from state administrators, it faced severe setbacks in its work.

Although the Oklahoma Writers' Project continually faced problems during its tenure, many times factors outside of the state program were the causes of the trouble. There were a few poor administrators and some incompetent writers on the staff. But state politics and federal government bureaucracy doomed any success that the project might have had. The economically and socially troubled decade of the 1930s proved to be a difficult period for the development of a federally sponsored writers' program in Oklahoma.

This thesis could not have been possible without the guidance of Dr. Joseph Stout, who offered consistent support

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Late in 1935, William Cunningham arrived in Oklahoma and began to organize the state's Writers' Project. Before coming to the project, Cunningham had enjoyed some success as a novelist and journalist. Most of his work had been in the Southwest, especially in Oklahoma and Arkansas. Mary Hays Marable and Elaine Boylan, in their book A Handbook of Oklahoma Writers, described Cunningham as a writer of the "proletariat school." His writings revealed his concern for the plight of the common man in America, and his liberal convictions placed him on the side of labor, the tenant farmer, and other oppressed groups. With this leftist outlook, Cunningham was representative of many American writers of the 1930s. Yet, these leftist tendencies were at odds with the conservative values of most of the other political leaders in Oklahoma. Cunningham's appointment to director of the Oklahoma Writers' Project was not wise because of the conflict which invariably and inevitably would result between the project and other state officials. Tension and mistrust between Cunningham and other state officials would taint operations on the project not only during Cunningham's tenure as director, but for almost two years after his departure.

Cunningham's interest in leftist ideology reflected the cultural concerns of the 1930s. The social-minded writers of the 1930s rejected the selfish, hedonistic behavior of the artists of the 1920s. In the twenties, most writers had refused to address social issues. Personal expression, form, and style were the main concerns of the day. Art had no moral or social purpose; rather it should serve only to "refine an individual's sensibility."[1] But, by the late 1920s, as unemployment escalated and southwestern farmers faced ruin, America's grave economic problems forced writers and artists to assume new responsibilities in and for society.

Richard Pells has written that the depression years became a period of atonement for the free-spirited generation of the 1920s.[2] American artists realized they could no longer dwell in isolation from the community. Holger Cahill, who served as director of the Federal Art Project, called for the unity of art with the activities, objects, and scenes in everyday life. Invoking the ideas of John Dewey, Cahill stated that art must be a significant part of the life of an organized community.[3]

Like essayist and literary critic Malcolm Cowley, Cahill believed that "art would transform a nation of separate individuals into a true community of men."[4] The writers of the 1930s heeded Cahill's call and found their community with the working class. Indeed, the writer believed that he must identify with the masses as the latter were the roots of American culture.[5] The common man became the source of

strength and stability for the country. Together, the writer and the proletariat could offer salvation and hope to the citizenry as the two groups rejected the ideals of the bourgeoisie and sought power through change in the social order.[6]

Literature of the day glorified the common American. John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath chronicled the plight of the Joads, a tenant farm family from Oklahoma. The Joads were heroes for Steinbeck even though they were poor, dirty, and unemployed. For Steinbeck, the Joads were victims of society's contempt for the dignity of life and for the respect of the individual. Proletarian writings, such as The Disinherited by Jack Conroy, praised the power of the working class to ban together against the omnipotent capitalists. Dramatists were also interested in the ability of labor to stand up for its beliefs. Clifford Odets, in Waiting for Lefty, found honor in the tenacity of union members for their solidarity against the company bosses who oppressed them. Besides this emphasis on the worker and farmer, literature also held promise for ethnic and racial minorities. For example, black writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison gained acceptance in the 1930s. These Are Our Lives, a compilation of interviews with workers and farmers in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia, celebrated life in the American South.

Federal One was a product of this search for culture and commitment. According to Jane de Hart Matthews, members

of the Roosevelt administration shared a commitment to aesthetic accessibility. Both Roosevelt and his WPA administrator, Harry Hopkins, believed that art should be available for all Americans to enjoy. Indeed, Roosevelt felt that access to the arts was as much a right as access to the ballot box. For Hopkins, who had a definite vision of the role of culture in society, the arts could be a vehicle of instruction and reform. Government could use the arts to shape public opinion and to find support for its programs. Most importantly, both Roosevelt and Hopkins saw cultivation of the arts as the means to "the fulfillment of a long-standing desire to bring together artist and people and to use the uplifting power of art to enrich the lives of ordinary citizens."[7] A contemporary evaluation of the WPA arts projects stated that the program enjoyed "a more immediate contact with the people . . . than anything the government has done in generations."[8]

When President Roosevelt initially authorized funds for a Writers' Project, several people submitted proposals for what such a program could do. One suggestion was that the project writers prepare forthcoming government manuals and technical reports. But, as Jerre Mangione pointed out in his book The Dream and the Deal, "even the more conservative members of the WPA administrative staff conceded that such bureaucratic tasks would add to the depression of the writers and the nation."[9] Another plan was that writers be able to work on materials of their own choice; novels, poems, and

short stories would flow out of the project. This idea held dangers of its own, however. The proliferation of a national literature might contain potential embarrassments for the Roosevelt administration if the writers' values or philosophy conflicted with the policies of the government.[10] This situation was indeed possible as many writers of the early 1930s were disenchanted with the status quo of modern society. The depression years had convinced them that contemporary American life was shallow and that the nation was unresponsive to the needs of the common man.

To avoid such sensitive issues, WPA administrators sought an attractive but safe agenda for the Writers' Project. From all the discussion about the Writers' Project, there began to emerge some consensus about the work of the program. The Writers' Project would collaborate on a national Baedeker. Originally conceived as one massive work, the project evolved into the production of forty-eight state guides. This set would replace the last published national travel guide, written in 1893 and revised in 1909. Politically safe, such a collection would also be attractive and marketable to the American people. These guides would be more than just travelogs; rather, they could chronicle the social and cultural heritage of the land. As the Writers' Project evolved, it pursued other interests, such as folklore narratives, labor history, and regional studies. The Baedeker, however, would always remain the primary concern of the project.

With purpose and scope defined, WPA officials could

focus on the administration and organization of the program. From the beginning, Henry Alsberg was to be the project's national director. In the 1920s, Alsberg had served as a foreign correspondent for the Nation and the New World; he also worked for the London Daily Herald. Later, he spent much time in the Soviet Union, where he witnessed the many treacheries of the newly empowered Bolsheviks. When Alsberg returned to the states, he edited a book describing the Bolsheviks' betrayal of the Russian masses. He distanced himself from such writers as Michael Gold, who openly sympathized with the Russian revolutionaries. Yet, despite his rebuke of the new Soviet power, Alsberg, for a while, remained outside the mainstream of American thought and life. As he wrote to a friend in 1926, he considered himself in constant revolt against the virtues and values of middle-class America.[11] After his career in journalism ended, Alsberg turned to writing fiction and drama. By the mid-1930s, when he accepted the directorship of the Federal Writers' Project, Alsberg's antagonism for middle-class values had abated and he was ready to work for the Roosevelt administration.

Alsberg was not ready, however, to accept the detailed paperwork and endless red tape which were the mainstay of his job. As many of his friends admitted, Alsberg was not a talented administrator. Citing his indecisiveness and his inability to complete some of the earlier projects he had undertaken, many of Alsberg's friends and co-workers questioned whether he could properly administer a nationwide project.[12]

Alsberg preferred to create, not to manage, and he could never relinquish his status as an artist for his position as an administrator.[13] The Federal Writers' Project would suffer due to Alsberg's poor leadership skills.

As one of his first duties, Alsberg had to choose personnel for the project, including directors for the forty-eight state units. (Each state had its own writers' project; some of the country's largest cities, such as New York and Los Angeles, had their own projects as well.) The national director had virtually complete freedom in choosing state leaders. Despite this freedom, Alsberg did encounter certain outside pressure from WPA state administrators or other state and local politicians who might use a directorship, such as the head of the state Writers' Project, for patronage purposes. At times, these local leaders felt that Alsberg's actions were interference in their private matters. Alsberg, however, did not welcome outside pressures on his personnel choices.[14] Hiring state directors was not an uncomplicated task. Alsberg sought to hire state directors who were already noted writers. Yet, he also had to take into consideration the political needs and climate of each state as cordial relations between Washington and local officials were essential in guaranteeing the integrity and quality of the project's productions.

Alsberg and state officials did not initially agree on the appointment of William Cunningham as state Writers' Project director. Oklahoma politicians supported A. L. Emery for

the head position. An attorney, Emery received endorsements from Senator Thomas Gore and such judicial figures as Thomas A. Edwards, Thomas H. Doyle, and James S. Davenport. Emery's background reflected no emminent literary qualifications, although, as an attorney, he had much practice in writing legal briefs.[15] But Emery was not Alsberg's choice for state director. William Cunningham, a native Oklahoman who had taught English at the University of Oklahoma and who had recently published the novel The Green Corn Rebellion, was Alsberg's pick for the job. As Alsberg wanted literary writers for state directors, Cunningham was, for him, a prime candidate. Before being appointed state director, Cunningham had received an offer to work in the national Writers' Project offices. Whe Alsberg realized that the Oklahoma position was open, he suggested that Cunningham fill that spot. Alsberg offered Cunningham the job for $2,300 a year. Accepting the position, Cunningham seemed pleased he would be staying in Oklahoma "as most of [his] material for writing [was] there."[16]

In recommending Cunningham to William S. Key, Oklahoma's WPA chief administrator, Alsberg emphasized Cunningham's strong literary background and his familiarity with Oklahoma history and culture. According to Alsberg, Cunningham had spent most of his life in the state. In addition to his teaching at the University of Oklahoma, he had worked several years in journalism. Besides writing The Green Corn Rebellion, Cunningham had published other novels and poems. One of his

poems, "The Old Time Fiddler," appeared in an Oklahoma textbook for ninth-grade English students.[17]

What Alsberg did not include in this recommendation were any references to Cunningham's radical past. For five and a half years, Cunningham had served as an instructor at Commonwealth Labor College in Mena, Arkansas. At Commonwealth, he taught courses in writing and Marxian economics. During the 1930s, Commonwealth became a strong proponent of socialist doctrine and a training ground for farmers and workers in the southern labor movement. While at the school, Cunningham was able to combine his literary interests and his political concerns. In articles for the Commonwealth College Fortnightly, Cunningham supported various socialist leaders over the "moronic minority" of Jack Walton, Huey Long, and Alfalfa Bill Murray. Cunningham also turned to theatre as a forum for his radical ideas. His play Until the Mortgage is Due also expressed his ideas on social issues. The play pitted the heartless banker, the agent of capitalism, against a farmer about to lose his land because he could not pay his mortgage. For Cunningham, society must side with the farmer in his fight against the evils of money and business.[18]

Although Cunningham's social concerns paralleled the interests of other artists in the 1930s, they did not coincide with the political realities in Oklahoma. While the artist community fought for the virtues of collective action and Roosevelt sought a progressive alliance among government,

business, and the people, Oklahoma still stood squarely behind the credo that the individual alone determined his or her own fate. Oklahoma did not experience any significant reform or cooperative movement in the 1930s, and the emphasis remained on the role of the individual in society.[19]

Although economic misery plagued the state throughout the 1930s, many Oklahomans chose to ignore the deplorable situation of the unemployed and the homeless. For the years 1929 to 1932, Oklahoma experienced the third largest decline in income of all states in the nation.[20] Unemployment was so high that the state WPA offices could not even process applications of the needy.[21] But many Oklahomans rationalized away these problems. Some refused to acknowledge that poverty and squalor existed. When Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath appeared, these Sooners denied the huge exodus of 'Okies' which fled west to California even though government statistics showed that eighty thousand left the state for the coast in the time period from July 1, 1935 to December 31, 1939.[22] Other Oklahomans refused to blame the state or social conditions of the day for the sad plight of the poor; blame rested with the individual. Major newspapers in both Tulsa and Oklahoma City ran articles which disparagingly described the unemployed and homeless in the state. One column in the Daily Oklahoman explained that the problems of the state were simply "'due to the fact that Oklahoma had a sadly larger number of people who are willing to take the government's money regardless of how they get it.'"[23]

In general, the state gave little support to its needy, and many social services became unnecessary frills. For example, Oklahoma City officials proposed that garbage, which the poor would regularly raid for food and clothing, should be sold for a profit. No one should get anything for free.[24] In Cimarron County, farmers were reluctant to insure payment of school teachers. Public services were not important to farmers who viewed many such programs as "excessive waste."[25] A New Republic article which appeared in July 1938 stated that Oklahoma had acquired a reputation of "cold-hearted stinginess" towards its relief employees.[26]

Given the conservativeness of the state in the thirties, Cunningham was not a wise choice for the directorship of the Oklahoma Writers' Project. His radical philosophy on labor and social and economic issues ran counter to the values of many Oklahomans. These differences would eventually produce tension between Cunningham and his fellow state administrators. Because of this animosity, Cunningham would have constant problems during his tenure as Writers' Project director and his radical image would color the project for several years.

The national Writers' Project office, by selecting Cunningham as state director, ignored the conservative tradition of the state. Alsberg seemed to give little consideration to Emery's appointment as project director. Emery did not have any noted experience as a writer, and Alsberg was concerned that state directors come from a literary

background. Yet, Cunningham also had little or no administrative experience. More importantly, his radical past was bound to antagonize conservative state leaders who were often hostile to those with socialist or Marxist roots. When choosing Oklahoma's director, Alsberg should have more carefully considered the importance of cordial working relations between the Writers' Project's leaders and other state administrators.

Alsberg's action here indicated one problem inherent with federal control of such massive projects as the Writers' Project. Washington officials could never clearly understand the social and historical background of all forty-eight states in the union. The national offices could never be fully aware of the problems and political tensions which each state faced. In asserting its control over state offices, Washington bureaucrats antagonized local leaders who believed that they, not the federal government, knew what was best for their area. At least in Oklahoma, lack of cooperation between federal and state leaders hindered the project's ability to be an effective and productive unit.[27]

ENDNOTES

[1] Richard H. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 37.

[2] Ibid., 153.

[3] Holger Cahill, "American Resources in the Arts," in Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Adminstrators of the WPA Federal Art Project, ed. Francis V. O'Connor, (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 34.

[4] Pells, Radical Visions, 159.

[5] Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 260-261.

[6] Pells, Radical Visions, 166.

[7] Jane de Hart Mathews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy," Journal of American History 62 (September 1975): 319-320.

[8] The Week Throughout Oklahoma, Harlow's Weekly 20 Aug. 1938.

[9] Jerre Mangione, The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project 1935-1943 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 42.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 56.

[12] Ibid., 57.

[13] William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, (N.p.: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 655.

[14] Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, 73-74.

[15] Oklahoma A-R, Administrative Correspondence, Oklahoma-Oregon, 1935-1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project, R.G. 69, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

[16] Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, 74.

[17] Henry Alsberg to William Key, 7 November 1935, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[18] Suzanne H. Schrems, "Radicalism and Song," The Chronicles of Oklahoma 62 (Summer 1984): 192-195.

[19] Keith L. Bryant, "Oklahoma and the New Deal," in The New Deal: The State and Local Levels, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 192.

[20] Leonard Arrington, "The New Deal in the West: A Preliminary Statistical Inquiry." Pacific Historical Review 38 (August 1969): 314.

[21] "Unemployed Arts," Fortune 15 (May 1937),

[22] W. Richard Fossey, "Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues: A Study of Oklahoma's Cultural Identity During the Great Depression," Chronicles of Oklahoma 55 (Spring 1975): 20.

[23] Ibid., 30-31.

[24] Donald E. Worster, Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the Great Depression (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 129.

[25] Ibid., 126.

[26] Washington Notes, New Republic, July 13, 1938, 279-280.

[27] Arrington, "The New Deal in the West," 311-316. Arrington discusses the western states' displeasure and skepticism about Washington's interference into their affairs. Many of these western states believed that their own government could better handle the region's problems.

CHAPTER II

THE CUNNINGHAM YEARS BEGIN

William Cunningham's appointment as director of the Oklahoma Writers' Project began in November 1935, and he served almost two and a half years. Arriving in Oklahoma City in late November, Cunningham quickly attempted to establish an administrative framework for the project. Throughout the first months of his appointment, he diligently corresponded with Henry Alsberg, national director of the Writers' Project. Although he had little spare time in the first few months, Cunningham even pondered questions beyond immediate administrative ones. He began to anticipate projects on which his staff could work.

Problems which appeared in the first months of Cunningham's administration unfortunately plagued the project throughout his tenure. He continually faced many problems, including the ratio of non-relief to relief workers, for government regulations specified that 75 percent of project employees had to be relief workers. Yet, Cunningham discovered that there were too few qualified writers on the relief rolls. Another of Cunningham's difficulties was the endless red tape and administrative detail which slowed down his work. He soon became frustrated with the bureaucracy

of his job and found that he had little time for creative work.

These were not the only obstacles which troubled the project in its first years. Cunningham's politically radical inclinations and interests affected the operation of the project. Some staff members accused Cunningham of favoring Communists, or Communist-sympathizers, on the project. These disgruntled workers also resented Cunningham's use of the project for furthering his leftist ideology. This friction became so acute that late in 1936, Oklahoma congressman R. P. Hill called for his dismissal, alleging that Cunningham was a political embarrassment for the Roosevelt administration. Cunningham, however, did not leave the office at this time; he remained with the project until spring of 1938. Yet, the political conflict which began during his period of leadership caused discontent among workers and tension among state and federal administrators. These difficulties would last for several years after Cunningham left.

During his first week on the job, Cunningham and Homer Heck, Director of Professional and Service Projects for the Oklahoma WPA, planned for the operations of the Writers' Project. At first, Cunningham was confused about administrative procedure for the office, and he and Heck spent considerable time coordinating the organization of the project. According to their plan, the project would include various district offices around the state. Each of these sites would be a different project, and Cunningham would serve

as state coordinator. The men designated the Oklahoma City office as the largest in the state. In addition to Cunningham, there would be a secretary, who would be paid about $80.00 a month, and a supervisor, earning $125.00 a month.[1] In the Oklahoma City office, there would be fifty relief workers and one nonrelief worker. The Tulsa project would employ one supervisor and twenty-six relief workers. There were six other district offices; Enid would employ five relief workers, while Woodward, Hobart, Chickasha, Ardmore, and McAlester each would have four workers.[2]

As he established the administrative organization of the project, Cunningham also assessed the office's financial needs. He requested $37,872.00 for relief labor, $1,893.60 for nonrelief labor, and $3,792.06 for materials. The total budget was $43,692.66.[3] Acknowledging that the state had already received $7,400.00, Cunningham asked Washington to send the rest of the money as soon as possible. With the initial $7,400.00, he believed he could at least begin each of the district offices on a monthly basis. The remaining sum would finance operations for five months thereafter.[4]

The establishment of the Oklahoma City Project was the first priority for Cunningham, and he wanted to hire fifty relief employees as quickly as possible. In an early letter to Alsberg, Cunningham expressed his concern that there might be too few competent individuals on the relief rolls.[5] At the time the project began, government regulations stated that not more than 10 percent of the staff could be of

nonrelief status. Cunningham could not exceed that restriction unless he received permission from Washington.

Alsberg found most of Cunningham's plan acceptable, although he disagreed on some issues. Alsberg stated that the project was limited to a total of 101 employees, of which eleven (exclusive of the staff administrators) could be nonrelief. In his initial report, Cunningham wrote that the project planned to hire 101 workers along with eleven nonrelief workers. The national director urged him to use nonrelief help only if "it is absolutely necessary to provide competent supervision."[6]

Alsberg believed that one item in Cunningham's report did not accurately reflect the facts. Cunningham had said it was his understanding that the regular relief workers would have "reasonably light assignments so that they may do free-lance work on the side."[7] Emphatically stating that Cunningham had wrongly interpreted the situation, Alsberg said that the relief workers would be responsible for compilation of state guides. No division of duties was possible. Alsberg then told Cunningham that his first concern should be administrative and personnel decisions. Assignments and editorial procedure would be important only after this was complete.[8] Because Cunningham encountered procedural problems, he eventually discovered that he had little time to work on manuscript copy.

In early December, Cunningham made several appointments to the staff, including Zoe A. Tilghman as Assistant State

Supervisor at $125.00 per month. Tilghman had been literary editor of Harlow's Weekly for almost ten years and had published a book of poetry and several pieces of fiction. Cunningham recommended Demma Ray Oldham, a fairly well-known writer of short stories, including the "Liza Crabtree" series to be supervisor of the Tulsa project.[9] In addition to these people, Cunningham planned to hire "approximately 12 persons" not on relief for the Oklahoma City project. As Cunningham noted to Alsberg, "all of these persons need jobs and are capable of doing the work but for one reason or another were unable to get on the relief rolls."[10] In this letter, Cunningham then listed thirteen people whom he recommended for employment.

The thirteen persons recommended represented a wide range of experience and interests. Most had some type of writing experience. Dr. Lucille Spire Blachly practiced medicine for seven years in Drumright and had served as director of the Bureau of Maternity and Infancy of the Oklahoma State Department of Public Health. She had written pamphlets and several articles for medical journals. Jesse Hilton had worked on both the Oklahoma Times and the Daily Oklahoman as well as the Grand Rapids Herald. She had studied the American Indian, and thus her knowledge would be valuable. A third writer was Charles Clark Smith who had written two textbooks on religion and several articles on religious education. All but two of the thirteen were experienced writers.[11]

As he recommended thirteen workers for nonrelief status, Cunningham exceeded the ten percent restriction on nonrelief employees. While projects could exceed this limit, before doing so the state director had to obtain permission from Washington. If a state project found that it could not hire enough qualified writers by remaining within guidelines, Washington officials could and often did grant permission for the office to hire additional people who were not from the relief rolls. The project could then hire up to 25 percent of its employees on nonrelief status. But Cunningham failed to seek authorization for the higher quota before he made his recommendations to Alsberg.

Jacob Baker, Assistant Administrator to Harry Hopkins, head of the WPA, finally approved increasing the Oklahoma project's quota to 25 percent. According to the authorization, no less than 75 percent of all workers on the Federal Writers' Project of Oklahoma had to be taken from the public relief rolls. Approval from Washington did not come until early January, 1936, and until it arrived, there was some confusion on the Oklahoma Writers' Project,[12] and Cunningham found himself in trouble.

On 9 December 1935, the state WPA personnel director administered the oath of office to twelve of Cunningham's nominations for nonrelief positions. Cunningham soon learned that he did not have the authority to hire the twelve. But, as they had taken the oath of office, he allowed them to remain on the job. Cunningham believed these individuals

would receive retroactive pay back to 9 December despite the fact that their hiring had been improper. Permission for the 25 percent quota was delayed in Washington, and Cunningham had to ask seven of them to leave their jobs. Cunningham did so because he discovered that, whether or not permission for the 25 percent quota came through, all the employees had to be paid for the time they worked. Originally, Cunningham had believed that, if the 25 percent quota was not allowed, the twelve employees would not receive any wages for the time they worked.[13]

Cunningham failed to follow proper procedure,and his error could have been costly for the project. As it happened, Washington approved the 25 percent quota, and all twelve workers received full wages. Shortly after this episode, however, Frank Bentley, state WPA official, sent a memo to Harold Stein, WPA administrator in Washington, concerning Cunningham's inability to follow procedure. Homer Heck, Professional and Services Director in Oklahoma, had informed Bentley that Cunningham could not follow orders and that there was tension between the Writers' Project director and the state administration, especially the Labor Management and Finance Division. Bentley arranged with Heck to monitor the relations between Cunningham and the state administration.[14]

Cunningham probably ignored proper procedure because he regarded the state bureaucracy surrounding the Oklahoma Writers' Project as sluggish and unresponsive. In a letter to Henry Alsberg written in late February 1936, he repeatedly

complained about the bureaucratic hierarchy in the state. He related one incident in which the Oklahoma Writers' Project consulted the labor office for some point of procedure. The labor official there responded, "Well, I can't think of any way to keep you from doing it."[15] Cunningham was dismayed by this rather pessimistic attitude of the state office. He also told Alsberg that if he wanted to hire an additional staff member he would need "an authorization from Jacob Baker, as well as about ten local officials and then recondition the entire Payroll Department of the district office in order to get him on the payroll. Most of my own energies have to go into getting them on the payroll, and in this struggle my own wits are pitted against those of the Payroll Department officials whose task seems to be to keep people off the payroll."[16]

Bureaucratic snarls with state officials were not the only administrative problems Cunningham faced. There was endless red tape in processing forms emanating from Washington. The WPA projects received funding for only a few months at a time, and the initial funding for the Writers' Project ended as of 15 May 1936. As early as 13 April, Cunningham wrote to Alsberg requesting that the second allocation be sent by 1 May. He was afraid that if the office received the additional funding after 1 or 2 May, some of the projects would have to shut down while the paperwork was being processed.[17]

Similar financial crises occurred at other times on the

project. On 20 July, Cunningham wrote Alsberg that the Oklahoma City project was "now operating on Faith alone"; all their funding had run dry. Cunningham noted that this was not the first time all their funding had been depleted. In the past, the District Finance Office had refused to allow the project to continue operations without adequate funding. This time Cunningham was "purposely avoiding" the office so that it could continue.[18]

Beginning 1 August, the state Writers' Project underwent some changes. The individual projects, such as the ones in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, were consolidated into one state-wide organization.[19] With this consolidation, however, there were still funding difficulties. Cunningham had written Alsberg to find out if Washington could let him know what the state quota of employees would be under the new system. He wanted to prepare the paperwork so he could process it as soon as the funding arrived. Cunningham wanted to avoid further delays that would cost his employees their wages.[20] By the close of August, the state project still had received only $12,000.00 of the $16,000.00 which Washington promised. Again, Cunningham had to write Alsberg to send the rest of the money. Cunningham lamented,

> Our experience has been that funds come in a week or two late and someone in the State [sic] office, discovering that we have no money, shuts us down, signs some form or other that puts us eternally out of commission, then we have to wire someone for permission to cancel something and the net result is a delayed payroll and frayed nerves all around.[21]

Cunningham constantly faced a bureaucracy which impeded his ability to give his full attention to the writing and editing needed on the project.

Indeed, at one point in November 1936, Cunningham told Alsberg that his creative work was suffering because he was working approximately 175 hours each month, mostly on administrative details. In order to do any creative writing, he had to rise at 5 a.m. and work for three hours each day before his job began as well as spend all day Sunday on his manuscript. This tedious schedule hurt his health and his work. Cunningham believed that the national Writers' Project staff should investigate alternative ways for "creative writers" employed on state projects to be granted time off for their outside endeavors. One proposal would allow writers who were working on legitimately creative work to "put in not more than 80 hours per month for a period of six months of each year, or three months of each six."[22]

All these administrative details weighed heavily on Cunningham and his ability to manage the project. But the most insurmountable problem was his lack of competent writers. Before Washington increased the Oklahoma Writers' Project's quota of non-relief employees to 25 percent, Cunningham was concerned about the shortage of qualified writers on his staff. The Oklahoma City offices, in particular, needed more. Cunningham noted to Alsberg that, because Oklahoma City had been somewhat prosperous despite depression conditions, "many competent persons have been able to live a

hand-to-mouth existence without going on relief." Besides, Oklahoma City did not much attract the talented writer/artist "who because of temperament is unable to fit into the present scheme of things." Cunningham also worried that the relief workers were creating confusion on the project, and he wanted extra nonrelief employees "to straighten out the mess."[23]

Although Washington authorized the increased quota for non-relief workers, Cunningham still faced personnel problems. He felt pressure because he realized that the project must follow WPA regulations concerning relief/non-relief personnel. Yet, he knew that these regulations prevented him from hiring the workers who could most adequately do the job. Cunningham wrote that "if efficiency in getting the guidebook out were the chief objective, we should be free of all relief labor requirements."[24] Yet, Cunningham realized that the purpose of the WPA projects was to give out-of-work individuals jobs, and he also knew that, if many of the relief workers on the Writers' Project lost their positions, they would be unemployable elsewhere. As Cunningham wrote to Alsberg, "we have considered it the main function of the project to put people to work and so of course have a great deal of dead wood."[25]

Cunningham found the need to maintain the proper balance between relief and non-relief workers frustrating. Because there were so many competent non-relief workers, Cunningham tried to hire as many as the state quota would allow. When

a relief worker left, however, the project's ratio of non-relief workers would be upset,and Cunningham had to scramble to restore the proper balance. Cunningham complained that he had spent more time trying to maintain the correct ratio of relief to non-relief workers than he had editing manuscripts.[26]

Even after the project had been in operation almost one year, it still had personnel problems. In September 1936, Cunningham had only three or four capable writers. Many of the employees could not do the work of a reporter. (A reporter on the project was to go to the library or archives and gather information for the writers.) Cunningham quoted one writer who tried to use material some of the reporters gathered. The writer sadly stated that using the files was "like trying to work with a ball of yarn that the cat has been playing with." Because he did not trust the accuracy of some of his reporters, Cunningham felt that 90 percent of the material collected was simply worthless.[27] This lack of quality writers hampered Cunningham's ability to administer the project efficiently.

Cunningham was not the only one to note personnel problems on the project. J. Ellen Wolgamuth, one of the editors on the project, sent a letter to national director Alsberg, complaining of the disorganization of the project and the inadequacies of many of its employees.[28] Wolgamuth stated that the Writers' Project, unlike the other projects, had never required applicants to pass any type of qualifying

exam before they were employed. Therefore, almost anyone could be hired. Wolgamuth noted that Cunningham had tried to send at least two employees back to Homer Heck, who was WPA personnel director for all the white-collar projects. These two, claimed Wolgamuth, could not even spell the simplest words. Cunningham had asked that they be assigned work more in keeping with their background. But the personnel office quickly returned them to him. [29]

Although Wolgamuth expressed sympathy for Cunningham's plight, her letter also indicated that she and her co-workers greatly resented some of Cunningham's actions as project head. Wolgamuth suggested Cunningham's leftist leanings permeated the project's affairs. Wolgamuth never referred to Cunningham as a Communist or as a member of the Communist Party. Indeed, she seemed purposely to have avoided writing any statements on the political affiliations of any project member. Yet, her letter indicated that Cunningham's inclination towards communism shaped his actions on the project.[30]

Wolgamuth accused Cunningham, who had authority to classify employees and decide their salaries, of labelling some typists as reporters and some reporters as editors even though the work they performed did not warrant this classification. She believed Cunningham made these arbitrary classifications to favor the Communists, and she cited a few examples of the director's bias. She mentioned one project reporter who was a known Communist and who was paid the higher salary of an editor. Angered by such injustice,

Wolgamuth wrote that the Communists employed on the project dictated staff affairs: "We hear it preached that in America men do not have to act like mice, but the non-Communists on the Writers' Project in the state have been MICE under the sway of the Communists in power."[31]

Wolgamuth's testimony to Alsberg was echoed in letters written by other project members. Due to their concern for the project, several employees sent letters to congressman Martin Dies, head of the House Un-American Activities Committee. These letters, like Wolgamuth's, mentioned Cunningham's continual involvement with leftist activities while head of the Writers' Project. Although none of the letters ever claimed that Cunningham was a member of the Communist Party, they did suggest that Cunningham hired Communists and tried to cultivate leftist philosophies on the project. Cunningham's alleged involvement with these Communists affected the project as it split the staff into two groups, Communists and non-Communists, and created bitterness among the latter towards the former group. This strife diverted the staff's energy away from completion of its work.[32]

The reports sent by the Writers' Project members to the Dies Committee referred to the same incidents which Wolgamuth described. These incidents, the writers insisted, pointed to Communist activity. Three of the statements charged that Cunningham hired Fred Maxham, an official from the state Communist Party, in the fall of 1936.[33] While on the project, Maxham turned in only one written report, and, although

all other reporters handed in their work to the assistant supervisor, Maxham gave his copy directly to Cunningham. Maxham was supposedly working on a labor survey, although one project employee claimed that there was no record of this in the files.[34]

Maxham's major interest seemed to be in organizing a labor union on the project. According to the statements to Dies, the project members did not really oppose the establishment of a union until a radical constitution was introduced. After this,

> the Union was carried on for some time, and Maxham, with Cunningham's open approval (although as director he had officially resigned from the Union on the grounds that a 'boss' couldn't belong) made strong efforts to join the union to the National Workers Alliance which, at least in [its] leadership and policies is [heavily] communistic.[35]

Parliamentary measures by the project's rank and file, however, thwarted this merger. After this failure, the union slowly died,and Maxham eventually ended his employment on the project.[36]

The most persistent charge which critics levied against Cunningham was his favoritism towards Communists or Communist sympathizers on the project. Cunningham showed favoritism to Alta Churchill, his personal secretary on the project. In 1936, Cunningham persuaded Churchill to spend her vacation at Commonwealth College, the same institution where he had taught Marxist thought and analysis. After her return, Churchill became a leading advocate of Communist ideals.[37] In October 1936, Cunningham sought permission to give Churchill

a twenty-five dollars per month raise.[38] Although Cunningham justified the pay increase on a basis of merit, the raise, coming so close in time to Churchill's visit to Commonwealth, suggested that the director was rewarding his secretary for her political choices. No one else on the project received a raise at this time.

In July 1937, when Washington made widespread cuts in WPA programs, Cunningham demoted Zoe A. Tilghman, who was assistant supervisor, to give James Thompson and Alta Churchill the only two nonsecurity wage positions available.[39] Tilghman had a fairly extensive literary background prior to her work on the Writers' Project. But her opposition to the leftist activities of Cunningham created tension on the project, and although she maintained her title, it was in name only. She lost her responsibilities and a percentage of her pay. Thompson, who was more amenable to Cunningham's political philosophies, assumed Tilghman's duties.[40]

Cunningham's activities outside the project also rankled some of the employees. Cunningham and James Thompson participated in a Southwest Writers' Conference, held in the spring of 1937 in Oklahoma City. The conference highlighted talks by Cunningham, Thompson, and some professors from the University of Oklahoma. Cunningham spoke on a topic concerning the writer, economics, and society, while Thompson's talk was entitled "The Economic Plight of the Writer."[41] A newspaper account of the conference charged that the meeting turned into a "political hotbed" when various speakers argued about

the role of politics in literature. During the conference, some of the participants called for the Southwest writers' group to unite with the League of American Writers, a group which espoused communist ideals.[42] Two project members who wrote to Senator Dies resented Cunningham's involvement with this conference. Zoe Tilghman, who realized that it was within Cunningham's and Thompson's right to attend such functions, nevertheless resented that as government employees they were involved in such activities.[43]

Tilghman and other project workers also were concerned with Cunningham's support for the Spanish Loyalists. Cunningham, along with Communist members of the group, had staged several benefits for the Loyalists. When Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas showed his support of the Spanish Loyalist faction, the Communists sent him a telegram of commendation. Later, however, when Thomas withdrew his support in response to protests of state Catholics, the leftist group tried to develop a "post-card shower of protests." They encouraged everyone on the project to send a protest to the senator for his actions against the Spanish Loyalists. One person who wrote to Senator Dies stated that this protest became open propaganda on the project until someone called attention to the federal regulation which explicitly outlawed political activity on the project. Some of the project members resented this project-sanctioned criticism of Thomas when so many of the other individual workers supported him.[44]

None of the criticism of the Cunningham administration

ever showed that the director, or anyone else connected with the project (except Fred Maxham) was a bona fide Communist. What emerged from the correspondence was consistent evidence that Cunningham encouraged radical activities and attempted to foster radical beliefs on the project, thus causing tension. Employees believed that the project pitted Communists against nonCommunists. This division led to animosity among project members and a breakdown in morale.

Not only did Cunningham's background and activities alienate his workers, but they also brought about problems with other government administrators. One person writing in the 1936 issue of Liberty magazine mentioned Cunningham's association with Arkansas' Commonwealth College. The article "Rah, Rah, Russia" described the "communistic" activities at the school: the Marxist teachings, the spurning of religion, and the school's approval of coed dormitories and nude sun-bathing. Particularly upsetting to the article's writer was that the government granted aid to the school. Federal funds, in the form of student aid, began to the college in November 1934. The article's author was also concerned that three former Commonwealth faculty members had found employment with the federal government, including Clay Fulks as editor of the Arkansas' Writers' Project, and William Cunningham as director of the Oklahoma Writers' Project.[45]

Cunningham was apparently unconcerned about any negative publicity that the article might generate, mentioning it in a letter to Alsberg. Cunningham believed that the article

had not caused him any problems in the state. He responded to the article through a letter to a local paper and then dismissed the incident from his mind.[46] Alsberg, in his reply to Cunningham, did not express any concern either about the article's adverse effects on the Oklahoma project.[47]

Despite this optimism, shortly after this episode, Oklahoma congressman R. P. Hill wrote to WPA administrator Harry L. Hopkins about Cunningham. Hill did not mention the Liberty article in his letter. Yet, Hill did ask Hopkins either to remove or to transfer Cunningham from the Writers' Project office. Hill wrote that Cunningham had been a "source of constant annoyance." He had been involved with various "communistic activities" and had "sponsored an abortive union movement designed to embarrass the Administration." Hill also charged that Cunningham had shown favoritism in the selection of workers and had imported several people for employment on the Writers' Project instead of offering the jobs to Oklahoma writers.[48]

In response to Hill's request, Hopkins established an investigation of the charges against Cunningham. Hopkins commissioned Blanche M. Ralston, regional director for Women's and Professional Projects in New Orleans, to go to Oklahoma to look into problems in the Writers' Project. Ralston traveled to Oklahoma City and, after reviewing the situation, recommended that as no further embarrassing episodes had occurred, Washington should refrain from any action against Cunningham at that time. Officials in Washington did not

take any action against Cunningham, and he remained head of the project until the spring of 1938.

Evidence concerning Hill's request for Cunningham's removal is quite limited. Hill's charges were vague and offered no substantive proof of any wrongdoings. However, when federal officials such as Hopkins and Ralston responded to Hill's allegations, they did not speak specifically to the charges. Officials in Washington neither achnowledged the validity of nor refuted the charges against Cunningham. There was no report of any investigation against Cunningham in WPA correspondence files in the National Archives. Although correspondence suggests that Washington had received other complaints about Cunningham, federal administrators never directly addressed the problems on the Oklahoma project, thus allowing tensions and frustrations among the staff to continue for several more years.[49]

Analysis of the problems which plagued Cunningham's administration of the Oklahoma Writers' Project revealed some of the contradictions inherent to the federal arts projects. Perhaps the gravest problem which Cunningham faced was the lack of qualified writers. To succeed, the Oklahoma Writers' Project needed talented workers who knew how to conduct research, write clearly, and edit copy. The majority of people on Oklahoma's relief rolls did not possess these skills. They desperately needed work, which a writers' program could provide. But, in Oklahoma, the Writers' Project was not the most efficient use of the resources of the unemployed.

If President Roosevelt's main objective was to provide employment for the jobless, the concept of a writers' program, at least in Oklahoma, was not an effective solution.

It is important to note that Oklahoma was not the only state to face these types of problems. McDonald, in his study on relief and the arts, noted that the WPA arts projects were ultimately not relief-oriented projects like most other WPA programs. Many times, state arts projects had difficulties finding qualified personnel from relief rolls and had to request Washington to increase the ratio of non-relief to relief workers to above the normal 10 percent quota. The nature of work in the arts, whether it was writing, acting, painting, or conducting an orchestra, required fine skills and a sense of professionalism. These characteristics were not readily found in those men and women on the relief rolls. Thus, there was an underlying tension in the aims of the federal arts projects: should their focus be relief for the masses of the unemployed, or should the projects provide more selective employment for the talented artists and writers in the nation? McDonald concluded that "the choice, indeed was difficult, and perhaps, the arts program met the dilemma best by not resolving it."[50]

Study of the early years of the Oklahoma Writers' Project revealed a second problem in federal sponsorship of the arts. In the 1930s, artistic interests were intricately connected with liberal political philosophy. Writers and artists believed that they were spokesmen for the concerns and needs of

the average American, who, as a victim of the depression, was often hungry, jobless, and poor. The liberal tendencies of these artists were at times at odds with those conservatives who wished to keep intact the status quo and were already upset by the change and innovation of the New Deal era.

In Oklahoma, whether William Cunningham was actually a Communist or not is not important. Cunningham's co-workers believed that the director was a Communist ally, and their convictions caused them to view many of his activities with hostility and suspicion. His liberal attitudes also antagonized state politicians who were not receptive to leftist ideologies of the 1930s. Because Cunningham alienated his co-workers as well as his superiors, the Oklahoma Writers' Project became stagnant and plagued with morale problems.

ENDNOTES

[1] William Cunningham to Henry Alsberg, 26 November 1935, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project, R.G. 69, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Alsberg to Cunningham, 29 November 1935, ibid.

[7] Cunningham to Alsberg, 26 November 1935, ibid.

[8] Alsberg to Cunningham, 29 November 1935, ibid.

[9] Cunningham to Alsberg, 6 December 1935, ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Jacob Baker to Key, 4 January 1936, ibid.

[13] Cunningham to Alsberg, 3 January 1936, ibid.

[14] Frank Bentley to Harold Stein, 27 January 1936, ibid.

[15] Cunningham to Alsberg, 29 February 1936, ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Cunningham to Alsberg, 13 April 1936, ibid.

[18] Cunningham to Alsberg, 20 July 1936, ibid.

[19] Cunningham to Alsberg, 10 August 1936, ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Cunningham to Alsberg, 20 August, 1936, ibid.

[22] Cunningham to Alsberg, 5 November 1936, ibid.

[23] Cunningham to Alsberg, 21 December 1935, ibid.

[24] Cunningham to Alsberg, 29 February 1936, ibid.

[25] Cunningham to Alsberg, 13 April 1936, ibid.

[26] Cunningham to Alsberg, 29 February 1936, ibid.

[27] Cunningham to Alsberg, 8 September 1936, ibid.

[28] J. Ellen Wolgamuth to Alsberg, 19 December 1938, ibid.

[29] In 1938, when Wolgamuth wrote the letter to Alsberg, the project included "dressmakers, manicurists, housewives galore, teachers . . . and people from almost every profession but the writing one." ibid.

[30] Wolgamuth's letter to Alsberg was written in a very reserved tone. Along with the two-page letter detailing the problems on the project, there was a short memo. This short memo actually was the first of the two correspondences which Alsberg read as the two-page letter had been sealed in a separate envelope. In the short note, Wolgamuth implored Alsberg to keep the contents of the sealed letter confidential. She wrote that Alsberg was to give her letter the same consideration that a priest would give a confession. She concluded her short note by stating that if Alsberg could not keep her confidence he should destroy the other letter unopened. ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] William and Zoe A. Tilghman Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma. These

letters are a part of the William and Zoe A. Tilghman Collection at the University of Oklahoma's Western History Collection. Zoe A. Tilghman was, at one point, assistant state supervisor of the Oklahoma Writers' Project. A review of this correspondence suggests that Tilghman acted as coordinator for the project members who were concerned about Cunningham's handling of the office. Five different statements appear in the file; only one is signed by Zoe A. Tilghman. The other four seem to be written by persons other than Zoe Tilghman, although the letters bear no signature.

[33] Maxham, for a time, served as city secretary of the Communist party. "Communists are Denied Use of Municipal Auditorium," Daily Oklahoman, August 15, 1939.

[34] "Statement on Federal Writers' Project," Tilghman Collection.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Cunningham to Alsberg, 30 December 1936, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project. In this letter, Cunningham described the project's union formation and activities. According to Cunningham, when the union was forming, problems arose between two project employees. These problems stemmed from an earlier confrontation which had occurred several years before. One of the workers had been involved with an unemployment organization which had refused membership to the second worker. At that time, the organization's officers were convinced that the worker was a spy who was selling information to the police. Animosities between the

pair had continued and when the first worker had tried to form the project union, the second "opposed it vigorously, tying up one meeting completely by parliamentary maneuvers."

Shortly after this, someone (although Cunningham did not specify who) lodged a complaint with the state office that four persons most active on the union were not doing any actual work on the guide. As a result of these complaints, the Federal Bureau of Investigation looked into operations of the project. The investigator sent by Washington officials was named Van Doren, who was involved in the Pretty Boy Floyd case. Van Doren interviewed the four workers as well as others on the project. Cunningham wrote to Alsberg that the investigator found the charges were absurd and that Van Doren would turn in a very favorable report. This writer could not find any copy of the FBI report in the Writers' Project files either in the National Archives or in Oklahoma.

Cunningham's account of the problems in the union formation differed from the narratives written by project employees. Cunningham also does not mention the employment of Fred Maxham on the project at this time. Maxham was, at one point, a member of the state Communist party and would most probably have been involved in union activities. Cunningham's omission of any details about Maxham's presence on the project is suspicious and does not constitute an open account of the union formation on the project. Other accounts of the union's activities become more credible as Cunningham's version left out some important facts.

[37] "Statement on Federal Writers' Projects"; "Communists and the Federal Writers' Project," Tilghman Collection.

[38] Cunningham to Alsberg, 30 October 1936, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[39] For a discussion of the importance of a non-security wage position, see McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, 172-176.

[40] Zoe A. Tilghman to Rep. Martin Dies, 10 June 1938; "Statement on Federal Writers' Project," Tilghman Collection. Zoe A. Tilghman's position on the Oklahoma Writers' Project requires further note here. A Handbook of Oklahoma Writers noted that Zoe Agnes (Stratton) Tilghman had been well known in Oklahoma literary circles for a long time. She had encouraged many poets and novelists in the state to continue writing. Her special interest in writing was western history, specifically Oklahoma history. Cunningham, in a letter to Alsberg, referred to her as a "Sturdy Pioneer" who had devoted her life to the "winning of the West." In the letter, Cunningham expressed his concern that Tilghman could not handle total supervision of the project because of her inability to get along with different types of people and her problems with writing and editing.

Cunningham's remarks could obviously have been a result of the political differences between the two. Yet, others complained about Tilghman's personality. J. Ellen Wolgamuth called Tilghman cruel and overbearing in her letter to Alsberg. When Angie Debo took over the project in 1940, she referred

to Tilghman as a persistent troublemaker. Despite these attacks on Tilghman's personality, the letters in the file to Representative Martin Dies are consistent in their allegations against the Cunningham administration and lent credence to her reservations about the director. Moreover, in a letter to Alsberg in May 1939, James Thompson, Cunningham's successor, admitted that Tilghman's removal as Assistant Director of the Writers' Project was without just cause.

[41] "Daily Oklahoman Story Discounted by Professors," Oklahoma Daily, 22 May 1937.

[42] "Was Writers' Meeting Red or Wasn't It?" Daily Oklahoman, 23 May 1937.

[43] Tilghman to Dies, 10 June 1938, Tilghman Collection. The Communist Party greatly influenced the organization and philosophies of the League of American Writers; Aaron, Writers on the Left, 284.

[44] Tilghman to Dies, 10 June 1938, "Statement on Federal Writers' Project," Tilghman Collection.

[45] Nolen Bulloch, "Rah, Rah, Russia" Liberty, 19 December 1936, 6-9.

[46] Cunningham to Alsberg, 30 December 1936, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[47] Alsberg to Cunningham, 25 January 1937, ibid.

[48] R. P. Hill to Harry Hopkins, 8 January 1937, ibid.

[49] In the files of the collection Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project, there was a letter from Opal Gallup which alleged that Cunningham was in trouble

on the project and was soon going to have to resign. Other notes suggested that WPA administrators were concerned about Cunningham's position on the project.

[50] McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, 172-187.

CHAPTER III

THE CUNNINGHAM YEARS

PART II

While William Cunningham was director, the Oklahoma Writers' Project failed to publish any of its works. This poor record reflected the tensions which the project faced during this time. The major undertaking of the project had been the writing of the Oklahoma guidebook. The difficulties which the staff suffered with the guide mirrored the larger problems which plagued the project. State government officials had little interest in the New Deal project and thus did not provide funds for the guide. The restrictiveness of federal regulations concerning the guide's publication thwarted the University of Oklahoma Press' ability to publish the work. Problems within the project also thwarted the guide's completion. Editors who read parts of the manuscript commonly complained that the copy contained historical inaccuracies and poor writing. Apparently, the project's lack of qualified writers and researchers hindered progress on the guide. The Writers' Project had similar luck in its other endeavors under Cunningham. Manuscripts such as "Indian Schools and Missions" and "Musicians of Oklahoma" were never published. Some of the project's research, such as "Cooperative Associations

in Oklahoma," reflected the interests of a few of the project's staff, but would garner little interest or support from the people of the state. Thus, under Cunningham's direction, the Oklahoma Writers' Project was unable to publish a single volume.

The principal task for the Federal Writers' Project was the production of the American Guide Series. When originally conceived, the idea of the American Guide consisted of the writing of a five volume work; each volume would focus on a specific geographic region of the country. It would highlight the area's history and cultures, and would include detailed travel information. This plan for the guide changed over time. By the late 1930s, the idea for the five volume set was displaced by the American Guide Series, a much larger collection of state and local guides.[1]

The guidebook series was to document American life, past and present. When Washington officials defined the purpose and duties of the Writers' Project, they looked for a project which would create a contemporary "'history of the people by the people.'"[2] Thus, the project would coincide with the developing interest in American folk heritage. An integral part of the documentary tradition of the 1930s, the series was valuable as it placed before the American public a set of facts and allowed the people to derive their own conclusions. There was no overt social message in the guides, although many project idealists "saw in the American Guide Series the hope of portraying the nation in such an honest

and effective way that it could help create a more noble standard of social behavior."[3] Henry Alsberg, national director of the Writers' Project, believed that the guidebooks "'would attract attention to the whole of American civilization and its development'" and would encompass the important concepts of folklore and iconography.[4]

If there were aesthetic advantages to the publication of the guide series, there also were positive practical considerations. In the 1930s, there were few national and state travel guides, and the commercial marketability of the guides appeared quite strong. The guidebooks, officials hoped, would encourage national travel, a possibility heightened by America's somewhat improved economic conditions and unrest in Europe. A final point in favor of the guides was that they could provide suitable white-collar employment to professional writers. Literate nonwriters could do a great deal of the work as the guides were not intended to be creative masterpieces.[5]

For all state guidebooks, there was a fairly standardized format for style and content. A memo to all state directors from the national office contained instructions on the writing of title pages, tables of contents, and text. All state guides had to conform to the regulations regarding type styles for these pages.[6] In terms of content, the guides had three major parts. The first part consisted of a series of introductory essays on such topics as history, natural resources, physical characteristics, folklore and folkways, government,

and education. After these essays, there followed reports on various cities and towns within the state. Finally, the books contained a tour section, intended to lead a visitor to the state's major points of interest. Washington wanted to make the tour section the highlight of the guide series.[7]

The publication of the state guide was the chief concern for the Oklahoma Writers' Project. About half of the staff contributed to the compilation of the guide, either in the form of writing or research.[8] Usually, the most competent workers were responsible for writing the manuscript, while others conducted the research. This research involved gathering, digesting, and interpreting information. It also meant simply typing verbatim accounts from newspapers and secondary sources. The level of research a particular worker performed was dependent upon his or her level of competency. Some of the research gathered eventually proved worthless because of the poor research skills of various workers.[9]

Initial drafts of the Oklahoma guide followed the format which Washington officials prescribed. In 1936, Ruth Crawford, from the Writers' Project national office, reviewed the work of the Oklahoma project and stated that the guide followed the outline Washington had set forth. Crawford's review was generally complimentary to the copy which the Oklahoma office submitted. Crawford wrote that the essays on government, contemporary culture, and folk ways were commendable as they aptly captured the essence of modern Oklahoma. According to Crawford, the essays on history and growth and development

also reflected an intelligent understanding of the social and political climate of the state. However, Crawford's analysis pointed to some major stylistic flaws in the copy. Crawford indicated that the writing was disorganized and disjointed, and the text did not flow smoothly from one idea to another.[10]

Crawford indicated that the copy on the geography and geology of the state betrayed the fact that project writers were not comfortable with their materials. The essay on geology, wrote Crawford, was unclear and rather dull. In one section concerning the history of white settlement in the state, Crawford lamented that the "exciting, interesting features of Oklahoma's history are apt to get lost in the pedantic march-of-events-style used throughout" the essay. Crawford also criticized the style of writing on the guide, charging that the essay on social development emerged as just "a detailed group of loosely connected paragraphs" and not a moving account of the people who built Oklahoma.[11]

Unevenness in quality of copy seemed to mark the entire guide. This unevenness was a result of the nature of the project's work. The work was a group effort, and not a product of one or two writers. While one person might have written an excellent chapter on state government, a second might have failed on a chapter about economic development. The project employed few good writers, and the two or three on the staff were not able to oversee the entire manuscript. Cunningham also did not have enough time to edit and rewrite all the copy

as he was too busy with administrative details.

Crawford's critique of the Oklahoma guide was echoed in other reviews of the project's work. A review of an essay written on oil for the guide contained scathing criticism. The reviewer wrote that the essay was poorly organized, skipping from point to point without making any connections. The style of writing was dull and confusing. Summing up the comments, the reviewer wrote that "most Oklahoma essays--and this fact was pointed out in the original criticism--suffer from a monotonous style of short paragraphs loosely connected. A paragraph of more than two sentences is almost an exception."[12] George Cronyn, associate director for the Federal Writers' Project, reiterated these sentiments when he commented that the oil essay lacked structure and continuity.[13]

Evaluation of the critiques of the project's work revealed other problems in addition to writing style. Another difficulty was Cunningham's pessimism towards his work. During the summer and fall of 1936, project employees were working on tour copy for the guide. The staff had trouble writing colorful material for the section. Cunningham seemed distressed because he felt the state contained little of note. Alsberg had to prod Cunningham to appreciate his state. He wrote, "I think you will find that Oklahoma has more of interest than you realize--even if National Geographic did not find it." Alsberg went on to say that Nebraska, a state which seemingly would have a rather boring heritage, had come up with some very exciting material for its guide.[14]

The Oklahoma Writers' Project encountered other problems in preparing its guide. These difficulties stemmed from the bureaucratic structure under which the project operated. The state project sent Washington for review two essays on Oklahoma government. The two reviewers who critiqued the essays differed in their opinions of the quality of the writings. While one reviewer favored the version by Curtis Ward as an example of good guidebook writing, the other passed over this copy for the second article. For the first reviewer, Ward's writing was clear, to the point, and authoritative. Royden Dangerfield's version was preferable, according to the second reviewer, because it was both authoritative and included the dates for the various changes in the government. Such discrepancies in opinion from Washington editors caused confusion for state project members. What was good guidebook writing; how was the work to be judged? If editors could not decide what they wanted, how could staff writers?

Sometimes Washington confused project writers by changing instructions in midstream. This happened when the project was working on the guide chapter "Industry, Commerce, and Labor." The national office had initially instructed the Oklahoma Writers' Project to write an essay on oil in the state, but it was to be separate from the chapter that it was preparing on industry and commerce. After the project prepared its manuscript in this regard, Washington changed its mind and decided to make the article on oil a part of the chapter

on industrial development. Oklahoma workers had to rewrite the essay and change the content of the article.[15] This naturally caused frustrations and additional tension for the staff.

Washington editors continued to criticize the writing of the Oklahoma project for its stylistic and organizational weaknesses. Yet, the national staff could seldom provide helpful comments on the historical accuracy of the project's work. Washington officials were so far removed from the situation in Oklahoma that it was impossible for them to understand and to know the history of the state. The editors were not experts in local history.[16] To insure that its work was accurate, the project often sent its copy to experts in the field who could better assess the merit of the work. Cunningham once sent the copy for the chapter on Oklahoma history to University of Oklahoma professor Edward Everett Dale, a leading scholar on the state. Scholars such as Dale were able to assess both the merit and the accuracy of the project's writing.[17]

Several of the critiques from university officials indicated that the manuscript contained historical inaccuracies that had to be corrected for a final draft. Professor F. A. Balyeat from the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma evaluated copy from the manuscript on education in Oklahoma. He found several mistakes and misrepresentations. Balyeat doubted the accuracy of the essay concerning vocational education. He also believed the description of

state junior colleges was misleading. He urged Cunningham to verify all the facts in the section on the State Department of Education. Although Balyeat admired the work done for the guide, he felt that, as the book would become an authority on the state, it was imperative that Cunningham "be very certain of the facts and impressions which will come from use of it."[18]

Another reviewer criticized an early draft of the manuscript for poor scholarship. This reader was from the University of Oklahoma Press. In the early months of 1937, the university press was considering publishing the guidebook. Joseph A. Brandt, then head of the press, gave the completed manuscript to a reader for editorial comments. According to a letter Brandt sent to Cunningham, the reader found many factual errors and considerable evidence of an amateurish style in the text. Brandt also believed that before publication drastic revisions were necessary.[19]

In early 1937, Cunningham began negotiations with the University of Oklahoma Press for publication of the state guide. At this time, the federal government had relinquished responsibilities for publication to state or local governmental bodies, or to private organizations. The publisher would serve as sponsor for the Writers' Projects' publications. As such, the publisher absorbed all costs of publication and thus helped to save hundreds of thousands of dollars for the federal treasury.[20] Cunningham had originally hoped that the state legislature would appropriate some money for

publication. But, in a letter to Alsberg, Cunningham noted that chances were slight that the legislators would take an interest. He wrote, "The outlook for publication of the State Guide is not very good. The Legislature will convene in January and its chief interest will be the impeachment of the Governor. We shall get a bill introduced but are not very hopeful."[21] Believing that the legislature would not prove helpful, Cunningham scouted around for other alternatives, and by early 1937, he turned to the University of Oklahoma Press.[22]

The University of Oklahoma Press was a division of the university, but it operated more or less independently from the institution. The press was non-profit, although at this time it wanted to repay the university all the funds which were initially allocated for its establishment. It was ready and willing to publish quality materials in all fields.[23] Brandt was interested in possible publication of the Oklahoma guide. He accepted the manuscript from Cunningham and told the director that his decision would be based on the quality of the copy and final approval from the university president William Bizzell.[24]

Ultimately, the press decided not to publish the guide. The decision was based on reasons of expediency for both the press and the university. In a lengthy letter to Cunningham, Brandt detailed the reasons why the press rejected the manuscript. The first reason which prompted the decision was that the government could not release unconditionally

the guide manuscript to the University of Oklahoma Press. The press would not be able to hold copyright for its full length either. Another reason for rejection of the guide was the fact that the government required all guides to be sold at a price of only two dollars per copy, a price at which the press would never be able to recoup its losses. Finally, the press realized that for a book such as this to be of permanent value, it would have to be constantly revised; this it could not do on its relatively low budget. Brandt was disappointed that the press would not publish the work, but he also understood that the university, which would absorb any losses incurred, could not afford to do so. The university was in a difficult budgetary situation,and its Board of Regents had "adopted a more rigorous policy toward the Press" which meant that Brandt must reduce the possibility of loss on new titles.[25] Thus, for the time being at least, the University of Oklahoma Press had rejected the Writers' Project's bid for publication of the guide.

When the university press turned down the manuscript, Cunningham had to look elsewhere for publication of the guide. He was unable to secure an agreement for publication before he left the project. Shortly after Brandt rejected the guide manuscript, Cunningham had written to him that a private firm might be interested in the book. The state travel guides already published had sold well on the market, and several firms, such as Macmillan, sought similar manuscripts. But Cunningham never finalized an agreement with any of these firms.[26]

At another point, Cunningham believed that the State Travel and Tourist Bureau would sponsor the guide, but state politics later crushed this plan. By the time he left the project, Cunningham still had not procured a sponsor.[27]

By the summer of 1936, the project writers had completed most of the work for the guide. Cunningham then had to find other activities on which his staff could work. Research for a study of early Indian missions in Oklahoma began, as did the writing of over one hundred biographies of state musicians. Of special interest to the project was the compilation of the folklore and regional traditions of the state. Almost one-third of all project employees worked on projects related to the gathering of folklore or the interviewing of state pioneers.[28] The project's other endeavors, however, never came to fruition; like the state guide, they remained unpublished when Cunningham left the office.

As a part of their interest in regional history and folklore, project members spent much time on the collection of interviews of former slaves living in Oklahoma. Sixty-five women and fifty-two men reminisced about their experiences as slaves. While interviewing the former slaves, project workers often had difficulty capturing on paper the substance and the spirit of the narratives. Project administrators issued guidelines on how employees should conduct interviews, but workers were still not always successful in their attempts to record the subject's story. Apparently, a major problem

was understanding the black dialect. Sometimes the interviewers recorded verbatim what the subjects said; other times they attempted to translate the Negroes' speech into proper English. A lexicon for Negro dialect was created to help workers record and understand the accounts. At times, however, this attempt to translate the blacks' speech into proper grammar caused even more confusion.[29]

Another project which Cunningham supervised concerned cooperatives in Oklahoma during the 1930s. The introduction to the study stated that "the cooperative movement in Oklahoma may well be regarded as a modern method of the struggle for economic liberty dating back to Pharoah's oppression of the children of Israel."[30] The study is primarily an inventory of approximately two hundred cooperative institutions. To do the work, the project sent a questionnaire to the various cooperatives in the state. Questions on the survey concerned membership, financial data, organizational affiliation, and [illegible] distribution of merchandise. When the study was compiled, data for each cooperative was presented on a standardized form which allowed researchers to compare statistics with relative ease. At the bottom of each form, there was room for general comments from the editor. These comments were usually a synopsis of remarks made by the person who completed the questionnaire. As the introduction to the study stated, this was only an initial examination on the role of cooperatives in the state.[31]

Cunningham was also responsible for the manuscript "A

Survey of Community Sales in Oklahoma." The structured format to this volume closely resembled that for the study of cooperatives. For each community sale, the survey listed such questions as "What local products are sold"; "When is the sale "; and "What is the average gross receipts from the sale?" The introduction to the survey claimed that "the community sale brought consumer and producer together, thereby eliminating the economic middlemen."[32] Like the study on cooperatives, this study gave some indication of the extent of collective economic action in the state.

The two above-mentioned projects were never published. These manuscripts remain in the Indian Archives of the Oklahoma Historical Society. Both of these studies reflected the political interests of Cunningham. They focused on the role of collective action in society and described the attempts of farmers and the lower classes to improve their economic plight. However, works with such pronounced political overtones were not destined to find a market in Oklahoma. For researchers,the compilations have great value, but they had little market potential in Oklahoma in the 1930s. The Writers' Project in Oklahoma, as well as in other states, needed to win support from the local population. To do this, the publication of popular works was important. Cunningham's projects, no matter what research value they might have, were not going to be attractive to the general populace.

While Cunningham was working on the two studies on cooperative efforts, other project employees pursued different interests.

There were attempts to write and find publishers for guides to Tulsa and Oklahoma City. The Writers' Project also was unable to find publishers for either of these works. Cunningham complained in a letter to Alsberg that, although he had found a printer for the Tulsa guide, he could not locate a sponsor who would give financial support. The established businessmen who had the money to help were "rock-bound" conservatives and opposed to such New Deal ventures.[33] Publication of the Oklahoma City guide also encountered snags. In Oklahoma City, the Writers' Project guide would have to compete with a privately published travel brochure filled with advertisements. The City Chamber of Commerce saw no need for two competing guides and was reluctant to sponsor it.[34]

Other work which the project completed at this time included the writing of a manuscript on early missions and churches in Oklahoma and an analysis of the Comanche language. The manuscript on missions was approximately fifty thousand words and included research on such sites as Forest Chapel Mission and Harley Institute. Project employees also compiled a Comanche word list of one hundred pages. A third project involved biographical work on Oklahoma musicians. Approximately 150 musicians were profiled for this work.[35]

During the two and a half years in which Cunningham headed the Oklahoma Writers' Project, the staff was able to accomplish considerable research and writing. The research was significant as it was (and still is) the basis for important historical study of the state. Much of the primary

material which the project workers gathered can be used by historians as a stepping stone for their research efforts. In many instances, this research is still in very raw form; it may just appear as a long file of re-typed newspaper stories or synopses from secondary sources. The richness of the material has not been adequately tapped. In many respects, the work of the project members reflected national cultural trends of the 1930s. The writing of the guide, the recording of interviews with former slaves, and the collection of folk-lore stories were attempts to document American life. As they captured facets of American culture and life on paper, project employees became, perhaps without realizing it themselves, a part of the literary popular front of the 1930s. This front was an important cultural phenomenon which reflected a renaissance of interest in American culture.

Despite these accomplishments, Cunningham was unable to get any of this work published. Problems continually thwarted the director's ability to succeed. There was little or no support from the community, and state agencies were reluctant to assist financially. Directives from Washington continued to cause difficulties in the project operations. Internal problems and inconsistencies plagued the state office. Under Cunningham, the project suffered from a shortage of qualified writers. Because of the constant need to handle personnel problems and adminstrative duties, Cunningham did not have adequate time to oversee all editorial decisions. Finally, his liberal political inclinations affected the project,

making it unacceptable to the average Oklahoman and unmarketable in the state. When Cunningham left the project, he left behind many partially completed works. He had not finalized a single publication contract, and some staff members were beginning to become anxious to see their work in print.[36]

ENDNOTES

[1] For a discussion of the origins of the guide project, see McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, 693-696.

[2] Monty Penkower, "The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1970), 31.

[3] Mangione, p. 193-194; William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 109.

[4] Penkower, "The Federal Writers' Project," 38.

[5] Ibid., 47-48.

[6] Memo, To all State Directors, Federal Writers' Project, 4 January 1937, University of Oklahoma Press Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

[7] Ruth Crawford to George Cronyn, 6 June 1936, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[8] Cunningham to Alsberg, 15 August 1936, ibid.

[9] Ibid.; McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, 733-744.

[10] Crawford to Cronyn, 6 June 1936, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[11] Ibid.

[12] "Oklahoma, Industry, and Oil," 17 November 1936, ibid.

[13] Cronyn to Cunningham, 20 November 1936, ibid.

[14] Alsberg to Cunningham, 19 September 1946, ibid.

[15] "Oklahoma, Industry, and Oil," 6 November 1936, ibid.

[16] Mabel S. Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture for the WPA," Harper's Magazine, 178 (May 1939): 656.

[17] Cunningham to Edward Everett Dale, 25 May 1937, Edward Everett Dale Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

[18] Balyeat to Cunningham, 26 April 1937, Works Project Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City,

[19] Brandt to Cunningham, 6 April 1937, University of Oklahoma Press Collection.

[20] McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, 272-274.

[21] Cunningham to Alsberg, 15 August 1936, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[22] Cunningham to Alsberg, 5 May 1937, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Joseph Brandt to Cunningham, 26 May 1937, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Cunningham to Brandt, 12 June 1937, University of Oklahoma Press Collection.

[27] Thompson to Alsberg, 25 March 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[28] Cunningham to Alsberg, 15 August 1936, ibid.

[29] Ex-Slave Narratives, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, In this file, there are copies of the various interviews taken by project workers. Many of these interviews appear in the collection Slave Narratives, prepared by the Federal Writers' Project and assembled by the Library of Congress Project, Work Projects Administration. The compilation was later reprinted by Scholarly Press, Inc. (1976). There are more interviews on file than what appears in the printed compilation.

[30] "Cooperative Associations in Oklahoma," Oklahoma Writers' Project, Work Projects Administration.

[31] Ibid.

[32] "A Survey of Community Sales in Oklahoma," ibid.

[33] Cunningham to Alsberg, 13 December 1937, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[34] Ibid.

[35] The biographies of musicians are in the collection of the Oklahoma Writers' Project materials in the Oklahoma Historical Society. The manuscript on early missions, as well as the Comanche word lists, can not be located in the Historical Society. Notes which most probably were integral to the study of missions are now scattered throughout the vertical file in the main reading room of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

[36] Tilghman to Dies, 10 June 1938, Tilghman Collection.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROJECT UNDER JAMES THOMPSON

In the spring of 1938, James Thompson succeeded Cunningham as director of the Oklahoma Writers' Project. Thompson had worked closely with Cunningham during his years as chief administrator, and his succession to the top position was logical. He directed the project until late summer, 1939, when the project suspended operations for about seven months. As director, Thompson had a little more success than Cunningham. Under his tutelage, two project works were published--Calendar of Annual Events in Oklahoma and Tulsa: A Guide to the Oil Capital. Project workers also began research on two other major works, The Negro History and Labor History of Oklahoma. Despite these successes, Thompson also encountered mammoth difficulties during his tenure. Many of these problems occurred during the last months of his tenure, shortly before the project ended operation. These difficulties stemmed largely from the fact that the Writers' Project, particularly under Cunningham, had earned a reputation as being a communist organization. As Thompson had been a close colleague of Cunningham, the project's reputation did not substantially change when he took control. In 1939, when the Writers' Project shifted from federal to state control, it could not

find a local organization willing to serve as sponsor, and the project was forced to suspend work until the spring of 1940.

In February 1938, Cunningham had written to Henry Alsberg of his intentions to leave the Oklahoma Writers' Project. The reason he gave was that his wife suffered from allergies which they believed to be caused by dust storms in Oklahoma.[1] As his replacement, Cunningham recommended James Thompson, who served as editor of the Oklahoma guidebook and who also was in charge of a proposed guide to the University of Oklahoma.

On previous occasions, Cunningham had indicated to Alsberg his desire to leave the project. As early as 1936, Cunningham had written that his many administrative duties on the project had caused his creative work to suffer. Cunningham repeated his complaint in May of 1937, when he wrote to Alsberg, "I find it impossible to do any writing on this job, and I am thinking of quitting about September 1."[2] Although Cunningham was honest with Alsberg about his desire to move on, he was not so open with state officials in Oklahoma. He feared that, if anyone knew too far in advance that he was quitting, "there would be a lot of political scrambling around and the state office would get its mind made up."[3] Obviously, Cunningham and state officials did not agree on such matters as project direction. He feared what would happen to the Writers' Project if he left, and he wanted to control the appointment of his successor.

Cunningham had supported James Thompson for a long time,

In the 1930s, Thompson was a fledgling writer just beginning to show promise. He had contributed to American Stuff, an anthology of writings done by Federal Writers' Project workers, and he was expecting, in the fall of 1938, the publication of his first novel, Always to be Blessed. Thompson and Cunningham shared political sentiments. In his own words, Thompson was very sympathetic to labor and the need of labor to form a "working class consciousness" to deal with economic oppression.[4] Thompson was also an executive of the American Writers' Union, a leftist literary group.[5]

While Cunningham favored Thompson's appointment, he seemed to fear that state administrators would support Zoe A. Tilghman for the directorship. Cunningham probably suspected that state administrators would support Tilghman because of her political connections. She was the widow of William Tilghman, "an honorable Oklahoma citizen."[6] Cunningham had deep reservations about such a move, and this opposition was likely based on two factors. Zoe Tilghman was apparently not easy to work with. In a letter to Alsberg, Cunningham wrote that Tilghman could not properly supervise the project: "She gets along fairly well with the average, docile worker on the project, but she fights with both the mental cases and the above-average folks."[7] But Cunningham's opposition to Tilghman's appointment stemmed from a second point as well. Tilghman did not approve of Cunningham's liberal political philosophies, causing tension between the two. Cunningham saw that with Thompson as his successor, his vision and philo-

sophy for the project would more or less remain intact.[8]

Thompson was appointed and assumed charge of the Writers' Project in the spring of 1939. Some project members perceived that his appointment was the result of his friendship and political comradeship with William Cunningham; the project workers noted that Cunningham and Thompson shared similar views on politics and social affairs. Shortly after Thompson's appointment, Ned DeWitt, already a project worker, was promoted to state editor. DeWitt allegedly held leftist sentiments similar to both Thompson and Cunningham. Employees of the Writers' Project again saw this promotion as political favoritism. Thompson's assumption of power, and subsequent promotion of DeWitt, only helped to polarize attitudes on the Writers' Project. As many saw it, the Communists held power in the organization, while the non-Communists were the lackeys. Whether or not Thompson and DeWitt were Communists, or leftists, or simply very liberal Democrats was not important. They were <u>perceived</u> by many as being Communist, and that would eventually become their undoing.[9]

Thompson's tenure as director clearly began with omens that problems were to follow. Indeed, tensions arose later in the spring of 1938, when a major personnel scandal erupted. The problem involved Thelma Shumake, a reporter for the project. Shumake earned $75.50 a month, while the other reporters earned only $68.00 per month. The higher figure had been her salary during the time she served as assistant to Communist Party member Fred Maxham, who had been

instrumental in the project's union formation in 1936. When Maxham left, Shumake went to work in the reporter pool. However, when she made the job change, she did not experience a cut in wages. She continued to make eight dollars more a month than the other writers.[10]

In the spring of 1938, when the other project workers discovered this discrepancy, considerable disruption in work occurred. To solve the crisis, the project reporters called a meeting. They wanted some recourse, preferably to have their wages raised as high as Shumake's. When they discovered this was not possible, the reporters decided against demanding that Shumake's salary be cut. The project employees claimed that Thompson refused to make any adjustment, no matter what the reporters wanted. To justify Shumake's higher salary, Thompson made her head reporter, an act Zoe Tilghman regarded as irregular since federal regulations provided a different administrative organization for the supervision of reporters. Employees who wrote to Martin Dies complaining of Communists on the project cited favoritism of Shumake as an example of the group's domination. Shumake was a known sympathizer with the leftist philosophies of Cunningham and Thompson. Some project workers believed that her political ideology had a direct connection to her higher salary.[11]

In the spring of 1938, the incident became the focus of several newspaper stories. The Daily Oklahoman, in late May, carried an article which described the reporters' anger over the salary discrepancy. The article also detailed other

incidents which supposedly indicated the influence of Communism on the project. According to the Daily Oklahoman, these incidents included Fred Maxham's employment on the project and Alta Churchill's trip to New York City at the time when the Communist Party was holding its national convention. Churchill was the executive secretary of the Federal Writers' Project and another Communist sympathizer.[12] A week later, Shumake responded to the article in an editorial in the Oklahoma City Times. In her response, she never admitted or denied charges that there were Communists on the project. She believed that the politics of the individual project employees should not be of public concern. According to Shumake, William Cunningham was generally well liked on the project, no matter what his politics might have been. Shumake discussed the controversy concerning her higher salary, but never gave any reason for it. Although she quoted Zoe Tilghman as saying that her work had always been satisfactory, Shumake did not justify the higher wage on merit.[13]

The importance of the episode was that it underscored the tension among project employees and interfered with their work. The workers were indignant about Shumake's higher salary. Although records offer no proof that Shumake received more money because of her politics, the action was highly irregular. The project probably could not have afforded to pay her more money unless it was at someone's expense. If Thompson, or his predecessor Cunningham, had made an error and just forgot the necessary paperwork to reduce her salary, he should have

admitted the mistake. His handling of the situation only produced more animosity, and it was shortly after this that project workers wrote the letters to Martin Dies.[14]

Despite these problems, the project did manage to have a few of its works published in the early summer of 1938. In May 1938, Tulsa: A Guide to the Oil Capital came out, published by the Mid-West Printing Company and sponsored by the Tulsa Federation of Women's Clubs. The guide was a printed booklet of about eighty pages, with photographs and maps. Copies sold for twenty-five cents each.[15] A second publication also was published in the summer of 1938. The Oklahoma State Travel and Tourist Bureau published the Calendar of Annual Events in Oklahoma, a rather short booklet which listed important happenings in the state, such as frontier celebrations and Indian dances.[16] The Calendar was well received by the public and Thompson hoped to be able to publish a second edition which would list more events.[17]

When the Calendar of Annual Events in Oklahoma was published in July, there were problems. James Thompson, according to Washington officials, had failed to submit final copy, galley proofs, and illustrations to the national headquarters for approval. If Thompson had done so, Washington would not have approved a particular illustration in the booklet. This illustration was for the Easter pageant and depicted the Resurrection. Alsberg, writing from Washington, felt that the Resurrection, which had been the subject of so many pictures, was not really suitable for Writers' Project publications such

as the Calendar. Illustrations which reflected local values and traditions were more appropriate; Alsberg suggested that, if future editions of the book came out, the Resurrection drawing be removed and an illustration reflecting Southwest heritage be substituted. Through such directives, Washington carefully maintained control over what the state project was doing.[18]

Besides the publication of these two works in 1938, Thompson also oversaw the beginnings of research for two other projects. A major project undertaken by the office was the compilation of a Negro history, which began as an offshoot from Lawrence Lay's work on the guide. For the guide, Lay had written a section concerning the Negro in Oklahoma. His writings were so extensive that Washington felt that they constituted a book and not just a section in the guide. Washington gave Lay a lot of freedom and told him to prepare a manuscript on the Negro in Oklahoma history. Lay worked with other interested blacks in the state to prepare the study.[19] He set up an organization of researchers in the state who were interested in the project. After corresponding with Negro leaders throughout the state, conducting a survey on living conditions for area blacks, and running a special questionnaire on the attitudes of blace leadership groups towards social and racial matters, Lay produced a manuscript of approximately forty eight thousand words.[20]

Lay had made tentative publication plans with a group of interested blacks, headed by Roscoe Dungee, editor of the

Black Dispatch.[21] But, apparently, these plans never came to fruition. When the Oklahoma Writers' Project suspended its work in the summer of 1939, the Negro history manuscript, remained unpublished. After the project re-opened in April 1940, there was some discussion about it, but the work never resumed. Lawrence Lay contacted Angie Debo, by then head of the Oklahoma Writers' Project, to see if he could continue the manuscript and be reemployed on the project. Neither of these turned out to be possibilities.[22]

The latter part of 1938 also saw the beginning of another project by the writers' office. This work was a history of labor for the state of Oklahoma. United States Senator Josh Lee from Norman initially proposed the idea for such a history in May 1938. Friends of the senator suggested the plan after they had learned that the Texas Writers' Project was compiling a labor history for its state. Lee asked Dean Brimhall, a state WPA official, to look into the possibility that such a history could be written in Oklahoma.[23] By early June, not only had Senator Lee expressed an interest in such a project, but also had Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas, Judge R. L. Williams from Durant, and W. L. Blessing, a retired railroad engineer.[24]

At the urging of these men, E. M. Fry, deputy WPA administrator for Oklahoma, directed Thompson to begin work on this manuscript, even though the Writers' Project director had qualms about it. Thompson told Fry that, although he was in deep sympathy with the labor movement, he "could not help

feeling hesitant about undertaking a work which was apt to be, to say the least, so controversial."[25] Despite Thompson's reservations, research on the project began. Thompson spent considerable time in 1938 and 1939 on the manuscript for the labor study. He also worked hard securing a sponsor and financial backing for the book. By mid 1939, however, Thompson would discover that his initial apprehension about the labor study was entirely justified. Controversy over the publication erupted in the summer of 1939, contributing to the project's temporary shutdown.[26]

At approximately the same time as work began on the labor and Negro histories, some members of the Writers' Project were working on folklore studies and collections. The Federal Writers' Project had always had an interest in gathering folklore material, as such stories and reminiscences often could best capture American culture and life. But, in 1938, the project's folklore program experienced a renaissance as Benjamin A. Botkin went to Washington and took over its direction. Botkin had early in his career earned a national reputation as an eminent folklorist. During the 1920s and 1930s, he had taught English at the University of Oklahoma,where he also edited the regional newsletter Folk-Say. Botkin strongly believed that the folk culture must reflect the concerns and values of the lower classes: "'Otherwise it may be dismissed as a patronizing gesture, a nostalgic wish, an elegaic complaint, a sporadic and abortive revival--on the part of paternalistic aristocrats going slumming.'" Botkin represented

the writer of the 1930s who believed that his concerns must reflect the concerns of the average working American. Jerry Mangione, in his analysis of Botkin's role on the project, states that "the proletarian emphasis on American writing generated by Marxist philosophy had strongly influenced [Botkin's] own thinking."[27]

In the fall of 1938, then, the Oklahoma Writers' Project expended more of its energies on the collection of native folk tales. Thompson corresponded with Botkin about the project's contribution to the folklore collection rather often. Because Botkin had lived in Oklahoma, he knew of some people whom Thompson could contact. Botkin recommended George Rufus Huckaby, one of his former students, who had a sincere interest in folklore studies. Botkin also suggested that writers Daniel M. Garrison, Welborn Hope, and Gordon Friesen would be valuable additions to the project. They were, in fact, hired to work on the folklore collections. These men, who regularly worked on the folklore project, operated outside of Oklahoma City (whereas most of the other workers were in the urban area). William Vernon Caywood worked out of Enid, where he was busy tracking down local tall tales and songs of the oil field. While Dan Garrison also spent time covering stories from the oil fields, Wellborn Hope was in charge of gathering materials from southeastern Oklahoma.[28]

Two of the three men recommended by Botkin were connected with leftist causes in Oklahoma. Daniel M. Garrison was a member of the theatre group known as the Red Dust

Players. The Red Dust Players performed before sharecroppers and union workers, and their work espoused the need for collective action in resolving social ills. As writer for the group, Garrison wrote such plays as "Tillie," an adaptation of the melodrama "Tillie the Toiler." Working as an allegory, the play stressed the ability of union action to meet the needs of the farmer in his fight against big business and the banks.[29] In 1941, Gordon Friesen married Agnes Cunningham, who was also with the Red Dust Players. Shortly before their marriage, Friesen had been the driving force behind a committee organized in Oklahoma City which gave support to union organizers and activists. In Oklahoma at this time, there was "a wave of fascist reaction to union organizing" and a campaign against labor agitators began. Friesen worked in defense of those arrested during this "witch hunt."[30]

That these two men were involved in leftist causes does not imply that their radicalism influenced the Writers' Project. In fact, the nature of their work suggested that they spent more time in the field collecting folk stories than in the project's offices. However, their involvement does indicate how pervasive leftist ideas were among writers and artists in the 1930s. Because so many interested in literature in the 1930s held--for the time--radical beliefs, their presence and to some extent, their influence, had to be acknowledged. For instance, Garrison, who was working at one point in Seminole, Oklahoma, wrote a letter to Craig Vollmer, a project worker in the city. Garrison signed the letter with his name and

the phrase "fellow traveller," which at that time referred to one who sympathized with the Communist party.[31] This was a fairly innocuous action; Garrison most likely had little influence on the project. The signature does show, however, that there was at least a small network of compatriots on the project who shared leftist sentiments. Moreover, the signature and what it symbolized would most likely have shocked conservative Oklahomans who opposed everything which Communism represented.

There were a few other endeavors which occupied the project's time in 1938 and 1939. Staff members worked on a series of plays for KOMA radio, Oklahoma City. The stories were based on actual events in Oklahoma history, although they were not intended as an exact portrayal of those events.[32] Some of the project members also contributed to a booklet featuring their creative writing done in their spare time. Daniel Garrison contributed a fable, while Thompson and Ned DeWitt also submitted stories.[33]

While all these other projects were going on, Thompson still had to shepherd the guide through publication. Although the project had finished writing the state book, there was editorial work that had to be completed. Correspondence between the Oklahoma project and Washington revealed that there were problems with the copy. Henry Alsberg complained that the manuscript for the guide lacked sufficient details. There was little descriptive information which captured contemporary conditions in Oklahoma. For example, Alsberg stated that the copy for the tour did not adequately describe flora and fauna along

the routes. Washington desired details on natural setting that Oklahoma copy was lacking.[34]

Alsberg's comments also revealed some of Washington's misconceptions about Oklahoma. On two occasions, he told Thompson to use John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath as a model for how quality guide copy should be written. Steinbeck's prose, according to Alsberg, vividly portrayed life in Oklahoma. At one point, Alsberg wrote, "Are the conditions in the country around Sallisaw as they were when Steinbeck collected material for his book? Are there considerable areas where there is practically nothing but the corporation farms? Are any of the Okies coming back to the lands they left?" [35] Alsberg's vision of Oklahoma was taken from Steinbeck's book, and not from reality. The Writers' Project did not, and could not, use Steinbeck as a model, for many Oklahomans had angrily rejected the novel and the picture of despair it presented of the state.[36]

There were other problems during the final editing of the guide. Alsberg seemed annoyed that Thompson sometimes did not follow directions. At one point, Alsberg reminded the director that the tours needed sectional introductions. According to Alsberg, Washington had always asked for this format, and the national director could not understand why Thompson had not followed the appropriate instructions. [37]

As he checked the project's copy, Alsberg also found numerous other errors which concerned him. For instance, the copy written for the town of Enid stated that the city had

seventeen hotels for a population of twenty six thousand. As he felt the number of hotels was high, he asked Thompson to check it. In the published guidebook, Enid has only six hotels.[38] Alsberg also had several changes he wanted made to the copy on Oklahoma City. He instructed Thompson to be sure and include information about the Federal Art Center. Thompson had not included this in the treatment of the Oklahoma City Municipal Auditorium, an omission which did not please Alsberg.[39]

Despite these problems, Alsberg stated that he was happy with the progress that the Oklahoma Writers' Project was making on the guide. He encouraged them to continue looking for a sponsor for the work. On this, however, the project was still experiencing difficulties. No one who was willing to serve as sponsor had the necessary financial means to do so. In his move to slash the budget, especially money for social programs like the Writers; Project, Governor Leon Phillips maintained a stranglehold on the state's purse strings. Few, if any, agencies could serve as sponsors; they simply did not have the money. As Thompson wrote to Alsberg, "it is relatively easy to interest state officials in the Guide and to have them ask for money, but getting the money is just about hopeless." Phillips was not a friend to President Roosevelt, nor to his New Deal programs, and thus it was not likely that the guide would find funding from state government sources. While the former legislator was in power, the State Travel and Tourist Bureau, which had welcomed sponsor-

ship of the guide, no longer existed; it was under the highway commission, now a bastion of support for Phillips.[40]

In the spring of 1939, Thompson was still looking for a sponsor, and he again turned to the University of Oklahoma Press. Benjamin A. Botkin, working on the folklore project in Washington, recommended his old alma mater as a sponsor for the guide.[41] Thompson corresponded with the new director of the University of Oklahoma Press, Savoie Lottinville, who had moved into the post after Brandt had left. Lottinville seemed interested in the possibilities of publishing the guide, although he was concerned about the press's ability to assume financial responsibility. Lottinville estimated that, while the publication of the guide would cost approximately six thousand dollars, the press could only commit itself to three thousand.[42] The press would have to look to contributing sponsors to pick up the difference. Besides financial considerations, Lottinville was also concerned that the quality of the manuscript be at par with other press publications.[43]

Negotiations with the university press continued throughout the summer of 1939. As the summer went by, endorsement by the press became even more critical for the project because of the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act. The act, approved 30 January 1939, drastically changed the operations of all WPA arts projects. According to the act, all projects of Federal One--except the Theatre Project, which Congress abolished--would now be under state control. State

sponsors must assume at least 25 per cent "of the total federal and non-federal cost of the program."[44] William F. McDonald explains how state control operated:

> For each program there was to be in each state an official sponsor which would be the state government or an agency thereof. This sponsor would be the source of legal authority. Subordinate to the official sponsor would be the cosponsor--a public authority to the official sponsor. . . . Finally, on the lowest rung of the ladder, was the co-operating sponsor, a quasi-public or nonprofit private agency that would assist the official sponsor.[45]

With these administrative changes, the Writers' Project also got a new director. John D. Newsom replaced Alsberg as head in late summer of 1939. These changes produced a change of title for the Federal Writers' Project. The national endeavor became known as the Writers' Program, although the state units were still referred to as Writers' Projects.[46]

Thus, in the summer of 1939, the Oklahoma Writers' Project was seeking more than a publisher for its guide; it was also looking for a program sponsor. It had two months to find such a sponsor, for Congress abolished Federal One as of 30 June 1939, and gave the arts projects two months for the transition from federal to state control. The Oklahoma Writers' Project officially closed on 30 June, although Thompson wrote Alsberg that the administrative staff was willing to stay on until satisfactory disposal of the guide and the labor history could be made.[47]

During the course of writing the labor study, Thompson informed both Washington and the state WPA offices of the project's progress. In April 1939, for example, Thompson

wrote to Alsberg that the history would be about twelve thousand words in length and cost about six hundred dollars. At first, the Oklahoma director was not sure that he could solicit enough money for the book, but in late April, he wrote to Alsberg that more funds were available than what he initially thought.[48]

In mid July, Thompson again wrote to Alsberg; this time he offered his resignation. Both he and his assistant Ned DeWitt resigned from their positions as of 1 September 1939; they would begin taking their annual leave on 24 July.[49] Thompson indicated in his resignation that he did not think he could work for the project under state control. Although he mentioned no specifics, he indicated that there were some problems between him and the state WPA administration.[50] Alsberg, however, did not want to accept the resignations, and he immediately sent Lyle Saxon to Oklahoma City to attempt to stop the two men from leaving. Accompanying Saxon on the trip were Mrs. Leo G. Spofford, Chief Regional Supervisor of the Division of Professional and Service Projects, and her assistant, George Hazelton.[51]

While in Oklahoma, the three regional administrators had a series of meetings with Oklahoma officials. The first meeting was with Ron Stephens, WPA state administrator, and Eula Fullerton, Director of the Division of Professional and Service Projects. The meeting was generally cordial. Stephens was new to the organization and he admitted that he knew little about the actual workings of the Writers'

Project. [52] But he expressed his desire that the project continue after 1 September and that the unit "work in close cooperation with the other WPA projects in the State.[53] After this meeting, Saxon met with Thompson and DeWitt who agreed to stay on the job and to try to work in harmony with Stephens and the other WPA offices in the state.[54]

Despite Saxon's apparent success, a few problems appeared during his stay in Oklahoma. The first concerned the project's labor history. Printing of the study had begun on the very day that Thompson and DeWitt met Saxon. According to Thompson, Washington had approved the manuscript, and thus printing had begun.[55]

Thompson had worked almost ten months on the manuscript, overseeing the research and writing of the history, as well as obtaining financial support for the venture. [56] Thompson originally received a promise of sponsorship from W. A. Pat Murphy, State Commissioner of Labor. [57] In 1938, when he pledged to sponsor the labor history, Commissioner Murphy stated that, although he did not then have sufficient funds to finance the publication of the labor study, he was going to ask for one thousand dollars in his next year's budget. [58] The state budget officer, however, denied this request. Later, Thompson interested a group of state legislators in the project. But when they attempted to pass a bill to obtain the money, the Attorney General ruled it was illegal.[59] Thompson was then hopeful that sufficient funding would be available through promises of advance orders for the guides.

Thompson wrote to Alsberg that the CIO miners had agreed to buy two hundred copies at $1.50 per copy. Other unions also might be able and willing to provide financial support, and thus Thompson was not worried about the funding situation.[60]

Thompson was able to persuade an all-union shop to print the book "at its own risk, and pay a royalty after--and if--a reasonable profit is realized."[61] This way, the sponsor did not have to pay the full cost for printing in advance. Before printing could begin, the manuscript had to meet the approval of both the sponsors and Washington. Although the State Commissioner of Labor was the official sponsor, Thompson considered the "real sponsors" the labor groups that promised the financial backing. Thompson planned to get leaders from these various organizations together at one big meeting and then hoped to get their approval of the manuscript. In addition to this, he hoped Washington would approve the manuscript as soon as possible. He wanted to have the book published by 30 June. Thompson,therefore,asked Alsberg if Washington would correct copy and, trusting the Oklahoma project to make all the necessary changes, allow the manuscript to go to the printers without a second reading in Washington.[62]

Alsberg responded to Thompson's requests about three weeks later. Washington had carefully edited the copy, and did not find any major problems. Indeed, Alsberg told Thompson that he had produced a fine interpretative work which was a credit to the project.[63] Answering Thompson's request concerning a second reading, Alsberg wrote that, although Washing-

ton ordinarily liked to re-check corrected copy, they would allow the project to send the manuscript directly to the printers if this would expedite publication. Of course, Washington would have to see the galleys before official approval could be granted. [64]

Thus, the labor manuscript was at the printers while Saxon was in Oklahoma. However, at this time, neither Stephens nor Fullerton had seen the labor copy, and both

> believed it inadvisable that such a book be printed unless someone in their own organization had read it. As Mr. Stephens pointed out, if some criticism followed he would be held responsible. He said that he did not anticipate trouble, but he wanted assurance that this book would not upset his organization.[65]

Saxon negotiated with Thompson for Stephens, or his representative, to read the manuscript. No one--Saxon, Stephens, or Thompson--expected any problems as they did not consider the book to be of a controversial nature. [66] At this point, neither Stephens nor Fullerton nor Saxon asked Thompson to halt the printing of the labor study. Saxon wrote to Newsom that everyone seemed pleased with the arrangement.[67]

While Saxon was in Oklahoma, he also met with officials from the University of Oklahoma, specifically President William Bennett Bizzell, the President's assistant (presumably Morris L. Wardell, WPA projects coordinator for the university), and Savoie Lottinville, the director of the school's press. The three men were quite cooperative and seemed to indicate that the university was willing to assume sponsorship of the Writers' Project. However, Bizzell had a few reservations that

needed to be dispelled before he could promise sponsorship. Bizzell had heard rumors that Communism existed, or had existed, on the project, and while the president did not believe that there was any merit to the accusations, he had to "assure himself that no future trouble would ensue if he picked up sponsorship."[68] Lottinville was optimistic about the state of affairs; he believed the university would assume sponsorship, and that the press would publish the guide.[69] Thus, when Saxon left Oklahoma, he believed that the university, the WPA state administration, and Thompson were all in accord on the issue.[70]

However, in mid 1939, the University of Oklahoma had good reason to avoid association with anything that could be called Communist. Shortly after Leon C. Phillips assumed the governorship in January 1939, he attacked both the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College for harboring professors who taught Communism in the classroom.[71] Phillips levelled the same charge in February 1939, although this time he did say that the Oklahoma A and M administration had cleared up the situation at their school. In neither of these charges did Phillips ever specify who was guilty of advocating Communism in the classroom. Investigations by Bizzell indicated that there was no validity to the charges. Still, tensions between the university and the governor remained throughout 1939 and 1940, and the school could not afford to antagonize Phillips.[72] As Eula Fullerton wrote to regional supervisor Mrs. Leo G. Spofford, "The

University of Oklahoma must be very, very careful since it is at the mercy of the State Legislators and the Governor. . . . One of the first acts of Governor Phillips was to launch a bigger attack against the University of Oklahoma as encouraging Communism among the faculty members and in the teaching program. I think you can see they are reluctant to become identified with anything that even smacks of Communism."[73]

To sponsor the Writers' Project may have prompted Phillips "to see red." Cunningham's background as a teacher at Commonwealth College and his activities during his tenure as project director had branded the project as a Communist domain. Many felt that Thompson and Ned DeWitt were radicals, dabbling in Communist ideology, although no one pointed to any overtly leftist actions on the project since Cunningham's departure. Fullerton addressed this issue to Spofford:

> Whether deserved or not, the Writers' Project in Oklahoma is branded as being a Communistic group. This is probably a hangover from Mr. Cunningham's administration. But little or nothing has been done to remove that stigma which may or may not have been earned and justified.[74]

Given the intensity of the university's misgivings, Saxon was naive to believe the crisis in Oklahoma was over. Shortly after his return to New Orleans, his home base, Saxon again had to respond to the situation in Oklahoma. Fullerton had contacted Spofford to inform her that the project labor history was being printed without final approval from Stephens.[75] After this communication, Saxon contacted Alsberg who, in turn, telephoned Thompson and Fullerton to hold up on the labor study. Alsberg, Stephens, Spofford, and others who

wanted to see the continuance of the Writers' Project believed that publication of the labor history at that time would possibly prevent the University of Oklahoma from sponsoring the guide.[76]

After all his efforts, therefore, it was rather disconcerting for Thompson when Alsberg told him to hold up production of the labor history in early August. In a letter to Alsberg dated 5 August, Thompson indicated his frustration with Washington's directives. He was concerned that, by cancelling the labor study, ten months of work would be wasted. Thompson wrote to Alsberg that he believed his requests were unreasonable. He suggested that Washington blocked the publication because it was "the convenient thing to do." Thompson wrote:

> I am wondering also if, having done it once, we will have to continue to knuckle under to exediency. I am wondering if some excuse will not be found to toss out our Negro history, our oil stories, and so on. And I am wondering why if we are not permitted to do any honest and original research, if we are never permitted to move out of the safe and beaten path, there is any use in having a Writers' Project.[77]

Careful scrutiny of the correspondence related to the labor history suggests that Washington wanted to kill the book to ensure that the University of Oklahoma would pick up sponsorship of the Writers' Project. Both Washington and Oklahoma wanted the university to do so. Regional Writers' Project supervisor Lyle Saxon wrote in a letter to Washington officials that Oklahoma WPA administrator Ron Stephens believed that the University of Oklahoma was the only logical sponsor.[78] Stephens himself stated that he felt support

from the university would enhance the prestige of the project.[79] The state administrators, however, had to balance their desires with the university's understandable cautiousness.

The labor history only symbolized the problems which the Writers' Project now faced; it represented the state's WPA administrators' desires to regain control of what they perceived to be an organization gone astray from traditional politics. In the lengthy correspondence about the book, no one accused it of being poorly written, erroneous, or radical in its interpretations. However, as several people pointed out, a labor history by its very nature was bound to arouse suspicion and controversy. As Fullerton acknowledged to Spofford, "It may be that now is no time to publish a history of a matter so controversial as labor."[80]

Realizing these problems, Thompson and his staff consciously avoided making the labor study controversial. In the introduction to the published work (by A. M. Van Horn, Oklahoma City, September 1939), Thompson and the study's editor, Clyde Hamm, wrote,

> the book is intended for general consumption, and, to that end, much material only interesting to minorities has been omitted. The space limitations for the volume were rigid, precluding the inclusion of many items that easily might have found a place in a longer work. Other items were left out because of their harmful or libelous nature.[81]

A rather short study, the Labor History of Oklahoma gives a balanced treatment to such topics as mass organization, agrarian movements, labor during World War I, and the ensuing

era of prosperity, and finally, union activity during the depression. The book attempted to present a balanced account of the labor movement, but a certain bias towards the union sometimes crept into the writing. In the sections on the rise of the Unemployment Councils in the mid 1930s and the subsequent backlash against labor agitation, the sympathies of the writers definitely were with the unemployed, who, in a demonstration against the state government in May 1933, fell victim to the tear gas and fire hoses of police. Big business and venture capital emerge as the villains against labor.[82]

These biases could most likely offend the sensibilities of the many Oklahomans who rejected progressive ideals and leftist political action. In the 1930s, Oklahomans were not receptive to the growing demands of labor.[83] They would perceive any book about labor as a statement endorsing labor's position on such issues as unionism and workers' rights. As Fullerton had earlier stated, the timing was simply not good for the production of a labor history. The very nature of the contents would spark problems.

That the labor history was not really the issue was indicated in other comments and actions by officials involved. Thompson asked Fullerton if scrapping the labor history would save the project. She replied that she was not certain. When Thompson asked her just what changes the project would have to undergo before it could obtain sponsorship, Fullerton answered again that she was not sure and that she would have

to check with Stephens. Thompson heard nothing from either one of them. He wrote in frustration to Saxon, "This consistent attempt, then, to make me appear stubborn and uncooperative and the cause of the project's cessation, has not been justified."[84]

State WPA administrator Fullerton seemed also to feel that controversy over the history of labor had gotten out of hand. On September 1, she wrote to the regional administrators in New Orleans and admitted that perhaps the University of Oklahoma "may be leaning over backwards on this labor history business."[85] She did not want the project to make any unwarranted concessions in obtaining a sponsor. Yet, Fullerton never showed any support whatsoever for Thompson's position, even though she knew that his work on the labor study had originated with an order from the state itself and not at his own initiation.[86] Fullerton, in her September letter to Spofford and Saxon, revealed that the labor history was not the real point of contention between the WPA administrators and Thompson. Thompson, and his reputation as an ardent leftist, was the issue. Fullerton wrote that, although the state had not secured a definite promise of a sponsor for the guide, it had received a tentative offer from the governor's office. Phillips had sent emissary Ira Finley, head of the Veterans of Industry of America, to see the state WPA administrators. According to Finley, the Governor had agreed to sponsor (or help sponsor) the Writers' Project, provided both Thompson and DeWitt were fired and that a new

supervisor in no way affiliated with the Oklahoma Communist movement succeeded them. Fullerton still hoped that the University of Oklahoma would sponsor the project, but, at least if it did not see fit to do so, there was another alternative.[87]

Furor continued throughout the month of August over the labor history's projected publication. While this was going on, the University of Oklahoma Press continued reviewing copy for the guide. Lottinville was hopeful the press would publish the guidebook. However, the readers on his staff had reservations about accepting the manuscript. They had found many errors in the manuscript, and Lottinville knew that, for the press to accept it, many revisions were necessary.[88] As 1 September approached and the Writers' Project did not secure a sponsor, Lottinville became concerned that the office would close without making the revisions to the manuscript. The editor hoped that the project would stay open and that James Thompson would remain on staff long enough to complete the work. In correspondence to state administrator Fullerton and Writers' Program director Newsom, Lottinville seemed unaware of the serious problems facing the project. His letters never suggest that he was aware of the tension among the project, Washington, the state WPA office, and the University of Oklahoma.[89]

September first came and went, and state WPA administrators had not secured a sponsor. The project officially closed. On 5 September, the Oklahoma WPA office called regional head-

quarters in New Orleans to inform it that the state administrator had approved publication of the labor history. In fact, the labor history was being published that day.[90] Regional supervisors were surprised to discover this, particularly since four days earlier Fullerton had written them that her office had tried to stop publication of the book. In late July, when Thompson first gave the book to the printers, he had entered the contract for the study, and this could not be voided. Fullerton stated that although her office had contacted the United States District Attorney to seek an injunction against publication, she was not sure he could help them at all.[91]

Throughout the controversy, James Thompson emerged as the scapegoat. No federal or state official defended him or his efforts to perform his job as he had been instructed. Washington had told Thompson that he could have the labor study printed without sending copy back for a final check. State officials had commissioned Thompson to do the labor study, and they never gave him any stipulations on what the manuscript should or should not say. They, as well as federal officials, had been given monthly progress reports of the labor history. Although no one had anything specifically negative to say about the labor study, neither Washington nor the regional supervisors nor state WPA administrators would assume any responsibility for its production. Thompson considered himself to be the scapegoat in the conflict.[92] A study of the correspondence does not reveal any specific

charges against Thompson's handling of the labor study. Fullerton does strongly criticize Thompson for insubordination during the controversy. At one point, she charged, Thompson wrote to Newsom about the need to close out the project; he also sent a second letter informing Newsom that, despite the problems, he was going to publish the labor history.[93] But Thompson did have, as the head of the Oklahoma Writers' Project, the responsibility for closing down the office. As far as the labor history was concerned, Thompson had entered the contract with the printers, and to an extent, had the right to carry through on publication of the labor book.

Before this whole controversy emerged, there were indications of tensions between state WPA officials and Thompson. In June of 1939, Spofford had told officials in Washington that the state administrator did not find Thompson very cooperative.[94] Saxon also noted that the state administrators and Thompson could have communicated better than they did, although he did not blame the Writers' Project director for the problems.[95] Again, however, no one gave any specific charges against Thompson or his work on the project.

Thompson's problems with the state administrators were a reflection of his ideological differences with WPA officials. The WPA in Oklahoma was not very progressive, and few state officials supported the social goals of the Roosevelt administration.[96] The traditional politics of the state WPA clashed with the radicalism of Thompson and his predecessor Cunningham.

When the state gained control of the Writers' Project, the administrative office found it politically expedient to let Thompson go. After the project lapsed in September 1939, it remained closed until the spring of 1940, when state historian Angie Debo assumed leadership. The state WPA office as well as the University of Oklahoma would find Debo a much more amenable administrator.

If the University of Oklahoma and the state WPA office did, to a degree, force Thompson's ouster, they did have a few good reasons for the move. In 1939, both institutions faced severe criticism from outside groups. Phillips had lambasted the university in early 1939 for harboring communists on its faculty. The state WPA organization faced pressure, both on the national and state levels, from encroaching conservatism which was causing the dismantling of many WPA projects. Also, in 1938, the state WPA was confronted with charges of political machinations during the gubernatorial races. Colonel William S. Key had resigned as chief administrator to run in the election, but there were rumors that there was pressure on WPA workers to vote for the former director.[97] The WPA could not afford any more controversy. The conflict between the liberal philosophies of Thompson and Cunningham and the traditional politics of other state institutions led to the six month shutdown of the Oklahoma Writers' Project. This conflict, however, was inevitable as Oklahoma was not willing to accept the radical visions and dreams which were so prevalent among American artists and intellectuals in the 1930s.

ENDNOTES

[1] Cunningham to Alsberg, n.d., Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project. Cunningham wrote: "Mrs. Cunningham has to leave Oklahoma because of an allergic condition." Mrs. Cunningham is presumably his wife. After leaving Oklahoma, Cunningham spent some time in Washington, D.C. as Alsberg's assistant, and then, for a while, supervised the Maryland and Delaware Writers' Projects.

[2] Cunningham to Alsberg, 11 May 1937, ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] James Thompson to Cunningham, 10 May 1938, ibid.

[5] Penkower, "The Federal Writers' Project," 321.

[6] Sen. Thomas Gore to F. C. Harrington, 16 January 1937, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[7] Cunningham to Alsberg, n.d., ibid.

[8] Although there is no documentation to prove it, Cunningham must have known that Thompson's elevation over Tilghman would upset state administrators. After Cunningham's departure, when Thompson was in charge, the latter had written to Alsberg about some problems Tilghman was causing on the project. Thompson sought to have her removed from the Writers' Project. He, however, admitted to Alsberg that he realized that this action would cause negative political implications for the project. Thompson to Alsberg, 22 May 1939, ibid.

[9] Wolgamuth to Alsberg, 19 December 1938, ibid. Correspondence to Dies, Tilghman Collection.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] "Work Office Aid Goes East as Reds Rally," Daily Oklahoman, 27 May 1938.

[13] "Shall We Pay Taxes to Hire Communists," Oklahoma City Times, 3 June 1938.

[14] The date on Zoe Tilghman's letter to Senator Dies was 10 June 1938; all the other letters were most likely written at this time.

[15] "Publication Report, Tulsa, A Guide to the Oil Capital," 23 July 1938, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[16] The Travel and Tourist Bureau was in existence only about two years. Although Cunningham and Thompson had considered that the agency could publish the state guide, its short life made this impossible.

[17] "Publication Report, Calendar of Annual Events in Oklahoma," 25 July 1938, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[18] Alsberg to Thompson, 25 January 1938, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[19] Lawrence Lay to Morris L. Wardell, 4 April 1940, Office of the President, Assistant to President Bizzell, University of Oklahoma Archives, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Eula E. Fullerton to Angie Debo, 2 November 1940, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[22] Lawrence Lay to Morris L. Wardell, 4 April 1940, Office of the President, University of Oklahoma Archives.

[23] Josh Lee to Dean Brimhall, 17 May 1983, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[24] Ron Stephens to Dean Brimhall, 4 June 1938, ibid.

[25] Thompson to Alsberg, 5 August 1939, ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, 270. For a discussion of Botkin and his involvement in the folklore project, see Mangione, 269-275.

[28] Benjamin Botkin to Thompson, 2 May 1939; Botkin to Thompson, 10 October 1938; Vernon Caywood to Thompson, 4 November 1938, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[29] Schrems, "Radicalism in Song," 201-202.

[30] "Sis Cunningham: Songs of Hard Times," Ms. 2 (March 1974): 31.

[31] Daniel Garrison to Craig Vollmer. 12 January 1939, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[32] Thompson to Alsberg, 14 September 1938, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project. One of the proposed plays was Sing Low, Sweet Chariot. This title appears on an inventory inventory of plays which the Oklahoma Writers' Project wrote and which were stored at the state Historical Society

in the early 1940s. The titles of these other plays on the inventory include: Fort Smith Travels; These Are Our Lives; Seminole; Pat Hennesy; First Murder; Snake Doctor; Adobe Walls; Oklahoma Scripts; While the River is Red; Steel Coronado; Early Bird; Step-en-Fetch It; People on Relief; Nobody with Sense; Barrel of Salt; and Old Oklahoma. Whether or not all or any of these plays ever became radio scripts, however, is not clear.

33 Botkin to Thompson, 11 May 1939, ibid.

34 Alsberg to Thompson, 27 July 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers Project.

35 Alsberg to Thompson, 27 June 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

36 Fossey, "Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues," 31-32.

37 Alsberg to Thompson, 27 June 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

38 Alsberg to Thompson, 27 July 1939, ibid.; Writers' Project of Oklahoma, Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941) 146.

39 Alsberg to Thompson, 27 July 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

40 Thompson to Alsberg, 25 March 1939, ibid.

41 No one ever mentioned Cunningham's earlier bid to interest the university in publishing the guide, nor did they mention Brandt's and Bizzell's decision not to accept the manuscript.

[42] Thompson to Alsberg, 14 June 1939, ibid.

[43] Lottinville to Thompson, 3 April 1939, University of Oklahoma Press Collection.

[44] McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, 313.

[45] Ibid., 325.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Thompson to Alsberg, 1 July 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[48] Thompson to Alsberg, 28 April 1939, ibid.

[49] Lyle Saxon to J. D. Newsom, 19 August 1939, ibid.

[50] Alsberg to Thompson, 21 July 1939, ibid.

[51] Saxon to Newsom, 19 August 1939, ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Thompson to Alsberg, 5 August 1939, ibid.

[57] Pat Murphy to Alsberg, 8 July 1938, ibid.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Thompson to Alsberg, 4 February 1939, ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Thompson to Alsberg, 2 May 1939, ibid.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Alsberg to Thompson, 29 May 1939, ibid.

[64] Ibid.

65 Saxon to Newsom, 19 August 1939, ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Norman Transcript, 20 January 1939, as quoted in George Lynn Cross, Professors, Presidents, and Politicians: Civil Rights and the University of Oklahoma, 1890-1968 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 112.

72 Cross, Professors, Presidents, and Politicians, 112.

73 Fullerton to Leo G. Spofford, 5 August 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

74 Ibid.

75 As mentioned earlier in the text, no one ever called for Thompson to halt the printing of the labor history.

76 Saxon to Newsom, 19 August 1939, ibid.

77 Thompson to Alsberg, 5 August 1939, ibid.

78 Saxon to Newsom, 19 August 1939, ibid.

79 Stephens to Spofford, 1 September 1939, ibid.

80 Fullerton to Spofford, 5 August 1939; Newsom to Saxon, 26 August 1939, ibid.

81 Federal Writers' Project of Oklahoma, Introduction to Labor History of Oklahoma (Oklahoma City: A. M. Van Horn, 1939).

82 Ibid., 67.

[83] Ibid.; "Sis Cunningham," 30.

[84] Thompson to Saxon, 31 August 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[85] Fullerton to Spofford, 1 September 1939, ibid.

[86] Thompson to Saxon, 31 August 1939, ibid.

[87] Fullerton to Spofford, 1 September 1939, ibid.

[88] Lottinville to Fullerton, 22 August 1939, University of Oklahoma Press Collection.

[89] Ibid.; Lottinville to Newsom, 1 September 1939, ibid.

[90] Saxon to Newsom, 9 September 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[91] Fullerton to Spofford, 1 September 1939, ibid.

[92] Thompson to Saxon, 31 August 1939; Saxon to Newsom 9 September 1939; Fullerton to Spofford, 1 September 1939; all from Record Group 69, National Archives.

[93] Fullerton to Spofford, 1 September 1939, Record Group 69, National Archives. Thompson's letter to Newsom about closing the project is in the files of Record Group 69; the second letter mentioned by Fullerton is missing.

[94] Lawrence S. Morris to George E. Field, 21 July 1939, ibid.

[95] Saxon to Newsom, 9 September 1939, ibid.

[96] Bryant, Oklahoma and the New Deal, 192.

[97] Ibid., 188.

CHAPTER V

ANGIE DEBO'S ADMINISTRATION: 1940-1941

About nine months after the Oklahoma Writers' Project closed, the office re-opened with Angie Debo as director. During the time that the project was closed, WPA officials discussed several options for reviving the project. The proposal included the appointment of John Dunn, the head of the Oklahoma Theatre Project, which by 1939 was defunct, to supervise the Writers' Project.[1] State and federal leaders never planned to allow the writers' organization to remain inactive permanently. Yet, they seemed to take longer than they anticipated to reopen the project. Although such officials as Ron Stephens and Eula E. Fullerton felt that the project would only remain closed for a few months, operations did not begin again until the spring of 1940.

Angie Debo applied for the position of editor of the Oklahoma guidebook in February 1940. A native of Marshall, Oklahoma, Debo received her Ph.D. in history from the University of Oklahoma in 1933. In 1939, the university press published her doctoral dissertation, the critically acclaimed _The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic_. Just before joining the Writers' Project, Princeton University Press published, in 1940, _And Still the Waters Run_, a history of the Creek Indians

which later became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Debo also had prior experience on WPA projects. Under the direction of Grant Foreman, Debo served as editor of the Indian Pioneer History program. She also served as curator of the Panhandle Plains Historical Museum, where she supervised students working with historical records.

Through her prior work, Debo had established strong credentials in writing, a sharp insight into Oklahoma history, and a good working relationship both with the University of Oklahoma and state WPA officials. In his report on the Oklahoma Writers' Project, field worker Lyle Saxon wrote that Debo "has the confidence and respect of the WPA officials in Oklahoma City. In addition to this, her relations with the sponsor, the University of Oklahoma, and the publisher, Oklahoma University Press, are cordial and entirely satisfactory."[2]

Yet, during her tenure as Writers' Project director, Debo also had difficulties in completing the guidebook. In her memos, Debo, like Cunningham, complained of a severe shortage of qualified writers on her staff. As did Cunningham and Thompson, Debo had problems with contradictory and misdirected advice from Washington. Indeed, Debo wrote in a memo to Eula E. Fullerton that Washington officials hindered the work of the first Oklahoma project because of their unfamiliarity with the state's history and affairs and their subsequent approval of poor, inaccurate copy.[3] Because she spent a tremendous amount of time on administrative duties, Debo, like her predecessors, found that she had little time for writing or

creative work.

As director of the Oklahoma Writers' Project, Debo worked better with different administrators both in Washington and in the state WPA offices than had Cunningham or Thompson. Colonel F. C. Harrington had replaced Harry Hopkins, who became Secretary of Commerce, as WPA administrator in Washington. Harrington had served for many years in the United States Army and had acquired superior administrative and organizational skills.[4] He tolerated very little nonsense within his department. In 1938 and 1939, the WPA had been the focus of much controversy. With Senator Martin Dies as the spearhead, the House Un-American Activities Committee ruthlessly investigated charges of Communism on Federal One. Partially as a result of the Dies' Committee investigation, Congress passed legislation authorizing the House Appropriations Committee, which was also known as the Woodrum Committee, to study the administration, regulations, and programs of the WPA. The Woodrum Committee found instances of waste, inefficiency, and financial mismanagement on the WPA.[5] As new WPA head, Harrington worked hard to rid the agency of these problems.[6]

Henry G. Alsberg had also resigned from his position as national Writers' Project director with the program's reorganization in 1939. Alsberg's resignation was not entirely voluntary, however. The director had wanted to remain on the job until all the state projects had completed their guidebooks. But Harrington wanted Alsberg replaced. Alsberg did not have the confidence of Harrington, who found the

Writers' Project director a bumbling incompetent, unable to administer properly the national program. Moreover, by 1939, Alsberg had lost much respect among his colleagues. In late 1938, when he appeared before the Dies Committee, Alsberg emerged as a friendly witness. Many of Alsberg's former allies were astonished when he treated the committee with such a mixture of "deference and candor" that Dies complimented the witness for his "'cooperative attitude.'" Despite Alsberg's reluctance to give up his position, Harrington eventually forced his resignation.[7]

To replace Alsberg, Harrington appointed J. D. Newsom, a former member of the military and the current director of the Michigan Writers' Project. When Newsom assumed the position, he too had a sound reputation as a strong administrator.[8] Newsom saw that his first responsibility was the completion of the guide series. As quickly as possible, the states were to finish their guides. In his assessment of the period of state control of the project, McDonald has written that, after 1939, "the emphasis was not upon innovation, but upon consummation."[9] Completion of the guides was the focus of the project's work. Although state offices still could work on projects such as oral histories or folklore studies, they did not pursue these endeavors with any fervor.[10]

Besides dealing with a new national administrator, Debo now worked more closely with officials at the University of Oklahoma, which finally agreed to become state sponsor for the Oklahoma Writers' Project. This agreement had come many months

after the problems related to the publication of the labor history. In late 1939 and early 1940, negotiations concerning the resumption of the Oklahoma project began. Federal officials from New Orleans conferred with state leaders about the renewal of the program.[11] In mid-January of 1940, the University of Oklahoma agreed to sponsor the guide after the "bad publicity resulting from the History of Labor had subsided."[12] J. D. Newsom wrote to Ron Stephens in early February that he hoped Oklahoma could eventually overcome its difficult situation and finish its state guide.[13]

During her first few months as state director, Debo examined copies of manuscripts submitted by her predecessors to Washington. Debo attempted to assess the quality of her predecessors' work and to determine what changes she must make to the copy. In early May, Debo informed state WPA administrator Stephens that much of the guidebook manuscript was unacceptable to the University and to her because of inaccuracies in the text. Debo stated that, although she would attempt to retain all salvageable parts of the manuscript, she would still have "to make drastic revisions."[14] Debo hesitated to give an unqualified condemnation of the earlier work, but she believed that anyone familiar with Oklahoma would acknowledge that the material failed to present the unique character of the state. Rather than blaming the former project members for the manuscript's weaknesses, Debo found that the staff had suffered special problems which other projects did not face. As Oklahoma was such a new state, there was little secondary source

material on its history and development. Historians had to rely heavily on primary materials. This was not an easy task, especially for novice researchers.[15] Debo also felt that the true problems with the guide were not simply the errors of fact in the text, but the misinterpretation and lack of insight into the panorama of Oklahoma history. Debo wanted to rewrite the material from the "standpoint of picturesque Oklahoma rather than that of the 'Western Story' magazine."[16]

The Washington office tried to help Debo in her efforts, and suggested that she use the editorial comments on the old copy to prepare a new manuscript. According to Washington, not all the copy was in need of major changes. The essay and city sections needed little work. It was the tour section that contained the most mistakes.[17] But Debo found that even with this editorial assistance, major revisions were necessary, and that the guidebook was still not ready for publication.[18] Debo was not the only person to find her predecessors' work unacceptable. Debo noted in a letter to Washington that readers from the University of Oklahoma Press, which was responsible for publishing the guide, had examined the manuscript during the existence of the first Oklahoma Writers' Project. In their assessment, the text "had too many errors to be acceptable for publication."[19] The university press office wanted the guide to be a quality product, as "literary and scholarly" as were all their other publications.[20]

Both Debo and the University of Oklahoma Press had high expectations for the guide. Debo, in particular, was a

perfectionist who demanded a great deal of quality work from herself and her staff. The Oklahoma director wanted the guide to be as good as the other books she had written, a goal which she did not feel was unattainable.[21] Yet, the practical realities of supervising a bureaucratic organization such as the Writers' Project conflicted with these ideals. In heading the project, Debo daily faced tedious administrative duties, personnel problems, and difficulties in understanding and implementing directives from Washington.

Although she accepted the responsibilities of her job, she found that her administrative duties interfered with her time to write and edit. Instead of being able to work on the state guide, Debo spent much time attending conferences, overseeing the work of the project's researchers, answering correspondence, and doing routine paperwork. The director also had to file a continuous stream of reports on the progress of the project. By the late summer of 1940, Debo became very frustrated with her situation. She discussed her problem with Lyle Saxon, who then conferred with Eula Fullerton. Fullerton agreed that Debo was overworked by her administrative and editorial duties and consented to make special arrangements for Debo to complete the guide.[22]

According to these arrangements, Debo received an administrative assistant who would be responsible for all office details, such as letter-writing and personnel supervision. Previously, Anna Lewis had helped Debo with these matters. But Lewis had to return to her teaching position by the fall,

and Debo needed someone to replace her. Debo recommended Stanley Clark of Muskogee for this position. Clark had recently graduated and had written his dissertation on Indians in Oklahoma. Clark also had prior experience in WPA administration, and thus Debo thought that he would be suitable for the job.[23] Besides requesting an administrative aide, Debo also asked for permission to work at home, devoting her time to the guidebook. Debo believed with this time at home she would be able to complete the editing of the guide within two, or, at the longest, three months.[24]

Eula Fullerton conceded to all Debo's requests as she realized that Debo was overworked. The project hired Clark to work as an aide to the director. Fullerton also allowed Debo to spend a considerable amount of time working at home on the guide. These measures, however, only gave Debo temporary relief. Clark stayed with the project for a month. John M. Oskison, an Oklahoma native and a prolific writer of short stories, was hired as Clark's replacement. Although Oskison's title was Assistant Supervisor of the Oklahoma Writers' Project, Oskison devoted most of his time to writing rather than to administrative work. Debo still handled most of the administrative matters of the office.[25]

Much of Debo's administrative duties concerned personnel. She had to insure the accuracy of her researchers' work as well as the quality of the writers' copy. In the spring of 1940, when the project reopened, Debo had approximately twenty people under her supervision.[26] Four of these employees did

some editing for the guide, as well as a bit of supervision of the other workers. Four others performed research work and checked the accuracy of disputed facts. The majority of the workers used materials in the library and newspaper files to do some writing for the guide. One of Debo's major problems, however, was that few of her workers were trained writers.[27] Thus, Debo often had to re-check or re-write much of the copy the staff produced.

In dealing with her staff, Debo had to give the workers very simple instructions; she often had to repeat directions several times. In her memos to her employees, she sometimes sounded like a schoolteacher addressing her students. For instance, in a note to reporters and research editors, Debo issued such instructions as:

> Do not repeat the assignment at the top of your page. This causes unnecessary writing.
>
> Use the heading that you will find on your assignment, for example, 'Tour 18, No. 19.' Do not make any other heading.
>
> I am sure that you have not been troublesome to librarians and archivists, but I am going to give you a word of caution: Do not ask them questions regarding your assignment. Find the books you need in the card catalog but do not ask them how to find information on a certain subject.[28]

Debo apparently felt that some of her workers were not capable of efficient work, and thus she monitored them quite carefully.

The Writers' Project director did have sufficient reason to doubt the ability of some of her employees. Project workers spent a considerable amount of time at the libraries, either at the Oklahoma Historical Society or at the state library.

While doing library work, the staff had clear guidelines to follow. They were not to disturb the staff or librarians at either place, and they had no access to private offices. At the Historical Society, only select workers could enter the stacks. Yet, despite these rather simple regulations, some of the editors and reporters still caused problems and violated the rules.[29] Debo had to discipline four employees, Louise P. Skelton, Thelma K. Shumake, Bertha K. Killian, and Robert L. Savage, for disturbances at the state library. Mr. Hudson of the library complained to Debo about their commotion. As a result, Debo ordered the four to do all their work in the office where they would be under her immediate supervision.[30]

Another problem arose with the researchers' use of library facilities. Debo had to warn the workers not to make any pencil markings in the library materials. "Circumstantial evidence" indicated that the project's employees were vandalizing the books.[31] In a memo to her researchers, Debo admonished any worker who wrote in the materials: "I should like to point out that reporters and research workers are supposed to be persons of education and culture, familiar with library usages."[32] With this statement, Debo again sounded like an angry schoolteacher rebuking her students. At times, she seemed to lack patience and understanding with some of her workers, many of whom were from the relief rolls and new to this type of work. Although Debo was justified in her annoyance, she often could have used more diplomacy in disciplining her employees.

Debo faced difficulties from other workers, and she frequently filled out a Form 403B, a notice of suspension or termination, for problem employees. One employee who received such a suspension was reporter Stella M. Allen, whom Debo stated was completely unable to learn to do her work.[33] Zoe A. Tilghman also received a notice of warning from Debo. According to Debo, Tilghman was careless in her research, and the director could simply not use her work "without wasting time checking it."[34] Before Debo left the project, she left a letter to her successor. In the letter, she described her problems with various employees. Though many tried to do their work, they were often unreliable in terms of competency and accuracy. Others, lamented Debo, were sheer troublemakers, who seemed to lie "awake nights to think up trouble for their fellow employees, the supervisor, the librarians and the general public."[35]

Debo was a strong, dedicated leader who set high standards not only for her own work, but also for the work of her employees. Being a scholar, she knew the importance of detailed accuracy and careful writing. Her publications reflected these characteristics, and Debo expected that any work she produced for the Writers' Project would also be of high quality. Yet, most of the people working for Debo were not trained or experienced writers. In her administration, as in William Cunningham's, the employees of the project came from the state's relief rolls. As dictated by government regulations, these people were on the project not because of a particular

skill in writing, but because of their relief status. Conflict remained on the Writers' Project between the need for qualified writers and the necessity of providing employment for the jobless.

In addition to administrative and personnel problems, Debo also had to maintain an effective working relationship with the national office. She often felt, however, that Washington did not understand the problems of her state office. Instructions from the national office sometimes baffled her. Debo believed that Washington's editing procedure was not as efficient as it could be. Another problem which she had with Washington was its ignorance of the history and culture of the state. Editors in Washington insisted that guide copy reflect their image of Oklahoma. To Debo, however, Washington's image was not an accurate picture of the state, and she had to fight to write parts of the guide as she saw fit.[36]

About three months after Debo began her work on the project, Washington offered to send an editor, Stella Hanau, to visit the Oklahoma project. Debo admitted that she felt that the project might receive some benefit from the visit insofar as improving the poor relations with Washington.[37] But Debo also felt that the central office did not always know what it was, or should be, doing. According to Debo, Washington had approved copy written by the previous Oklahoma project which she thought was unacceptable. She wondered how editors in Washington, so removed from the experiences of Oklahoma,

could accurately judge the guide copy, especially when there was a lack of secondary sources on the history of the state to use as a reference point. In a memo to Fullerton, Debo wrote,

> The correspondence files, for the entire period covered by the [former] project, show that the Washington office was handicapped throughout by a lack of familiarity with the Oklahoma scene, and there is no doubt in my mind that this condition delayed and hindered production.[38]

Debo needed someone who knew the history of Oklahoma and could properly evaluate the quality and accuracy of guidebook copy.

The University of Oklahoma, which was both sponsoring and publishing the guide, supported Debo and her work. Morris L. Wardell, assistant to President Bizzell at the university and coordinator of university-sponsored WPA projects, was also not convinced of the necessity of a visit from Washington's editor. He believed that Debo could edit the guide, and he was skeptical of interference from the national office. After Debo had completed the guide, Wardell and Savoie Lottinville, director of the University of Oklahoma Press, planned to recheck the material for accuracy, making the manuscript ready for publication.[39]

Stella Hanau did not visit the project in the summer of 1940, but, in early fall, national director J. D. Newsom again suggested that the editor visit the state. Once more, Debo was unenthusiastic about the offer, especially Newsom's suggestion that Hanau could provide "technical assistance" to the Oklahoma staff. In a second, rather bluntly-stated memo to

Fullerton, Debo said that, although she would welcome a visit, she had no time to waste on technical assistance from the national editor. She reiterated that Washington was unfamiliar with Oklahoma history and its editoral advice to her predecessors "always misse[d] the point. . . . They were completely satisfied with a manuscript so bad that no reputable publisher would touch it."[40]

Besides being critical of Washington for its ignorance of Oklahoma's affairs, Debo sometimes doubted that it operated as efficiently as possible. By late July of 1940, she became extremely anxious to complete the guide. At this point, she had hired a temporary assistant, Anna Lewis, who had a keen knowledge of Oklahoma history. Debo had also obtained her own office and a few other conveniences which helped her with her work. With these amenities, she wanted to complete her task as quickly as possible. But, the Washington office complicated her work because it demanded a list of maps to be used in the guide.[41]

Debo felt that, until she had finished the manuscript, she could not honor this request. The maps were primarily for the tour copy. Based on her knowledge of the experience of the first Writers' Project, Debo knew that Washington made a lot of editorial changes to submitted copy. In the past, some of the submitted tour copy was either eliminated or consolidated. With these changes in copy would come changes in map choice for the guide. Hence, Debo did not understand why Washington was so insistent on knowing which maps would be

in the guide. As Debo wrote to Fullerton, she felt it illogical that the preparation of maps precede the completion of the manuscript. She felt that no experienced writer would follow that sequence of work.[42]

Debo had planned to finish the guide by the fall of 1940, but when 1941 began, the manuscript was still not ready for publication. Problems that she experienced in her first months as director continued throughout her tenure. Early in 1941, Debo and her staff worked in earnest to complete the manuscript. Most of the unfinished work related to the tour section. Correspondence between Debo and the national office indicated that the staff worked frantically to finish the guide. In late January, the Oklahoma office had received final approval of copy for only one tour. The majority of tours still needed major revision, and four tours had not been started.[43] To write the tour copy, Debo and John Oskison had to visit all sites mentioned in the guide. This travel naturally reduced the amount of time the two could spend on actual writing and editing. Debo would have preferred to stay in the office and write, but regulations restricted on-the-job travel to certified personnel only. None of her staff except for Oskison could do the travelling. Debo felt extremely hard-pressed for time to write and to create, and she did not appreciate this new obligation.[44]

Copy poured into Washington in the first few months of 1941. During this time, Stella Hanau served as Washington editor for the guide manuscript. In the fall of 1940, Hanau

had visited the Oklahoma project and, after meeting Debo and Oskison, was confident that the two could produce a fine guidebook.[45] Her correspondence with Debo in the early month of 1941 was filled with words of prodding and encouragement. Hanau realized that the cooperative writing of the guidebook was not an easy task. In a letter to Debo and her staff in late January, Hanau pleaded with them to be patient despite the endless paperwork and detail. She told the staff that she was confident that the tour section would prove extremely interesting when it was completed. Hanau just wanted the project to finish its work.[46]

A month later, the staff was still agonizing about the tour section. They had completed the most difficult parts of the tour section, but some problems lingered. For instance, in one of the tours, mileage amounts did not match. Within a given tour, different travel routes to a stated destination were described. The mileage of these individual routes should have been equal to the mileage of the united portion. But these figures did not match. Hanau wanted the staff to correct these discrepancies. She also felt that the tour needed some cutting and rewriting, and she forwarded some suggestions.[47] Again, Hanau acknowledged the tedium and frustration of editing the guide. In her salutation of Debo and Oskison, Hanau described herself as their "old fuzz buzz friend." As she closed the letter, she implored the staff to be patient and to bear with her. Anticipating the project's frustration over yet new changes, Hanau added an ironic note as her last line:

"Damn those Washington editors WHO DO THEY THINK THEY ARE."[48]

Hanau was able to maintain cordial relations with Debo and her staff. When Debo submitted her resignation letter, she praised Hanau for her capability, fairness, and alertness.[49] But Debo and Hanau did have some disagreements on the quality and suitability of copy for the guide. A major disagreement arose concerning the copy for the opening of the guide. For this introduction, Debo had asked Edward Everett Dale to write an essay describing the past, present, and future of Oklahoma. Dale, a professor at the University of Oklahoma, was a nationally known historian who had spent his career studying and analyzing the growth of the state. Because of Dale's excellent reputation as a scholar, Debo had turned to him to serve as contributor to the guide. Hanau had warned Debo that contributed articles often caused problems because the writer often had a style that might be in contrast with the rest of the book. The editor suggested that Debo at least provide the contributor with a detailed outline of ideas for inclusion in his essay. In other words, Debo could "'coach [Dale] from the sidelines.'"[50]

When Debo submitted Dale's essay, the Washington office rejected the material. J. D. Newsom criticized Dale's work because it did not give a "vivid, contemporary picture" of the state. Rather, it concentrated too much on the state's history, and thus repeated much of the material in the history essay of the guide.[51] According to Newsom, the introductory essay of the guide should describe the contemporary scene of

Oklahoma, and with subtlety, explain to readers why they should give the impression that Oklahoma is a pretty interesting place."[52] As he headed the national Writers' Program, Newsom was concerned that these guidebooks sell, and their marketability stemmed from their use as travel guides. Because Dale's work, which was to be the introduction the guide, did not serve as a lure for prospective tourists, Newsom wanted the copy changed.

Debo and Oskison disagreed with this appraisal of Dale's essay. While they understood Newsom's reservations, they believed that Dale's essay aptly presented the uniqueness of the Oklahoma spirit. Because of their strong conviction that Dale's essay was appropriate for the guide, Debo and Oskison were able to win support from other state WPA leaders.[53] The state editors agreed to delete any material found in both the introductory essay and the essay on history from the latter piece, but they believed that Dale's piece should remain intact.[54]

The disagreement over Dale's copy was but one in a series of problems with the national offices. In the administration of the Writers' Project, there was persistent conflict between the needs of the state and federal offices. Debo believed that Washington never understood the heritage and growth of Oklahoma, and thus it could never properly edit the project's copy. Yet, Washington had its own needs and goals. The national office wanted to have some standardization to the guidebooks; it expected a certain style and format to the

project's publications. When the Oklahoma project wanted to place an introduction in its guide that was different from what Washington expected, it resisted the idea. It could not use an essay highlighting the past of Oklahoma; it wanted a piece emphasizing the present and the future, a piece that would lure tourists to the state. The Roosevelt administration was under heavy fire to justify its social programs, especially the arts projects of the WPA. The justification of the Writers' Program was the travel guide, which, if a commercially viable product, would symbolize the potential success of government involvement in the private sector. Most important for Washington was the commercial success of the guide. This simply took precedence over the state's needs.

Conflicts between national and local needs are not uncommon to federalized products. The Oklahoma Writers' Project faced additional tension with Washington. In establishing the project or in running any arts program, someone must be responsible for determining what is quality art. In the case of the Writers' Project, someone had to decide what was good writing. Again, Debo disagreed with editor Hanau on what constituted good writing. Debo credited a young writer on her staff, Dorothy Holcomb, with writing much of the guide manuscript.[55] In a letter to Hanau from early 1941, Debo lamented Holcomb's departure from the project: "Dorothy is leaving February 6 to join her husband in California. It is impossible to replace her."[56] Yet Hanau apparently was not at all impressed with Holcomb's work. In one of her letters to

the Oklahoma project after Holcomb's departure, Hanau complimented John Oskison on his writing style. According to Hanau, Oskison had "done wonders with Dorothy's rambling passages."[57]

Evaluating art is not an objective process. Each individual's response to a given piece of work reflects that person's subjectivity, sensitivity, and cultural background. Thus, disagreement on the quality of art is unavoidable. The federal arts projects, because they ultimately attempted to impose one person's definition of art upon another, were doomed to be surrounded by bitterness and disappointment. There can be no final arbitrator to decide what is, or what is not, good art.

Despite all the difficulties that remained for the Oklahoma Writers' Project, it was able to submit to Washington the final draft of the entire guide in mid-March. Not all the copy had received final approval from Washington, and Debo wrote to Fullerton that a bit of the copy might require some additional revision.[58] After the national office had given the manuscript final approval, Savoie Lottinville, editor of the University of Oklahoma Press, would make any last minute changes to the copy. The approval of the press was necessary before the manuscript would be press-marked in Washington.[59]

Coinciding with the submission of the final draft, Debo gave Fullerton her letter of resignation from the project. As Debo believed that the guide was close to actual publication, she felt that her resignation would not leave the project "in the lurch."[60] Debo wrote in her letter that she had

enjoyed her tenure as project director and that she had "never been associated with people of higher character and ability than the WPA officials and supervisors."[61]

Yet Debo also noted her dissatisfaction with the absence of quality writers on the project. To Debo, there were few, if any, unemployed writers in the state. Without writers, the project had no reason, and no ability, to operate. The project could not continue to rely on the efforts of a few talented people. Under current regulations regarding certified and non-certified employees, the project could only meet minimal success.[62] In her official resignation letter, Debo elaborated further on this point:

> It has been a pleasure to be associated with the WPA organization. I am leaving with some regret. I believe, fully, in the humanitarian motives that underlie the provision of creative employment to the unemployed. I have come to the conclusion, however, that a writers' project is not the best method for utilizing their skills. They are conscientious in their research but it is unfair to expect them to write a book. The writing, therefore, falls upon one or two non-certified persons. If the project is to be operated efficiently, it will be necessary to make exemptions so that more writing can be done.[63]

During Debo's year as project director, staffing problems and conflict with Washington officials continually hampered progress on the guide. She did receive some able assistance from Stanley Clark, John Oskison, and Dorothy Holcomb, and by March 1941, the guide was almost in final form. But Debo left the project, as did her predecessors, with a defeatist attitude. Certainly, she did not face the political tensions which plagued the administrations of William Cunningham and

Thompson, other problems concerning personnel and interference from Washington. When she left her post, Debo was frustrated by the bureaucracy and inefficiency of the Writers' Project. This frustration was not simply the result of difficulties on the Oklahoma project itself. Rather misdirection from the national office caused much of the tension Debo, and her predecessors, faced. The government, as it treated the arts program as a relief program, did not allow the Writers' Project to reach its full potential. Without qualified personnel, the Writers' Project could not succeed.

ENDNOTES

[1] Newsom to C. E. Triggs, 31 December 1939, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[2] Debo to Fullerton, 23 July 1940, ibid.

[3] Saxon to Newsom, 22 August 1940, Work Progress Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[4] McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, 306-307.

[5] U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Appropriations. Investigation and Study of the Works Progress Administration acting under House Resolution 130 Directing the Committee on Appropriation of the House to Conduct an Investigation and Study of the Works Progress Administration as a Basis for Legislation, Parts 1-4, 76th Congress, 1st session, and 76th Congress, 3rd session, 1939-1940.

[6] Mangione, The Dream and the Deal, 329-330.

[7] Ibid., 16-22.

[8] Ibid., 331.

[9] McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, 687.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Spofford to Triggs, 4 January 1940, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[12] Spofford to Triggs, 18 January 1940, Ibid.

[13] Newsom to Stephens, 2 February 1940, ibid.

[14] Stephens to Florence Kerr, 3 May 1940, Work Progress Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[15] Stephens to Triggs, 27 August 1940, ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Newsom to Stephens, 18 May 1940, ibid.

[18] Fullerton to Kerr and Newsom, 13 June 1940, ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Stephens to Triggs, 27 August 1940, ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Saxon to Newsom, 22 August 1940, ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Debo to Fry, 10 March 1941, ibid.

[26] "Workers on Statewide Writers Project," 17 May 1940, ibid.

[27] Saxon to Newsom, 22 August 1940, ibid.

[28] Debo to reporters and research editors, 14 May 1940, ibid.

[29] Debo to all editors and researchers, n.d., ibid.

[30] Debo to Skelton, Shumake, Killian, and Savage, n.d., ibid.

[31] Debo to all editors and reporters, n.d., ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Form 403-B for Stella M. Allen, 22 August 1940, ibid.

[34] Notice of warning or suspension, 10 January 1941, ibid.

[35] Debo to Clark, n.d., ibid.

[36] Fullerton to Kerr, 11 February 1941; Newsom to Stephens, 7 February 1941, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[37] Debo to Fullerton, 23 July 1940, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writer's Project.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Wardell to Fullerton, 25 July 1940, Office of the President, Assistant to President Bizzell.

[40] Debo to Fullerton, 4 September 1940, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Projects.

[41] Debo to Fullerton, 31 July 1940, ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Debo to Hanau, 27 January 1941, ibid.

[44] Debo to Hanau, 3 February 1941, ibid.

[45] Hanau to Debo, 23 October 1940, ibid.

[46] Hanau to Debo, 28 January 1941, ibid.

[47] Hanau to Debo, 24 February 1941, ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Debo to Fullerton, 18 March 1941, ibid.

[50] "The Spirit of Oklahoma," 7 February 1941, ibid.

[51] Newsom to Stephens, 7 February 1941, ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Fullerton to Kerr, 11 February 1941, ibid. Fullerton wrote this letter in support of Debo's position.

[54] The essay which appears in the published guide contains many of the characteristics of Dale's copy-- the emphasis on the past and the interest in the unique pioneer history of Oklahoma. Although this writer did not see Dale's original essay, she is sure that his submission does appear in the guide.

[55] Angie Debo, interview with Gloria Weber, Oklahoma 1982.

[56] Debo to Hanau, 27 January 1941, ibid.

[57] Hanau to Debo and Oskison, 1 March 1941, ibid.

[58] Debo to Fullerton, 14 March 1941, ibid.

[59] Newsom to Stephens, 11 March 1941, ibid.

[60] Debo to Fullerton, 17 February 1941, Office of the President, Assistant to President Bizzell.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Debo to Fullerton, 14 March 1941, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST YEAR OF THE OKLAHOMA WRITERS' PROJECT

With Debo's departure, there was again a vacancy for the directorship of the Oklahoma Writers' Project. Stanley Clark, who served for a brief time as Debo's administrator, was chosen as the new project head. Under Clark's leadership, the Oklahoma tour guide received final approval from Washington officials. After some changes, the University of Oklahoma accepted it for publication, and, in December of 1941, the Oklahoma guide became the last of the American Guides series to be published.

After the project completed the guide, the staff began preparation on other possible works. The first Writers' Project had collected research for a work on conservation in Oklahoma, and Clark's staff planned to assemble the material for a book. Clark and John Oskison proposed that the project coordinate a study of the American Indian which would include contributions for Writers' Projects throughout the country. The staff also prepared material for the proposed Oklahoma Health Almanac.

During his administration, Clark did not face the difficulties which had plagued Debo. Most of the work on the

guidebook, which Debo so diligently had attempted to complete, was over. Clark did have a few personnel problems, but these did not seem to be as bothersome for him as they were for Debo. Clark's relations with Washington remained cordial through his year on the project. Yet, he faced some political problems which Debo did not encounter. These difficulties with politics were different from those which Cunningham and Thompson experienced. In the early 1940s, as war became imminent, the government came under increasing pressure to justify the existence of many of its social programs. Opponents of Roosevelt's social policies believed that such programs as the WPA were a drain on the national economy. They pressured the administration to give top priority to military build-up and defense preparation. Thus, to justify the existence of such cultural programs as the Writers' Project, the Roosevelt administration had to prove their worth to the national defense effort. Clark was under intense pressure to demonstrate how the Oklahoma Writers' Project aided defense work in the state. Realizing that the continuance of the project depended upon its contribution to national security, Clark tried to shape its work to reflect the political demands upon him.

Within two months of Debo's departure, Washington gave final approval to the state guide. Clark was responsible for the last-minute revisions which the national office suggested. In the closing months, Washington still suggested some changes. The essays on literature and history still needed some revisions. In particular, the national office felt that the

history essay only scantily treated Oklahoma after statehood, and it wanted the copy brought up to date.[1] But the editorial revisions needed did not cause undue delay in finishing the guide, for by mid-May the work was complete.

Besides the corrections which Washington suggested, the University of Oklahoma also wanted some corrections to the work. Its reviewers found little seriously wrong with the manuscript, and all agreed that the University of Oklahoma Press should publish the work. While one reviewer felt that parts of the book could have been better written, a second found several inaccuracies in the text.[2] Again, however, there were no major changes. After the press had given its final approval, the manuscript went back to Washington for press markings. With this step finished, the University of Oklahoma Press could begin its work. Savoie Lottinville, director of the press, wanted all corrections completed as soon as possible so that his staff could begin actual publication. He predicted that the guide would be ready for fall publication.[3]

With the guide completed, the program received congratulations from the Washington office for a job well done. In a letter to Ron Stephens, national director J. D. Newsom expressed his "appreciation of the spirit in which the Oklahoma Writers' Program undertook revision of the earlier copy and carried this oft-times grueling task to completion."[4] Newsom specifically acknowledged the hard work of staff member John Oskison for "what must have been a tedious job for a writer

accustomed to a freer medium."[5] Newsom did not mention the work of the earlier project nor did he give any credit to Debo.

The University of Oklahoma Press planned that Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State would be available in November. In anticipation of the event, the state WPA Information Service and the publicity staff of the university press prepared various promotional activities for the guide. The two offices took advantage of American Guide Week to promote the Oklahoma guide. President Roosevelt had proclaimed the week of November 10 to 16, 1941, as American Guide Week to celebrate guides. In endorsing the week of celebration, President Roosevelt proclaimed that the guidebooks were the windows through which Americans could learn their cultural heritage.[6] For the Guide Week, the state WPA Information Service issued news releases for use on the radio and in daily and weekly newspapers. The university station WNAD ran a full half-hour broadcast promoting the guide. It also planned a special broadcast highlighting John Oskison and Angie Debo and their efforts on the book.[7]

The guide, however, was not published until December 15, 1941. The response to its publication was overwhelming. Within the first week of the guide's publication, twenty-five hundred copies were sold at $2.50 per copy. Only seven hundred and fifty copies of the first printing were still available, and the University of Oklahoma Press planned to bring out a second edition.[8] Savoie Lottinville was very pleased with the

publicity the guide received from the state press. While the Daily Oklahoman gave the book a full page feature, both the Tulsa World and the Tulsa Tribune highlighted the guide on their front pages. Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State received good reviews from newspapers both in and out of the state. Lewis Gannett wrote in the New York Herald Tribune that the Oklahoma guidebook was probably one of the best of the forty-eight state volumes "partly because the state's peculiar history gives it special character, perhaps partly because that distinguished historian of the American Indian, Angie Debo, was one of its editors."[9] The Book-of-the-Month Club placed the Oklahoma guide on its recommended book list.

The published baedeker was over four hundred pages, and contained a foreword by W. D. Bizzell, and an introductory essay, "The Spirit of Oklahoma," by Edward Everett Dale. After thirteen general essays on such topics as industry and labor, agriculture, education, and folklore and folkways, the guide contained about one hundred pages of description on major cities such as Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Muskogee, and Bartlesville. Tour copy consisted of almost two hundred pages. Maps and photographs were sprinkled throughout the book.

With the good notice that the guide received, the university press planned to issue a second edition in spring of 1942. After the first edition came out, there were some minor errors found in the text. In March of 1942, the Oklahoma Writers' Project sent Washington a list of approximately

twelve suggested textual changes. With only a few exceptions, Washington approved these changes, noting that minor errors were common in a first printing of a book as voluminous as the Oklahoma guide. The national office respected the integrity of the University of Oklahoma Press for its willingness to "make the book as accurate as possible."[10]

As the Writers' Project completed all work on the guide in the summer of 1941, it was then able to begin other projects. Clark was able to oversee endeavors other than the guidebook, which had monopolized so much of Debo's time. Under earlier administrations, the staff had gathered research for the study Wasted Treasures: The Fight for Conservation in Oklahoma (previous title, Unspent Treasures: The Study of Conservation in Oklahoma). The purpose of the book was "to present a clear picture of Oklahoma's place in the nation-wide conservation program and to evaluate the State's [sic] resources from the national defense point of view."[11] When Clark took over the directorship, only about three-quarters of the research for the study was completed. By late winter 1942, Washington had received a first draft of the book. Clark envisioned that the study would be about 76,000 words and that it would include many pictures, maps, and charts. Clark also planned to use illustrations which showed the work of the United States government towards the goal of conservation. Writing to Florence Kerr, assistant Commissioner

for the WPA, the director stated that the study should be "a picture to awaken the average Oklahoman to a realization of the need for supporting the Federal Government's [sic] varied program."[12]

Under Clark, the project also became involved in a massive study of the American Indian. The study was to be national in scope. All the state projects would contribute to the piece. The Oklahoma project would serve as editor for the work. The University of Oklahoma Press was very excited about this undertaking, and planned to publish the two studies that would result from the project, The Indian Tribes of Oklahoma and The Indian Tribes of the United States. Lottinville believed that it was "the germ of a really significant idea, important both to the Writers' Project and to the Press."[13] This project unfortunately died with the approach of war and the demise of the Writers' Project.

Various other works were also under development by the Writers' Project. The Oklahoma County Tuberculosis and Health Association co-sponsored a book with the Writers' Project entitled the Oklahoma Health Almanac. Staff member John Oskison edited and wrote portions of the Recreational Guide to Oklahoma, a project initially undertaken by the first Oklahoma Writers' Project for Bacon and Wiech, Inc. The group also submitted several articles on the state's parks to the Oklahoma State Park Commission to be used as mimeographs for publicity.[14]

But the Writers' Project was able to make little progress on most of these endeavors. During 1941, the impending war between the United States and the Axis powers increasingly influenced the work of the project. The nation had been preparing for war with a massive military build-up and a rapid increase in industrial production. After 1941, the WPA gave low priority to many of its social welfare projects, and turned its attention to America's defense needs. The Oklahoma Writers' Project, like all other WPA-sponsored works, found that its right to exist was dependent upon its work in the area of national defense.

Even before Clark's administration, the project had to respond to questions regarding its relation to the national defense. Debo, in a memo to Eula Fullerton, wrote that "the Writers' Project contributes to national defense by furnishing constructive employment and economic and spiritual rehabilitation to people who, through no fault of their own, have been cast off by private industry."[15] Furthermore, according to Debo, many Oklahomans were very ignorant about their state. The project's guidebook would enlighten both Oklahoma natives as well as citizens around the nation to the heritage of the state. To Debo, education was a prime factor in strengthening national defense. Once the project completed the guidebook, it wanted to undertake the publication of a Fact Book, which the Department of Education requested for the use of school children. Again, Debo felt that a well-educated citizenry was the best defense against

war and foreign occupation.[16]

By the time Clark became director, the New Deal administration placed even more emphasis on the need for the Writers' Project to contribute to the national defense effort. The Oklahoma Writers' Project was under pressure to justify its continued existence in a war-time economy.[17] Clark understood why the project was under this pressure, but he felt that WPA officials had not handled the issue well. He wrote in a letter to University of Oklahoma administrator Morris L. Wardell,

> It has been my private opinion, very very private understand, that the WPA has been shilly-shally with this question of defense long enough. By that I mean, we have been requested to justify our project in a defense set-up, and many of the justifications have been truly laughable when we rule out the major one of giving employment.[18]

Clark continued that most of the Writers' Project employees were between the ages of fifty and seventy and ineligible, or unqualified, for "the limited defense program" planned for Oklahoma. The WPA project was one of their few hopes for employment. If Oklahoma's congressmen realized this, Clark believed that they would allow the program to continue.[19]

Despite Clark's desire to deal honestly with WPA administrators, he still had to justify the project's work in terms of its support of the national defense effort. In describing the various endeavors of the Writers' Project, Clark was careful to show a relationship to the defense build-up and preparations for war. Oskison, still on Clark's staff,

had an idea for a publication for the project. He planned a brochure containing general information on the state which soldiers stationed at various army posts in the area and students at Spartan School of Aeronautics would find appealing. The pamphlet could serve as a guide to the soldiers, as well as a souvenir to send to relatives in other states.[20]

Clark justified other publications proposed by the project in terms of their relationship to the defense effort. In Wasted Treasures: The Fight for Conservation in Oklahoma, Clark wanted to include a section on undeveloped resources. The director believed that, with war looming on the horizon, such material could stimulate citizens' consciousness about the neglect of state resources in a time of national crisis. Clark planned to relate even the Health Almanac for Oklahoma to defense needs. One paragraph of the book explained how the WPA was one of the first federal agencies to contribute to the defense program. WPA workers, on loan to the Oklahoma State Department of Public Health, had aided the agency in providing hundreds of Oklahomans who had left the state for defense positions elsewhere with their birth certificates. The state health department, hindered by inadequate funding, did not have the manpower resources for the task, and WPA employees assisted the agency. Project publications at this time always highlighted the relationship of the Writers' Project, or the WPA as a whole, to the defense build-up.

The Oklahoma Writers' Project did not act on its own

when it attempted to justify its existence based on its contribution to the war effort. Colonel F. C. Harrington, head of the WPA, wanted as many of the government's relief programs as possible to be connected with national defense needs.[21] The Writers' Program could specifically contribute to the nation's defense posture through its publications. The guidebook series would alert United States' citizens to the glory of their country and thus underscore the need for a strong defense.[22] In such states as Mississippi and Illinois, the Writers' Projects produced newsletters and brochures for servicemen stationed there. As state WPA administrator, Ron Stephens also wanted all Oklahoma projects to reflect the nation's new needs. Especially after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Stephens wanted all WPA endeavors to "have direct bearing on the war effort."[23]

Clark tried to integrate the Writers' Project into the national program of defense, and he submitted to Washington several ideas for defense-related publications. For instance, he proposed that the project write the booklet, "On the Oklahoma Home Front," which contained practical suggestions for state citizens to help in the defense effort. A listing of defense-related educational opportunities within the state as well as a survey of area manufacturers and their response to the war effort was also planned. Yet, despite Clark's intentions, he found it impossible to coordinate the Project's activities with other federal defense-related programs because no one in the government was really interested.

The Office of Emergency Management and the Office of Civilian Defense had no uniform procedures related to defense work; neither office seemed interested in including the Writers' Project in their future plans.[24]

By early 1942, the country was in full-scale war and there simply was little time, resources, or interest for the continuation of the arts project. In late February, Wardell wrote to Clark, notifying him that the project probably would last only about a month longer. With the closing of the project imminent, Clark planned the final disposition of Writers' Project materials. Clark wanted to keep all materials in the well of the Oklahoma Historical Society, where they would be stored for the future use of another Writers' Project after the war. There were voluminous materials, especially for the compilation of a history of the Negro in Oklahoma. Because Clark hoped there would be another project after the war, he did not want this research available to the general public. Wardell, however, disagreed with this plan and wanted the material shipped to the University of Oklahoma where students would have access to it.[25] Washington eventually supported Clark's choice of the Oklahoma Historical Society as repository for the project's materials, although the national office did want all the research available to the general public, especially as public money had funded it.[26] Following these instructions from Washington officials, Clark and Oskison supervised the project's closing. In late April, the Writers' Project shut its doors for the last time.

ENDNOTES

[1] Stanley Clark to Wardell, 14 April 1941, Office of the President, Assistant to President Bizzell.

[2] University of Oklahoma Readers' Reports, Oklahoma: A Guide to the Indian State, University of Oklahoma Press Collection.

[3] Savoie Lottinville to Clark, 22 April 1941, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[4] Newsom to Stephens, 13 May 1941, ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Press release, State Guide Book to Spark National Event, ibid.

[7] Laura F. Rogers to Spofford, 6 November 1941; L. J. Carrel to Clark, 2 December 1941, ibid.

[8] Lottinville to Newsom, 29 December 1941, University of Oklahoma Press Collection.

[9] Excerpt from "Books and Things" by Lewis Gannett, New York Herald Tribune, 18 December 1941, ibid.

[10] The second edition did not come out until 1945. Merle Colby to Stephens, 2 March 1942, ibid.

[11] Activity for the Writers' Project: A Study of Conservation, Office of the President, Assistant to President Bizzell.

[12] Clark to Kerr, n.d., Works Progress Administration,

Federal Writers' Project.

[13] Lottinville to Newsom, 2 September 1941, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[14] Narrative Report of Writers' Program, 12 July 1941, ibid.

[15] Debo to Fullerton, 20 December 1940, ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Signed petition, 26 March 1941, Office of the President, Assistant to President Bizzell. In March 1941, employees feared losing their jobs when the project faced possible reorganization. In protest of a possible personnel reduction, staff members sent a petition to Fullerton and University of Oklahoma President William Bizzell. The petition urged the two administrators not to discharge any of the workers because age or physical disability had made it impossible for them to find employment in the private sector.

[18] Clark to Wardell, 26 April 1941, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Clark to Lottinville, 9 May 1941, University of Oklahoma Press Collection.

[21] Congressional Record, 76th Cong., 3rd sess., 1940, 86, Appendix, 4244-45.

[22] "WPA Writers' Program in National Defense," Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[23] Conference Outline, 19 February 1942, Office of the

President, Assistant to President Bizzell.

[24] Walter M. Kiplinger to Stephens, 18 February 1942; Letter signed by J. S. Clark, 4 February 1942; Memorandum for Director, WPA Writers' Program, Washington, on Proposed Activities of State WPA Writers' Program in our War Effort, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

[25] Clark to Rivers Randle, 24 March 1942, Work Projects Administration, Oklahoma Writers' Project.

[26] Kiplinger to Stephens, 24 April 1942, ibid.

CONCLUSION

In approximately six years, the Oklahoma Writers' Project produced four books. Three of these publications came out in 1939, when James Thompson led the project. Tulsa: A Guide to the Oil Capital and A Calendar of Annual Events in Oklahoma were sources of general information for either the in-state or the out-of-town tourist. In September 1939, after the project had suspended operation, the Labor History of Oklahoma was published. A short publication of approximately one hundred pages, the history was an introduction into state labor union development. In addition to these publications, the Writers' Project was also responsible for "Oklahoma Day by Day," a column which appeared in various journals during January to August 1939.[1] Finally, in late 1941, Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State came out. It was so well received that the University of Oklahoma came out with a second edition in 1947, after the war ended.

Despite these accomplishments, the Oklahoma Writers' Project encountered endless difficulties because it could not carry through the different charges that the government had given it. The project had three major responsibilities which it had to oversee. Its first charge was to provide work for some of the thousands of jobless in the state. Secondly,

as a unit of Federal One, the Oklahoma Writers' Project was a part of President Roosevelt's national plan to teach Americans about America through the creation of a cultural arts program. Roosevelt wanted the nation's citizens to learn about their land and to be proud of their heritage. In the 1940s, the state Writers' Project received yet a third charge: as the war approached, it was to contribute to the national defense effort. The project found, however, that it was impossible to meet all three of these charges as each entailed a different goal and a different means to that goal. Moreover, the Oklahoma Writers' Project discovered that the purposes and the ends of its three charges very often contradictory.[2]

With the creation of Federal One, President Roosevelt and WPA head Harry Hopkins wanted to establish a national cultural arts program. Such a program would encompass drama, music, folklore and folklife, writing, painting, and sculpture. Through these various media, Roosevelt and Hopkins hoped to teach the American people about their nation's cultural heritage. Roosevelt's interest in the arts was based on an "altruistic concern long held in America by the best of his class": all Americans, regardless of race or class, should be able to enjoy the glory of fine art.[3] Roosevelt saw the cultivation of a national arts program as his gift to the people. With the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Arts Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Theatre Project, Roosevelt wished to present a positive picture of

American life for a nation which had recently seen so much poverty and despair. Like Roosevelt, Hopkins believed in the power of art to inspire and to educate. He also saw in art the means to shape public opinion as the Roosevelt administration might find appropriate.[4] As one of its missions, the Oklahoma Writers' Project worked to enlighten the citizens of its state's development and cultural roots. Through publications such as the state guide and the Calendar of Annual Events in Oklahoma, the citizenry could learn more about local history and tradition.

But juxtaposed to his desire to form a national arts program, Roosevelt also wanted to establish a system of relief works to help the unemployed. William Stott points out in Documentary Expression and Thirties America that the arts projects were first and foremost a means of providing work for unemployed writers, actors, and artists.[5] Roosevelt's interest in the arts might have been keen, but his political acumen was even sharper. He knew that elections were more often decided by reduction of unemployment, and subsequent stimulation of the economy, than by government subsidization of the arts. In the study The New Deal for Artists, Richard D. McKinzie discusses Roosevelt's involvement with the arts, and he states that the President "would lend his name and limited financial support to the broad effort. He would not stoop to brawling in any controversies his support might generate, and he would not allow his patronage to jeopardize enterprises more beloved to him."[6]

The Oklahoma Writers' Project had to balance these two different aims. To create quality literature, the project needed good writers. To meet government regulations concerning relief, the project was able to hire only a few qualified writers. The goals of the Roosevelt administration in establishing the arts projects were contradictory and the Oklahoma Writers' Project had difficulty operating under them. Cunningham and Debo advised Washington officials that in order for the project to operate most efficiently, the government should suspend all relief requirements for its employees. To do this, however, would antagonize many voters, an act Roosevelt could not afford to do.[7] Thus, the Oklahoma Writers' Project faced continual problems with unskilled personnel who could not adequately perform the work they were hired to do.

The Oklahoma project was not the only state office to face problems of this nature. Mabel S. Ulrich headed the Writers' Project in Minnesota in the late 1930s; she resigned from her position after two and a half years of service. Shortly after her resignation, Ulrich wrote an essay for Harper's Magazine in which she glumly described the inconsistencies and inefficiencies of the program. Some of her experiences in Minnesota paralleled those of the directors of the Oklahoma Writers' Project.[8]

Throughout her tenure, Ulrich encountered a bureaucracy in Washington which did not seem to know what it was doing. Ulrich remembered:

> Four times deadlines were set and frantically met; we would confidentially await news of imminent publication only to be told that plans had changed, new instructions and a new wordage set up, another system of punctuation..., and a new tour form adopted.[9]

The Minnesota director recounted other difficulties which plagued hew work. Like the Oklahoma project, her office experienced conflicts with state politics. Although the source of conflict was different in Minnesota than it was in Oklahoma, political differences among Ulrich, Governor Elmer Benson, and the state WPA administrator Victor Christgau hampered the project's work and ultimately led tc Ulrich's resignation. Accoring to Ulrich, the Minnesota office also faced problems because of the presence of Communists on the staff. These Communists caused demoralization among workers and prompted in Ulrich a cynicism towards her job and towards the direction in which the Minnesota was headed.[10]

Furthermore, Ulrich noted the tensions which emerged as the federal arts projects evolved during the 1930s. When these projects began, there was an enthusiasm among program workers who were thrilled to be a part of a national commitment to the artists and professionals of the nation. But, as the Writers' Project developed, this excitement waned. There were no standards related to employment on the project, and little consistent guidance concerning the work which staff writers produced. Only a few of Ulrich's staff were capable writers. After a year or so, few workers really cared about the project and its potential for contributing to the national culture. Ulrich realized that the federal government s sponsorship of

the arts was an entirely different concept than support for a relief work program. In her experience as Minnesota's Writers' Project director, Ulrich found these two goals incompatible and questioned the values and validity of government subsidized relief programs for artists and professionals. The administrator concluded that the cultural projects must be totally separate from the government's relief program.[12]

In 1939, control of the federal arts programs passed into state hands. Colonel F. C. Harrington replaced Harry Hopkins as WPA chief. Formerly a career officer in the United States Army, Harrington brought to his new job a strong sense of discipline and good organizational skills. Harrington also brought changes to the WPA. The arts projects continued, although the states now had control. The federal government's Writers' Program acted as coordinator for the states' Writers' Projects. The Roosevelt administration did not pursue the continuance of the arts' program with any zeal. William McDonald has written that the administration showed an "acceptance of continuity rather than a consciousness...of a cause.[13] Interest in the recreation of a national arts program waned. With Harrington's rise to the post of chief administrator, the WPA grew more concerned with agency management and program efficiency. Harrington also wanted to bring the WPA into the government's efforts in national defense. Harrington, and Florence Kerr, his assistant administrator in charge of the arts projects, frequently prodded the directors

of the state arts projects to insure that their work was consistent with the nation's new needs.

The Oklahoma Writers' Project attempted to respond to Harrington's order and proposed various activities that supported the nation's defense build-up. But these efforts were, at best, of marginal significance to the drive for a stronger defense. Stanley Clark admitted that justifying the arts program in terms of the wartime preparation was not logical when the projects were most suited to providing jobs for those not employable in private industry. Even when Clark tried to "sell" the project's value to the defense effort, no one seemed interested. Such agencies as the Office of Civilian Defense and the Office of Emergency Management had other methods to perform the tasks that the Writers' Project proposed to do. That the project faced problems responding to its three charges was not the fault of its leadership or its workers. Rather, because the federal government imposed upon it a set of goals which consisted of contradictory objectives, it was impossible for the project to achieve any considerable success.

The Oklahoma Writers' Project also suffered because of the schism between the ideal and the reality of the 1930s. Writers and artists represented the ideal of the decade. They dreamed of a social utopia in which they would be united with the worker and the oppressed. In this peaceful world, the artist would serve as herald for the virtues of egalitarianism and liberty. Reality in the thirties was epitomized

by the politically expedient policies of the Roosevelt administration and the conservative personalities and practices of Oklahoma.

The Roosevelt administration was able to find some common ground with the artistic idealists. In creating Federal One, Roosevelt showed his support for the artists' search for an American culture which was by, for, and about Americans. To Roosevelt, art did not belong to the rich; it should be accessible to the masses. The guidebooks and the oral histories of the Writers' Projects; the "living newspaper" presentations of the Theatre Project; and the murals of rural life which, painted by the Art Project, grace the walls of school buildings and post offices, affirmed the artists' contention that culture must reflect the values of the masses. In its early years, the Oklahoma Writers; Project represented this cultural promise as the staff worked on folklore narratives, interviews with former slaves, and a history both of the worker and the Negro in the state. The liberal politics of William Cunningham and James Thompson also represented the attempts of the artist in the 1930s to be a spokesman for the average American. As artists, the two directors wanted to exalt the potential of such groups as labor and the farmers, who were struggling for survival in the 1930s.

Roosevelt was willing, however, to give government support only to those projects which reflected the positive values of American society. In his essay analyzing Roosevelt's relationship with art, William B. Rhoads writes that

> Roosevelt did not understand art (especially government-sponsored art) as something expressive of the unrestrained imagination of the individual artist. Rather, like Thomas Jefferson, he valued works of art primarily as historical records and educational tools subject to editorial revision and serving a public function.[14]

Thus, his administration was not willing to give sustained support to the arts projects when they began to face heavy opposition from the public, from Congress, and from Roosevelt's foes. Shortly, after the investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Woodrum Committee, Federal One was abolished and control of the projects passed into state hands. The new leaders responsible for the national coordination of the state projects, F. C. Harrington, Florence Kerr, and J. D. Newsom, moved away from any commitment that Roosevelt and Hopkins might have had to creating a national culture. The three administrators just wanted to make the projects efficient and productive units.

By mid 1939, the Washington office of the Federal Writers' Project was most interested in completing the state guides, which were the most practical and marketable of its endeavors. Thus, when Oklahoma encountered problems in getting its guide published, Washington was quite concerned.[15] At this time, state officials believed that the University of Oklahoma Press was the best available publisher, and Washington worked with them to procure a contract agreement with the press. As a result, the national office tried to suppress the Labor History of Oklahoma, a work in which the University of Oklahoma refused to be involved. The national office did

not support the state director, James Thompson, who had merely followed orders from Washington and state WPA officials in writing the labor history. Thompson's reputation as a leftist proved to be an embarrassment for the university and thus an embarrassment for the Washington office. In order to win the support it needed for publication of the guide and the continuance of the state Writers' Project, the national office had to placate the University of Oklahoma's fears and witness the temporary shutdown of the project.

If the Roosevelt administration was under pressure to suppress any indication of radicalism in literary expression, Oklahoma institutions were even more wary of supporting leftists and their causes. Conservative social and political philosophies had been pervasive throughout the 1930s. This was especially so when Leon Phillips became governor. The University of Oklahoma feared any association with leftism, and officials of the school became cautious about involvement in the Writers' Project. Any endorsement of the leftist beliefs and affiliations of Thompson, and his predecessor William Cunningham, could cause political and economic turmoil for the university. The university avoided sponsorship of the state Writers' Project until six months after Thompson had left the office and the project had been cleansed of any stains of radicalism.

The Oklahoma Writers' Project was a victim of the many contradictions inherent in government subsidization of the arts during the 1930s. Because the project could not ascer-

tain its proper role--was it a relief project, or an organ for cultural development, or a partner in the nation's defense effort--it was never able to accomplish very much. Moreover, the Oklahoma Writers' Project was unable to straddle the gulf between the ideal and the reality of the 1930s and the early 1940s. The political reality of the 1930s made the fulfillment of the idealistic visions of the period's artists and scholars hard to achieve.

ENDNOTES

[1] "Publications of Federal Writers' Project for Oklahoma from 1935 to August 1939." Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

[2] Theophil Ross, "Conflicting Concepts of the Federal Theatre Project; a Critical History" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1981), 189. Ross has analyzed the operations of the Federal Theatre Project and has arrived at a somewhat similar conclusion. He has stated that conflicts between social services and relief, cultural development, artistic activities, and political relationships posed endless problems for the project.

[3] Richard D. McKinzie, The New Deal for Artists (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), x.

[4] Mathews, "Arts and the People," 319-320.

[5] Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 101-102.

[6] McKinzie, The New Deal for Artists.

[7] Arthur Goldschmidt, "The Relief Programs and Harry Hopkins," in The Making of the New Deal, edited by Katie Loucheim (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 194; Mathews, "Arts and the People," 331-332.

[8] Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture for the WPA," 653-664.

[9] Ibid., 657.

[10] Ibid., 662-663.

[11] Ibid., 658.

[12] Ibid., 663-664.

[13] McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, 307.

[14] William B. Rhoad, "The Artistic Patronage of Franklin D. Roosevelt: Art as Historical Record," Prologue: Journal of the National Archives 15 (Spring 1983): 19.

[15] Newsom to Saxon, 26 August 1931, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project.

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