NEW DEAL WORK RELIEF FOR WOMEN: THE CASE OF OKLAHOMA

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PREFACE

This study examines the Depression Era work relief programs for women during the New Deal of President Franklin Roosevelt; how they began, what they offered, and what women gained from them, especially from the sewing room project. Practically every element of the New Deal has been extensively studied. Yet there is a gap in research on the experiences of females in work relief activities. Even books written about women during the New Deal make small reference to the women's work relief program administered by Harry Hopkins and supervised by Ellen Woodward.

Actually, women made substantial contributions to their communities through work relief programs. Throughout American history women have been the community builders. Women have reshaped their communities and have advocated improved welfare for all. This makes their work relief accomplishments important to history in general, and to Oklahoma history in particular. Indeed, women in Oklahoma and elsewhere made impressive contributions during the Depression and on other occasions.

The fact that the sewing project employed over half of all women on relief roles, nationally and in Oklahoma, suggests the continual restraints placed on women. The New

Deal work relief agencies succumbed to the sex-typed labor force in the private sector by relying on women's traditional skills, such as sewing, to provide women with work and wages during the Depression. So while making accomplishments in community service during the New Deal program, work relief jobs also hampered the move for economic equality.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The soup lines, bank failures, drought-stricken farmers, and New Deal programs combating these problems symbolized the 1930s nationally and in Oklahoma. None of the representations, however, express the impact of the depression years on women. They experienced the 1930s in a different way than men and, as a consequence, the Franklin Roosevelt administration treated women differently by giving them their own New Deal. More so than males, most females reorganized their daily lives to accommodate the economic hardships. The most important change came when the Depression forced women to seek employment for the first time. Even though they were discouraged from participating in the work force by the general public, women continued to do so; a reflection of their commitment to family needs and values rather than a conscious attempt to gain autonomy or to escape domesticity.

This was true for women in Oklahoma also. Few women in the state saw themselves engaged in a challenge to tradition. They were simply doing what they could to help their families survive during the Depression. The

Roosevelt administration recognized the female economic struggle and decided to include them in some of the New Deal programs, the most important being the work relief program. Through this work many women not only gained economic relief, but also contributed to the well-being of the family and their local communities.[1]

With the stock market crash of 1929, the country became engulfed in an economic depression that would last throughout the 1930s. Nearly 70,000 business firms went bankrupt after Herbert Hoover became president. The failure of 5,000 banks erased nine million savings accounts. By 1932, the national income declined from $87.4 billion to $41.7 billion and unemployment, which reached 4 million in 1930, had drastically increased to 12 million. One out of every four regularly employed men and women became jobless. People lost their homes and farms and Hoovervilles, settlements of tin-can shanties sheltering the homeless, grew on the edges of many cities. Bread and soup lines formed and hunger riots increased. Yet, President Hoover mistakenly relied on businesses and state and local governments to take care of the massive amount of economic and social problems caused by the Depression.[2]

In Oklahoma many of the same difficulties existed. But these were compounded by the serious prolonged drought creating the Dust Bowl. Factories and mines closed, the oil market collapsed, and unemployment increased from less than 14,000 in 1930 to 310,000 by 1932.[3] Business lagged

and there were food riots and soup kitchen lines. These plains people assumed that the main source of their problems came from the devastating drought. It caused many to leave the state, making "Okies" the enduring symbol of human misery throughout the Great Depression.[4] The Dust Bowl, caused by soil depletion and lack of rainfall, left cotton and wheat farm families hungry and in poverty. Farmers poured into the larger towns seeking help.[5]

In Oklahoma and the nation as a whole, the Depression changed the family unit. Standards of living were threatened, family roles became confused, and familial and personal objectives had to be rearranged.[6] In general, tradition made women responsible for managing housework and family life, controlling the spending of at least eighty percent of the family's income, while men were basically the "breadwinners."[7] The Depression made budgets a necessity. With creative shopping and cooking ideas, women tried to feed and clothe their families, following the old saying, "use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without."[8] As the Depression continued, women found it more difficult to satisfy the needs of their families on the continually shrinking budget. The breadwinning men lost their jobs, causing a tension that either broke the family up or brought them closer together.[9] It also altered the responsibilities of female members of the family.

The crisis years of 1930-33 drove an increasing number of married and single women into the labor market. Their goal was either to preserve the family's standard of living or to just survive. They wanted to work outside the home, not because they sought equality with men or liberation from housework, but so that their families could be clothed, fed, and sheltered.[10] These women only tried to deal with those aspects of the Depression that they were personally exposed to and with their primary loyalty to the family as the essential institution, this work translated into family needs.[11]

The work of married women best reflected the outlook of many women seeking employment. The wife did not work in order to usurp her husband's role or to compete with him, but instead wanted to assist him as the loyal supporting "helpmate".[12] Both the wife and husband generally assumed that this was only a temporary, emergency situation, expecting that the woman would quit her job as soon as the economic climate improved. However, women as a part of the work force led to a new pattern of combining work and family roles. This pattern dominated family life during and after the Depression.[13] Wives worked to pay for the house, to keep the children fed, clothed, and in school, and to restore the family foundation. In a sense, therefore, the Depression actually reinforced traditional ideals among men and women, because they began to see employment as an extension of female nurturing activity.[14]

A large portion of the general public, unprepared to accept married women working during the early Depression, actually tried to blame them for the economic problems.[15] People feared that these women were taking jobs away from unemployed men with families to support. Removing women from the labor force seemed to be the solution to massive unemployment problems. This controversy also fostered a reaction against any change in a married woman's traditional role as houseworker and the emotional supporter of the family. Woman's place was in the home, it was said, and children were healthier and home life happier if women did not work.[16] This argument harkened back to the old theory that women must suppress individuality for the good of society.[17]

The early attempt to make women the scapegoats for the Depression and to replace them with men in the work force failed. Even though there was a conscious effort on the part of some to restrict the rights of married women, others accepted them in the work force as a temporary emergency measure.[18] In addition, firing married women did little to help unemployed men. Men rarely replaced women in their vacated jobs, because of the strong segregation by sex built into the occupational structure.[19] Women's work was so rigidly sex-typed that they actually had some measure of protection from unemployment.[20] Generally, certain jobs, considered work only to be done by women, created a market for female labor that did not infringe on

male unemployment.[21] So the Depression that seemed to drive women back into the home actually solidified their positions as workers.

The sex segregated market delineated several roles women could successfully acquire and in which men could not compete. Unemployed coal miners or drought-stricken farmers could not very well take over the lower paying jobs of cleaning woman, nurse, social worker, seamstress, laundress, stenographer, typist, or telephone operator. These jobs, which women dominated, were not considered interchangeable between males and females.[22] The only areas generally considered women's work in which men did succeed in dominating during the Depression were teaching and librarianship.[23]

Though women had their own labor market, problems continued to exist. During the Depression the feminized work fields endured drastic pay cuts and deteriorating work conditions.[24] The sex-typed work force assigned women to many essential jobs such as domestic and personal service, but these jobs were seen as the most menial sort and paid the lowest wages. As more and more women, usually unskilled, began looking for employment out of economic necessity, over half of them became domestic or personal service workers or found no work at all. As illustrated in appendix A, over half of all single women dependent on themselves and female heads of families later on relief were either unskilled, inexperienced, or working in the

service occupations. The lack of professional training and an overabundance of unskilled women workers competing for too few domestic type jobs remained problems for females throughout the Depression.

President Hoover and his administration found it difficult to relieve the economic hardships faced by so many men and women. Under Hoover three conditions hindered the federal government's action. First, the relatively continuous economic prosperity experienced by many Americans had historically retarded the development of any type of organized national public welfare program. Second, the country had never before faced such a drastic, economic downturn as that which began in 1929. Third, Hoover insisted on maintaining his belief in the individualistic attributes of the capitalist system. He believed that direct relief would not serve, but rule the people. He thought it dangerous to rely on the national government to solve every problem.[25] These principles limited President Hoover's response to the Depression. Therefore, he depended on federal grants to corporations to take care of hard times through the "trickle down theory" and decided that private charity and state and local governments must be responsible for direct care of the poor and suffering.

Without help from the federal government, the severe unemployment situation quickly overwhelmed the structure of relief in Oklahoma. The state government made relief of the indigent a responsibility of county and local officials

as late as 1930. Money allocated by county governments for aid soon became insufficient for the ever increasing relief rolls. Private charity could not fill the gap, because most of the expenditures were for the maintenance of homes for the aged. The little amount of money that was available from the county and charities only provided direct relief through a dole. These agencies offered nothing to able-bodied unemployed men and women.[26]

Such conditions impelled Governor William H. Murray to take action in relieving needy Oklahomans. At his insistence the 1931 state legislature appropriated $600,000 for immediate direct relief, making Oklahoma one of only eight states offering money for direct aid.[27] Murray also collected funds from state employees and businessmen and contributed much of his own salary, $6,000, to alleviate hard times for many people.[28] In 1932, when Hoover authorized loans to states for relief purposes, Murray immediately applied for and received these loans and used this money to aid the unemployed. He had no specific programs for women although private charities tried to attend to their needs. The measures taken by Murray improved the situation, but were not enough. The people of Oklahoma needed and soon demanded more.

The continuing unemployment, the inability of Hoover to eliminate the Depression, and the insufficient funds available through state and local governments and charities led to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in November of

1932. Herbert Hoover could not escape blame for the Depression, while Roosevelt instilled hope and confidence in the American people.[29] He convinced the nation that he would do what was necessary to end the Depression and told the people that the federal government was interested in their plight. He stated that he would insure that they received the necessities of living a decent life. Although these new goals embodied a type of welfare state, the citizens of America accepted them.[30] They initiated a change from individualism to a sense of community cooperation, an alteration especially apparent with the establishment of a national work relief program. Roosevelt won the presidential election because his New Deal represented hope for the future and renewed a belief in the capitalist system.

To translate this hope and confidence into action, the Roosevelt Administration produced many new programs to alleviate the economic difficulties in the areas most urgently needing help. For the relief of severe agricultural problems, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) planned crop reduction through price supports. The government cooperated with business through the National Recovery Act codes. New laws regulating the banking industry were established. New Dealers began creative experiments like the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) which was a government-owned and operated company producing cheap hydroelectric power for an economically

depressed area. In addition to the agricultural and industrial problems, New Deal legislation dealt with unemployment by appropriating money for direct federal aid in the form of federal grants to states for relief measures through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).[31]

Oklahoma's participation in these and many other New Deal programs had just started when Governor Ernest W. Marland succeeded William H. Murray. Governor Murray had led the state in developing relief funds for the needy, but his failed bid for the presidency in 1933 changed him. He became antagonistic towards his successful rival, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and wanted nothing to do with the New Deal or federal aid to Oklahoma. The people of Oklahoma disapproved of Murray's opinion and practically demanded a New Deal in 1934 by electing Marland, a New Deal congressman, who campaigned on the pledge that he would bring the New Deal to Oklahoma. Once sworn in as governor, Marland also began his own "little New Deal."[32]

To implement his program, Marland stressed that it was the government's duty to rehabilitate the economy and provide every able man with work and those who were unable with relief.[33] Nearly 150,000 Oklahomans were unemployed and 700,000 on relief. To alleviate this situation, Marland offered some new programs aimed at stimulating the economy. He recommended the establishment of subsistence homesteads, conservation policies, and construction of dams

to provide hydroelectric power. He also wanted to set up old-age pensions and to upgrade education. He did not offer any specific programs for women. The taxes needed to pay for Marland's little New Deal were too high, according to the Fifteenth Legislature led by Speaker of the House Leon Phillips.[34] So Marland's program failed. His real success came with his cooperation and full participation in the national work relief measures that made lasting contributions to Oklahoma and its men and women.

The largest percentage of contributions came from work relief for men. The federal work relief measures developed under the New Deal concept in 1933 began with the goal of relieving unemployed men by raising their morale, preserving their skills or teaching them new ones, and providing them with a wage they could use to obtain the necessities of life for their families. The New Dealers relied on construction projects to accomplish these goals. These public works included the repair and building of schools and state, local, and federal buildings, recreational facilities, conservation projects, road construction and repair, airports, sewers, bridges, waterworks, and many others.

In September of 1933, New Dealers were convinced that unemployed women also needed a work relief program. To quell public pressure, they made work relief available only to single women dependent on their own resources and to women who were heads of families. Married women continued

to compete for the small number of jobs that remained in the private sector. To sway public opinion in support of the programs for women, New Dealers emphasized the need for women to work during times of temporary emergency and decided to make the traditional roles of women -- cooking, cleaning, and sewing -- the basis for the new work relief programs.

Even though the overall program allowed men to dominate the better paying relief jobs and gave preference to male heads of families, the work relief program helped many women and their families, nationally and in Oklahoma, to survive during the Depression. The majority of jobs given to them were in areas that were essential to relieving the poor such as sewing clothes and canning food. So even though these women were not highly paid or properly recognized for their many accomplishments, women were able to contribute much to their families and their communities with the help of New Deal programs.[35]

Roosevelt never regretted the development of his New Deal and was anxious to be recognized for its accomplishments.[36] He was very impressed with the successful experiment of money from the federal government being expended in work relief for millions of unemployed people. But he could not take the credit for the inclusion of women as a separate group with special needs. Instead, the credit went to three very insightful and sensitive people -- Eleanor Roosevelt, Harry L. Hopkins, and Ellen S.

Woodward. They brought the New Deal to women, nationally and in Oklahoma.

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CHAPTER II

WOMEN GET A NEW DEAL

Government interest concerning work relief for women began with Eleanor Roosevelt, Harry L. Hopkins, and Ellen S. Woodward. More so than any others, these people obtained the recognition women needed during the Depression. It was upon their understanding and sensitivity that women became a part of the New Deal. But governmental and public acceptance of women working for relief wages came only when they based their argument on the traditional female role of caring for the family. They insisted that women wanted to work to meet family needs rather than gain independence or defy tradition. So through the role of premier family nurturer, women obtained a New Deal. To further enhance the idea, they chose the traditional skills of cleaning, cooking, serving, and sewing in establishing work relief programs for women.

Work relief for women during the New Deal was nonexistent until Eleanor Roosevelt decided to become their spokesperson within the government. During the 1930s when most people thought of unemployment, they constantly

envisioned an unemployed male worker standing in a bread line. Few recognized that more than two million women were out of work as well. But Mrs. Roosevelt helped to change this perception through her radio broadcasts, newspaper columns, books, and speeches. Aided by her position as the president's wife, she molded public opinion by increasing the awareness of the needs of women on relief rolls.[1]

Her basic philosophy emphasized the importance of the family and women's traditional roles within it. In her opinion, a woman's first duty was to her home and family and during economic crisis, this included working outside the home in order to sustain the family economically.[2] She believed that women with special gifts should take part in work relief programs and community service duties to preserve the foundation of family and home. Females had special talents in caring for the needy and could fully participate in wage-earning as a means of supplying the family with those material things they needed most. Women "had understanding hearts," wrote Eleanor, while men "had ability and brains."[3]

Because of these deep-seated beliefs, Eleanor thought that the focus of women's work relief should be on providing the qualities of compassion which male-dominated institutions lacked.[4] She began her plan to get destitute women the employment they needed and decided that these work relief jobs would be geared toward community service--something women did best. With her power as First Lady,

Eleanor began her term as the clearing agent for work relief project proposals initiated by women for women.[5]

The increasingly popular view that women should not work during the depression began to show its effect on the female population, especially upon married women. Every day, Mrs. Roosevelt's mail included letters from women with differing backgrounds asking for assistance. Both married women and widows who were heads of families pled for help. Single women who were without the means to support themselves or, in many cases, their dependents begged Mrs. Roosevelt for employment. Increasingly, women began to lose their jobs and in response, many more desperate women began to write to Mrs. Roosevelt. In 1933, these letters evoked sheer anguish in Eleanor.[6] This caused her to step up her crusade of work relief for women. She continually concerned herself with what she called the "forgotten woman" who roamed the streets and slept on subways.[7] Her more vocal appeals got her many letters from those asking that married women not be allowed to hold jobs which might be filled by men, but Eleanor opposed this saying that these women must work because of the many needs of the family and those of society.[8] Her sympathy for these women encouraged her to take quicker action in establishing a relief program for women.

Two New Deal congressional measures gave Mrs. Roosevelt the impetus to demand work relief for women. First, the Economy Act passed in 1932 provided that if both

husband and wife were on the government payroll, one would have to quit. The consequence of this legislation was that the wife usually left her job.[9] Mrs. Roosevelt protested, but did not succeed in getting the act repealed until 1937, although it actually remained in force in the emergency agencies until their dissolution.[10] Second, the National Recovery Administration (NRA) started as part of the New Deal, through the National Industrial Recovery Act in May of 1933, regulated working conditions of men and women alike through their wages and shortened hours. But these codes, whose main function was to increase business production, offered little to the two million women who lost their jobs and were forced to seek relief.[11] Unlike the later relief agencies, the NRA codes (in force until 1935) did not assume that women had special needs and abilities and did not devise separate programs for them. Eleanor realized that this offered nothing to jobless women needing food and shelter for themselves and their families. Primarily for these reasons, in addition to her basic philosophy and her compassion for unemployed women, Mrs. Roosevelt insisted that the newly established Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) have a women's division.

FERA began in May of 1933 to channel 500 million dollars of federal money to state and local agencies. The president chose Harry L. Hopkins to head the new relief agency. The new administrator quickly set up relief work

programs, especially in construction and public works. Hopkins had been a prominent social worker and head of Governor Roosevelt's New York Temporary Relief Administration. It gave him the experience and knowledge needed to operate a relief agency on a national basis. As a social worker he became very receptive to the needs of women during the depression, and as a result, Hopkins established Eleanor's women's work division within the FERA on September 21, 1933 and named Ellen S. Woodward as its administrator.

More than anyone else, Woodward shaped the government's relief policies toward women.[12] Hopkins chose her because of her experiences as Director of the Mississippi State Board of Development and member of the State Board of Public Welfare in 1932. She coordinated state work relief programs for women through these governmental committees. With this experience behind her, she set up the first programs for women under the FERA and her policies carried on through the Civil Works Administration (CWA) that provided work during the winter months of 1933-34. She eventually became the head of the Women's and Professional Projects Division for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935 and continued to try to expand work relief programs for women. Except for an occasional intrusion by Hopkins, the New Deal work programs for women were conducted almost exclusively by Woodward and her female associates.[13]

Woodward became Mrs. Roosevelt's closest ally, and they worked together to establish relief work projects for women. She believed, as did Mrs. Roosevelt, that women's activities were basically influenced by their domestic and family concerns. "Whether we are actively engaged in homemaking or not, we are family conscious,"[14] she said. This philosophy heavily influenced her decisions about women's work projects. Combined with her aims of developing employable skills among women and getting them wages to survive, this view led her to decide that the most appropriate work relief for the majority of women would be the sewing project.[15]

Woodward felt that it was easy to start large sewing rooms in order to give employment to a great number of women without work skills.[16] It satisfied two critera: the sewing room could operate year-round, and unemployed women knew how to sew. She assumed that sewing was a common service that most women carried out for the family. Those who could not sew could be trained or they could do simple tasks within the sewing room. It seemed to be the most appropriate project for women, because teaching new skills was an important rationale for the whole women's division and because the garment industry was the second largest industry in the country employing women.[17]

Woodward served as the main representative in promoting relief programs for women throughout the New Deal. She sought to reshape public opinion to accept the

fact that a woman could be the head of the family. She believed that few state administrators for the FERA were aware of the problems faced by women breadwinners and that their concepts of women's abilities and job needs were limited; Woodward wanted to change this perception.[18]

To promote women's work relief, Ellen emphasized the sewing rooms as being socially useful and a benefit to local communities.[19] This perspective made it more readily acceptable by the public. Rather than emphasize the fact that the project paid women and gave them a livelihood, she reiterated the point that it offered a service to the community by clothing men, women, and children.

Once these sewing rooms were successfully established and accepted as legitimate projects by the public, Woodward began to develop additional projects for women based again on their traditional roles and job opportunities. Almost on a daily basis she began issuing instructions to her newly appointed, all-female FERA directors for designing projects such as collection of toys, book and furniture repair, nursing, mattressmaking, housekeeping aides, canning, serving school lunches, librarian work, work for dietitians, clerical workers, and recreation directors.[20] But even with all of these additional programs, the sewing project remained the standard for the women's division throughout the life of the FERA, the CWA, and the later WPA that ended in 1943.[21]

Mrs. Roosevelt continued to give her support to Ellen

Woodward and the women's work division. She went on extensive tours of sewing rooms, where women made clothing for indigents, in order to promote their acceptance and the acceptance of women working within the relief agency. She continually told reporters how efficient and problem-free these sewing projects were and expressed her amazement at the speed with which the work was turned out.[22] But Eleanor wanted to diversify women's work relief. She became most interested in the creation of the more imaginative projects such as adult education, training camps, and artistic projects.[23] Ellen agreed; proud of the projects already in progress and their accomplishments, she continued to be much more interested in getting art, writing, music, and theater projects started.[24]

Because of this desire to offer women more job variety, Eleanor called the White House Conference on Emergency Needs for Unemployed Women to meet on November 20, 1933, with the purpose of defining women's problems and needs. She also wanted to solicit new project ideas that would compliment her own. Harry Hopkins agreed with these objectives and participated in this conference. Fifty prominent women leaders, including Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, New York Congresswoman Caroline O'Day, and Head of the Women's Division of the Democratic National Committee Molly Dewson, attended the day-long session and submitted ideas for the women's work program. Hopkins told the group that 300,000 to 400,000 women needed

relief work, but the FERA had few creative programs for women and he asked them for any and all suggestions they might have.[25] Ellen Woodward spoke next and said that she thought the most urgent need was providing jobs, but that finding half a million jobs for women was much harder than finding four million jobs for men, because women were not considered appropriate for construction work. Establishing acceptable programs for women became a recurring problem throughout the 1930s.[26]

With Eleanor Roosevelt presiding, the remaining portion of the meeting was devoted to a discussion of specific program ideas. Woodward announced to the group that traditional work, musical projects, and historical research had proved to be feasible alternatives to sewing rooms. In addition, women participating in the conference suggested work programs that expanded public library services, used women in unemployment offices, developed projects for unemployed teachers, set up systems for vocational guidance, and established resident camps combined with relief for giving women concentrated training in skills such as teaching and clerical work.[27] This conference succeeded in supplying Woodward and Mrs. Roosevelt with the ideas they were looking for. Many of them became women's relief projects throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, beginning with the FERA program in 1933.

Before the FERA had a chance to expand on these new programs, the federal government created the Civil Works

Administration. An executive order created the CWA in November 1933 to provide work during the winter months of 1933-34. Rather than dispense money to state relief programs, the CWA nationally controlled its work relief projects (just as the later Works Progress Administration). The CWA concentrated on large-scale construction and public works projects, which were considered unsuitable for women. The CWA relied on the large-scale sewing project for the 300,000 women it employed and did not take full advantage of the relief projects designed for women.[28]

Projects could not compete with private industry or infringe on those programs currently directed by other FERA divisions, which caused problems for Woodward. To try to improve the situation, she sent reminders to her state directors in which she asked them to concentrate on placing women in civil works projects such as sanitation surveys, highway and park beautification, public building renovation, public record surveys, and museum development. Hopkins supported her in this, but she did not overwhelmingly succeed.[29]

After some success under the FERA, and little success under the CWA, Woodward was fully prepared to improve the women's work program under the WPA. When the president created the Works Progress Administration (later changed to the Work Projects Administration) as an independent agency on May 6, 1935, Woodward saw it as a new challenge. Her goal was to place 500,000 women who were heads of families

and between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five at work in a variety of projects.[30] Some of the jobs, such as the sewing project, were those time-tested under the FERA, but others included new white collar positions once considered exclusively for men.[31] She could use all types of projects, because with her new title -- Director of Women's and Professional Projects -- she gained an enlarged staff, regional supervisors (all women) and district supervisors responsible to the forty-eight state directors.

But the sewing projects remained the largest and most important ones for women on the relief rolls, because most of the women involved were unskilled. Only 20 to 25 percent of all the women on relief had professional status.[32] This meant that the artistic projects, which Woodward was most interested in, could not provide the massive amount of jobs required for needy women. The sewing projects could and did supply the needs of the largest number of unemployed and unskilled or semi-skilled women.[33] The other programs providing traditional work such as serving school lunches, housekeeping aides, and book repair, also provided work for these women, but sewing rooms continued to be the backbone for the women's work program.

The sewing room project became the most successful relief work for women because it perpetuated the segregated job market system within and outside of government operations. As was many of the New Deal experiments, the

sewing project was the conservative answer to women's unemployment problems during the depression. Harry Hopkins, director of FERA, CWA, and later the WPA, stated that the bulk of women's projects were built around their "traditional skills" and had "taught thousands of women how to make clothes, can, and to cook with knowledge of food values."[34] These sewing rooms also provided some women with cutting skills and the ability to operate power machines which they could use to get jobs in the garment industry.[35] Woodward reiterated time and again that the first priority in selecting sewing rooms as a relief project had to do with their "social and economic desirability, benefit to the community, and the country as a whole."[36] The sewing room also provided women with a traditional skill that they could use at home or for later employment. She believed that many of the unskilled women workers could not be employed on any other project.[37] She thought that sewing had to be the mainstay for women's relief.

It is certain that Woodward, Hopkins, and Mrs. Roosevelt realized that to be successful for any length of time, the project had to have popular support. The project also had to be useful to the community at large.[38] Sewing rooms supplied both of these needs. Of all projects for women under the FERA and the WPA, the sewing rooms became the most readily acceptable program. The cost to local communities was small while the benefits were large. These

sewing rooms produced needed clothing, bedding, and additional products (depending on the community's own unique needs) while giving some economic relief to many women living there. Sewing rooms became the center of life for more than half the women on relief rolls throughout the depression on the national level and in Oklahoma. For this reason and many others, it is important that the sewing projects be studied in detail. It is a crucial element of the New Deal legacy for women and must be evaluated because it was the project most nurtured by the relief administrations of the Depression Era.

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CHAPTER III

WOMEN'S WORK RELIEF UNDER THE FERA

Increasing anxiety in the country caused by the economic depression forced the Hoover administration to accept some measure of federal relief as necessary.[1] Generally, poor relief had been considered a state and more particularly a local problem with private charity playing a supplementary role, but this system could not provide enough money to meet the needs of the many unemployed. To help ease this situation, the federal government passed the first federal relief act in 1932, the Emergency Relief and Construction Act, which provided for federal-to-state loans acquired by state application to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. In this way, the federal government, under President Hoover's leadership, held on to the old theory of local responsibility for those in need.[2]

But under this system, the state and local governments on average contributed less than one-third of the total public relief funds spent.[3] As applications for loans increased, state and local funds became increasingly inadequate in meeting the needs, even on a subsistence level. This, combined with an escalation of demands for

help from the public, prompted the new President, Franklin Roosevelt, to instate the New Deal concept of federal responsibility for the economic welfare of its citizens through the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933. The Act established the Federal Emergency Relief Administration on May 12, 1933. Congress authorized one-half billion dollars in emergency relief money to be channeled from the FERA to the newly organized state agencies.[4] Half of the money would be appropriated on the basis of matching funds by the states and the other half in the form of straightforward grants which they termed, grants-in-aid. Through this method, the national government began its new responsibility for relief but was still determined to make the states share in carrying their own relief expenses to the extent of their ability.[5] Harry Hopkins, the FERA administrator, determined the size of each state's allocation and took care of procedural matters.

The FERA began a new relationship between the states and national government in terms of economic relief. Hopkins and the FERA staff allocated funds and enforced general rules and regulations concerning their expenditure, but they did not assume the actual administration of funds in each state. The state and local relief agencies actually determined how to distribute the money and decided the person's eligibility and certification to work on relief.[6]

In addition to these duties, Hopkins set forth three immediate objectives for FERA programs. First, the federal government should provide all needy persons with food, clothing, and shelter. Second, employables must be given the best type of relief -- work relief, rather than the dole. Third, this work must be designed so that work on the project might directly or indirectly be related to the person's ordinary occupation.[7] To accomplish these goals, Hopkins concentrated on public works and construction jobs for men, but he soon became aware of the many women on relief rolls and established the Women's Work Division in September of 1933, under the direction of Ellen S. Woodward, to establish work relief programs for unemployed women.

Women and men in Oklahoma needed the FERA, because until these federal grants-in-aid became available, the state and local governments had the task of providing relief for all needy persons. This caused problems because Oklahoma law required each county to be accountable for local relief aid. With the onset of the depression, the funds allocated to the counties by the state became inadequate for helping the newly unemployed and the drought stricken farm families.[8] Charitable organizations tried to fill the gap for most counties, particularly cities, in Oklahoma.

In Oklahoma, charitable organizations first established programs for women. From 1931 to 1933, the Red

Cross led the relief effort by conducting fund-raising drives, soliciting donations, and setting up sewing rooms. The organization announced the establishment of the sewing rooms in the local newspapers and called on women to participate.[9] As the main supporters of community service, women did volunteer to work in the rooms. These women benefited from the sewing experience. They received needed clothing and experience that would be valuable to them later under the FERA program. In addition, the Salvation Army conducted clothes drives throughout the depression. This involved the collection of used clothing to be distributed to the poor; many women also participated in this community service.[10]

The charity work helped many, but actual women's work relief projects did not begin until Oklahoma received Reconstruction Finance Corporation loans from the Hoover administration in 1932. RFC state director L. C. Giles acquired $4,570,597.00 worth of loans which he channeled into work projects all over the state.[11] Typical projects included work on lakes and dams, farm-to-market roads, and flood control. The state also set up sewing rooms. These were scattered throughout the state but not in each county.[12] RFC loans paid for the wages while localities paid for the materials used.[13] Although, few women began to get the work relief they needed, the small-scale sewing project under the RFC program became an important source of relief for women when it was expanded during the Roosevelt administration.

In Oklahoma, the first impact came from the temporary work relief agency in 1933 -- the Civil Works Administration. The CWA used the sewing room more than any other project for women. The administration did not last long enough to enable the completion of arts and crafts centers, schools, nursing centers, and home demonstration programs.[14] The CWA established a few sewing rooms throughout the state, but not in each county. Women working in these rooms received approximately 30 cents per hour with a maximum of 30 hours to work per week.[15] Women's work relief expanded under the CWA, but the situation drastically improved with the liquidation of the CWA in Oklahoma in March 1934 and the beginning of the work relief program under the FERA.[16]

The FERA grants-in-aid, with their strict procedures, became the chief support for all work relief in Oklahoma. Governor William Murray made application for the funds, and the office in Washington determined the amount the state should receive. They did this on a quarterly basis. Once granting the funds, the federal government did not directly administer the relief.[17] The state set up the Oklahoma Emergency Relief Administration (OERA) to dispense these grants acquired by the governor.

The OERA allocated the federal funds to local relief units and had to approve all local programs that would be using the money.[18] In turn, the OERA supervised the projects and accounted for their actions and effectiveness

in Washington.[19] The state and, to some extent, the local units interpreted, applied, and added to the FERA definitions of projects and the eligibility of workers. They also determined the number of people needing relief, available funds, and wage rates. Local traditions and concepts regarding the amount of relief a family should receive and what projects should be established strongly influenced these decisions.[20] To give more structure to this organization, the Social Service Division was given the responsibility of determining individual and family eligibility for relief.[21]

The OERA gave the job of state director of the Women's Work Division to Nina Gould, the wife of State Geologist Charles Gould. She diligently worked to establish many of the programs developed by the national director, Ellen Woodward. Knowing that the initial attitudes of citizens and reception of the relief administration depended on the way in which needs were met, Woodward continually encouraged the state directors, including Mrs. Gould, to get women's projects started.[22] Woodward wanted the projects underway as soon as possible so that they would be more readily acceptable to the community.

Women in Oklahoma badly needed these work relief projects. With about one-third of the state's population on relief,[23] it was reported in March of 1934 that women on relief totaled 29,934 in 72 counties: 24,168 white, 4,671 black, and 1,095 Indian. This included 10,567 white

housewives, 5,005 seamstresses, 779 stenographers, 566 laundresses, 519 white teachers, 458 saleswomen, 379 nurses, 231 bookkeepers, 80 beauty operators, and 12 lawyers.[24] With this large number of unemployed women needing relief, and with encouragement and assistance from various women's organizations, the women's division found it easier to succeed in getting the funds needed to establish many projects.[25]

Mrs. Gould proposed two types of projects she felt were most suitable for women. One involved production and distribution activities such as sewing rooms and food canning. A second type sought to provide skilled workers with professional training projects in which they could perform services involving nursing, teaching, homemaking, research, surveying, and library work.

The OERA established a diversity of production and distribution projects for unskilled women. To relieve the need for adequate bedding, the state women's division established mattress plants in nine cities which produced 7,011 mattresses by December 31, 1934.[26] Vegetable canning centers, in operation for a short time, employed 338 women while 3,500 women worked in seven meat canning plants that operated throughout the OERA program.[27] Sewing rooms opened on a state-wide basis while a basket-weaving project operated in Delaware county, as well as a rug weaving program in Tulsa county for Indian women.[28] In other unskilled categories, the OERA established library book

repair projects in nineteen counties, and women on relief also prepared and served free school lunches to children in fifty-one counties by December 31, 1934.[29] All of these projects succeeded in helping many women labeled "unskilled." Gould utilized the sewing project most. It became the largest project and provided the foundation for women's work relief in Oklahoma. In this sense, the New Deal for women in Oklahoma was no different than that for women in the country as a whole.

With the money allocated to it and following FERA regulations, the Oklahoma women's division initiated the establishment of sewing rooms in every county and in hundreds of cities.[30] To develop the structure and operation of sewing rooms, she had to follow the general rules set up by the FERA. The size of the sewing room depended on local conditions such as the number of unemployed women available, the size of the work place, and the amount of material available. The group size ranged from 10 to 1,500 women. The aims were to get clothing made for needy persons in the community and to teach women to sew. Within the sewing room itself, the FERA decided that organization should follow the factory model (see appendix B).[31]

In Oklahoma, the smaller sized FERA sewing unit worked best, because most sewing rooms were located in smaller towns with limited choices for location and operation. Workers in the sewing room were to be given job duties

according to their abilities and skills in the following areas: keeping records, cutting patterns and cloth, assembling parts of garments, sewing by hand, sewing machine operation, pressing, stock room and supplies, checking, and distribution. The sponsor of the sewing project in each location obtained the building or room through donations from private businesses or the county governments. The local community and the women working in the sewing room had to furnish the sewing machines, cutting tables, work tables, irons, ironing boards, thread, and needles. In addition, cutters were to bring their own shears and keep them tied to their dresses with tape.[32] But these requirements varied by county and city.

The average sewing room could choose to produce any combination of garments. These included work shirts, dresses, slips, pajamas, nightgowns, blouses, skirts, bloomers, panties, and layettes. If heavier machines could be acquired, they could make windbreakers, knickers, coats, and overalls. The administrator had the choice of either purchasing three patterns of each type of garment, for style variation, from the store submitting the lowest bid or have individuals in the sewing room design simple patterns for use. Supervisors were told that the average unskilled worker needed approximately three hours to make a dress. If using a sewing machine, it would take one hour to sew a garment. The FERA also advised the supervisors to confine the work force to a daily program along closely

defined lines, because it would increase efficiency and pride in the work developed.[33]

The OERA established 434 individual sewing rooms throughout the state despite problems plaguing the division. When these rooms first opened the OERA had difficulty acquiring sufficient material to do efficient work, because FERA regulations did not allow expenditure of relief funds for supplies. Local women's organizations made contributions, but it was not enough.[34]

The situation drastically improved with the help of the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC). Beginning in October of 1933, this agency was under the executive direction of the FERA. The Corporation helped farmers by serving as an agency for removing price-depressing surplus commodities from the open market and became the instrument through which these surplus commodities were made available to Oklahoma and its local communities. This Corporation provided surplus cotton to sewing rooms across the state. So not only was it easy to set up and operate sewing rooms for unskilled women, but obtaining textile materials through the FSRC also benefited the depressed farmers and cotton mills.[35]

The purchase of cotton and other materials through the FSRC became especially controversial for the national FERA. The National Association of Manufacturers denounced this system as socialism that competed with free enterprise, but Hopkins observed that the poor needed mattresses, bed

coverings and clothing which he felt exonerated him and his agency from this charge.[36] The controversy did not stop the OERA from participating, because the program allowed for the operation of many more sewing rooms in Oklahoma.

The Social Service Division director ordered that the sewing room products purchased through the FSRC be distributed to local relief agencies in Oklahoma. The commodities could not be worked for nor sold to clients, so the local relief administrations received them without cost. The commodities, cleared through Washington, were shipped to district warehouses. Then the county warehouses received their share by truck from the district. The state-wide sewing project received approximately $363,735.00 worth of surplus materials in the form of comforter covering, sheeting, terry toweling, and cotton.[37]

Since many of the women working in the state-wide sewing rooms were not in the habit of doing continuous needlework, the state women's work division decided, at the suggestion of FERA guidelines, to keep the patterns as simple as possible. All sewing rooms in Oklahoma made work shirts, wash dresses, slips, pajamas, nightgowns, skirts, aprons, bloomers, children's playsuits, and layettes. Some of the more experienced women made comforters, sheets, pillowcases, hand and bath towels, simple rugs, mattress pads, and quilts. These articles produced in the sewing rooms were transported to commodity warehouses to be distributed among the needy in the individual communities.

By December 31, 1934 the OERA sewing rooms had produced 80,000 garments and almost 100,000 bedding, towel, and rug articles.[38]

At the national level, Ellen Woodward set the standard for wages and hours for women's relief work. She placed the maximum hours of work per week for each woman, as was originally set for men, at twenty-four, except for administrative, professional, and technical personnel. The rates of pay would be the prevailing rate in the community for the various types of work with a minimum set at 30 cents an hour.[39]

The OERA honored Woodward's decisions. White and black women in the Oklahoma sewing rooms, on average, had the possibility of working between 54 and 104 hours per month at 35 cents an hour.[40] Throughout the duration of the OERA, the sewing rooms provided approximately one and one-fourth woman hours of labor, receiving wages totaling $409,500.00.[41]

The national FERA Women's division wanted to provide wages and new skills to as many women as possible. Because of this and the fact that the garment industry was the second largest industry in the country employing women, the sewing project seemed to be the most appropriate undertaking.[42] Skill in sewing was supposed to lead to private employment after the economic crisis.

The OERA agreed, but the main concern in Oklahoma had to do with the allocation of money. They wanted to hold

material and operation costs to a minimum, which made the sewing project very appealing. It was very labor intensive and low in cost to the local community.[43] The project used fewer supervisors than other programs and ninety to ninety-five percent of the employees could be acquired from the list of certified women workers.[44] This reduced the number of non-relief personnel. In addition, a diverse group of women could work in the sewing room. It enabled the OERA to relieve a larger number of women through one project with wage payments coming from the FERA and some local funds.

The OERA, through the women's work division, also established many projects for women with special skills. By December 31, 1934, the OERA offered work relief for 904 unemployed teachers. They conducted classes for teaching adults on how to read and write and offered classes to adults seeking specialized education.[45] The state, under the supervision of the education department, established nursery schools in thirteen cities for children between the ages of two and six that were members of needy families; women were employed to work in them as teachers and nurses.[46]

In addition, a special project for rural assistance provided aid to rural families on relief. The state sent rural assistants, women trained in home economics, to teach women in rural families in homemaking activities. The OERA employed seventy-seven white assistants, one for each

county, and six black assistants to work in McCurtain, Wagoner, Choctaw, McIntosh, Logan, and Seminole counties.[47] These instructors went into the rural areas in their county and presented demonstrations to individual housewives or groups of them on relief. They gave instruction on how to plan the family food supply; grow gardens; can, dry, and store vegetables, fruits, and meats; prepare meals; repair furniture; renovate clothing and mattresses; make soap; and develop home health and sanitation habits.[48]

At the insistence of Mrs. Roosevelt, the FERA also established work and educational camps for unemployed women in areas where the needs were greatest; Oklahoma qualified for this.[49] Ten miles outside of Tulsa, an FERA educational camp lasted a few months. The YMCA furnished the buildings and the location site -- Parthenia Park. The OERA paid the salaries of the seven teachers and the camp director, and the living expenses of the participating women. The camp accepted approximately thirty-two unemployed women, eighteen years of age or older who had work experience and wanted to study and improve themselves for a career. The program offered them courses in social studies, home economics, clerical skills, and drama. The camp also provided medical aid to those women in poor health. Many of the small number of women attending this educational program later obtained jobs in the private sector.[50]

Even though these projects became valuable contributors to the community, they employed and trained relatively few women. With so many unskilled women on the relief rolls, at least 10,560 housewives, the OERA decided that they had to rely on the projects that promoted women's traditional skills rather than provide training in the higher paying skilled fields such as clerical and research work.

Even though FERA emphasized construction projects, which accounted for approximately seventy-seven percent of all work relief,[51] the administration attained some impressive accomplishments through the women's work division, especially in the sewing rooms. As has already been mentioned, women working under the OERA produced approximately 180,000 garments and bedding articles. By the end of the FERA in 1935, the national administration had directed the completion of one million articles of infant wear, over 3.5 million women's and girl's dresses, over one million men's shirts, five million pillowcases, and four million sheets. All of these articles were distributed to needy families across the country. In addition, women workers in other production projects across the country helped to process 195 million pounds of meat and preserved sixty million pounds of fruit. All together, these production and distribution projects provided jobs for 65.1 percent of all women on work relief rolls.[52] The second largest group of projects employing women were

public education, arts, research, and tool and sundry equipment projects with 31.2 percent of all work relief women, which did not come close to the projects made for unskilled females.[53] As a whole, the FERA provided employment for approximately 280,000 women until its liquidation in 1935.[54]

Even though the FERA provided more work relief for women than any other agency before it, problems continued to exist. The program did not succeed in giving work relief to all women on the rolls nationally or in Oklahoma. Women's work in Oklahoma under the OERA began operation as did the FERA with certain rules applying to female work relief certification. Women should be provided work relief only if the male breadwinner was dead, ineligible for certification, or temporarily incapacitated. Male and female members of an immediate family could not simultaneously do work relief, because FERA regulations specified that only one member could work at a time. Men were given first choice for work relief. If married, the woman must be the head of the family. Single women could be certified for work relief only if all family members depended on it or she lived alone, making her own way.[55] These rules drastically reduced the number of women eligible for work relief.

Wage scales also presented a problem for females. The wages on projects with a concentration of women averaged

only 30 to 40 cents an hour. The construction projects, which males dominated, were guaranteed an hourly wage of one dollar.[56]

Another problem had to do with the allocation of funds.[57] FERA grants-in-aid were discretionary, causing irregularities in the amounts of grants received by the state on a quarterly basis.[58] The federal government had been organized in this way because policy makers, including Hopkins, thought they were dealing with a temporary emergency situation, so they did not initiate long term planning until 1935.

Because of the irregular money flow to Oklahoma, the state lagged behind in providing relief projects for women.[59] The sewing rooms became temporary set ups that functioned when money was available. In Oklahoma, they became known as the "on again off again" sewing rooms.[60] Even though they employed thousands of women, they sometimes operated only one week per month.[61] It meant that these women could not completely rely on the sewing project or any other work relief projects for continuous aid.

The tradition of racial segregation held true for the OERA women's work relief. The FERA rules forbade discrimination in giving relief on the basis of race. But the states defied this decision. Federal officials did little to enforce equal opportunity where local prejudice prevailed because the administration of work relief was

under the control of local authorities.[62] The percentage of relief persons compared to the total persons on relief showed that in urban areas of Oklahoma, 12 percent were white and 27.9 percent black; in rural areas: 20.2 percent white and 26.7 percent black.[63] Realizing this, the OERA provided many blacks with direct relief benefits such as food, clothing, and medical aid and established separate work relief programs for them.

The sewing project became the most important way of acquiring relief for the approximately 4,670 black women on relief rolls. The move to establish sewing rooms for these women began at a time when white sewing rooms had already been in operation. Black sewing rooms began opening in January of 1934 and were located in black neighborhoods.[64] Though these rooms had a slow start, they also contributed many articles of clothing and bedding materials to be distributed throughout the community.

The answer to some of these problems came with the establishment of the new system of federal relief. Roosevelt and Hopkins knew that the time for temporary relief had passed. The FERA with the work emergency in its title was appropriate for 1933, but in 1935 with an extended need for relief and a presidential election on the way, the two decided to link the campaign to "progress" rather than the emergency need blamed on Hoover's term.[65] This led to the liquidation of the FERA in December 1935 and the creation of the Works Progress Administration.

The WPA became the main governmental agency providing work relief for the unemployed. During this time, the federal government returned unemployables to state care or assigned them to the Social Security Program. The new WPA took responsibility for all those certified as employable and began to initiate large scale work relief programs for them. This included the 300,000 women working under FERA by 1935, which made up 12 percent of the total number of unemployed at work on FERA projects.[66] The OERA remained in control until its liquidation on January 1, 1936 when the administration transferred all of its operations to the new WPA.[67] The WPA began the advanced development of the sewing project for women in Oklahoma and the nation.

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CHAPTER IV

Women's Work Relief Under the WPA

Unlike the FERA projects, the WPA-sponsored women's work relief programs were extensive and helped thousands of women in Oklahoma and nationally. The WPA continued to rely on the sewing project as the basis for employing needy women just as the FERA had before it. But the WPA's attempt at employing all women on relief rolls was much more impressive, making the sewing rooms reliable as a source for income during the Depression, while still offering them training in the traditional skills of cooking, cleaning and sewing.

Created by executive order in 1935, the Works Progress Administration was the largest welfare program of the New Deal. Out of the nearly $5 billion made available by Congress through the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1935, the WPA was allotted $1.39 billion to give work to three and a half million jobless Americans.[1] The WPA replaced the FERA and for the first time the work program acquired some approximation to a national plan with uniform policies that operated in all states.[2] The Roosevelt Administration gave more time, money, and effort to the WPA

than to any other relief agency, and it became a semi-permanent program, surviving until 1943.[3] During its operation, the WPA programs provided jobs, at one time or another, for approximately 8,500,000 people at a cost of eleven billion dollars. Nearly one-fourth of all families in the United States were dependent on WPA wages for their support. The peak of WPA employment was in 1939 with three billion persons involved. Thereafter, employment declined steadily to 271,000 by 1943.[4]

Like the FERA, the WPA was a relief program and was placed under the direction of Harry Hopkins. But there were some very important differences between the FERA and the WPA. As a federal program, the WPA operated under federal instead of state officials, controlling appropriated funds rather than transferring them to the states through grants-in-aid. The WPA had complete control over hour and wage policies and approved projects through applications submitted by states. The WPA also abandoned the idea of federal direct relief or the dole system for a program consisting exclusively of work relief.

The WPA created a new relationship between the federal government and the states in relief matters. The states and local communities had to assume primary responsibility for the care of unemployables, which included the physically unfit and the aged. The federal government assumed responsibility for the able-bodied unemployed and planned large-scale work programs for them.

In excluding unemployables, the federal government added to the burden of state and local relief agencies. These agencies not only had responsibility for the unemployables, but also had to try to take care of employables the WPA did not reach. Of some 10 million jobless, the WPA cared for approximately 3 million, or about one-third of those who needed work.[5] This left millions to be helped by the state. In Oklahoma, the Department of Public Welfare assumed responsibility for about half of the unemployables which left those remaining with restricted options.[6] Many able-bodied employables, (along with those unable to work) relied on the dole or free food distribution, putting a strain on state and local relief funds. The only federal aid for unemployables came from the Social Security Act, but this act did not relieve all those who were destitute in Oklahoma.

Under the WPA system, states and local communities cooperated in administering work relief to the employables. The state or local community originated, planned, and sponsored work projects that had to be useful to the community. The WPA reviewed the projects proposed for soundness, sufficient availability of labor, legality, and cost. Therefore, local communities could determine the type of improvements or services they wanted through work relief, while the federal government enforced operating requirements and rules. The WPA paid the wages for all relief roll laborers and up to half the cost of materials

used. To be sure that the projects were really needed, the WPA required each community to supplement federal funds primarily for the purchase of materials and supplies. On average, state and local units spent one dollar for every four dollars spent by the WPA. The completed services or public works belonged to the community or state.[7]

The purpose of the WPA was to provide useful public work for unemployed people in keeping with their particular skills and abilities.[8] To make sure projects qualified for this purpose, the WPA set up standards to be followed when establishing a work relief project: it should be publicly useful, on public property, use a large proportion of money for wages and a low proportion for materials (labor intensive), the local sponsor should contribute a fair share of the costs, and ninety-five percent of the labor used must come from WPA relief rolls. Most important, according to Harry Hopkins, the public must desire the product of the project.[9]

With all of these requirements, it became difficult to establish projects that best utilized the particular skills of workers, even though this was part of the WPA's major goal. The most pressing problem came from the fact that seventy-five percent of all WPA employables were unskilled or semiskilled.[10] This meant that projects had to be of a limited nature. The WPA developed large-scale projects, assigning many workers to jobs that did not utilize their skills, so that unskilled workers could learn some basic

skills, presumably marketable ones when private industry gained momentum.

Most women on WPA relief roles were a part of the problem. Approximately one-third of all female family heads who had worked in the past were in domestic and personal service areas considered semiskilled employment. More than one-third were unskilled housewives. These factors limited the type of projects to be utilized for women.[11]

A further difficulty involving women had to do with the public's preference for projects that "could be seen and recognized as some return on the money invested."[12] Construction projects, dominated by male workers, best suited this preference. People recognized buildings, streets, and bridges with "WPA" stamped on them, but nonconstruction projects, which females dominated, provided less tangible services such as teaching and feeding the helpless poor.

The only projects for women producing a product that "could be seen" were those involving sewing clothes and canning food. These products were then stored in warehouses making them visible accomplishments. Still, a proportionate distribution of WPA expenditures came to four dollars for construction projects to every dollar for nonconstruction projects.[13] The importance of the sewing project increased and became the largest program for women on work relief even though it remained a project that used

only seven percent of WPA funds.[14] By 1937, in Oklahoma, the project employing the largest amount of WPA workers, 56.9 percent, was the highways, roads, and street construction program. The sewing project was second with 11.4 percent.[15] Even so, the percentage remained low because of public opinion on the visibility of a project's product.

During the reorganization of the federal government's role in relief measures, the Roosevelt Administration decided that work programs for women would be maintained. Ellen Woodward continued to direct the WPA women's projects as she had during the FERA. Given a new title, Assistant Administrator of the WPA, she was responsible for all nonconstruction programs, including women's work relief under the Division of Women's and Professional Projects. In her new consolidated position, Woodward became a major power in the WPA and was instrumental in keeping the projects for women in operation.[16]

Women's work relief continued under the WPA in categories similar to those of the FERA. Woodward, however, wanted to expand on these programs in order to include more women. Her goal, in 1935, was to find work relief for 500,000 women who were heads of families, widows, or single with dependent relatives or unattached and on their own. These women accounted for 15 percent of the 3.5 million on the WPA rolls in July, 1935.[17] It was not until mid-1936 that the women's division came close to

meeting Woodward's goal with a peak employment of 460,000 of the almost 680,000 women certified for work relief.[18] To employ these women Woodward continued with projects such as serving school lunches, canning foods, shoe repair, toymaking, housekeeping aides and demonstrations, gardering, bookbinding and repair, and recreational activities. On a smaller scale were teaching, nursing, library work, research, surveying, clerical work, crafts, and the arts. So the WPA continued its reliance on traditional work roles for women and succumbed to the sex-typed labor market (compare appendixes A and C).

Actually, the WPA relied more heavily on the sewing projects than did the FERA. By 1936, 56 percent of all women on work relief were employed in WPA sewing rooms, and this percentage remained valid throughout the critical years of WPA operation. WPA officials perceived it as the most important project for unskilled women. "For unskilled men we have only the shovel," one said. "For unskilled women we have only the needle."[19] So the traditional duty of sewing was chosen to employ the majority of women on relief rolls who were either unskilled or had experience in domestic and personal service occupations.

The sewing project was most cost effective for the WPA. It was very labor intensive, provided work for a diverse group of women, and enabled women to acquire a fairly marketable skill. The project helped the cotton industry through the federal purchase of materials, and it

provided destitute families in the community with clothing and bedding articles. So while earning a wage, women believed that they were acquiring a valuable skill and doing a service for the community.

The purpose and organization of the sewing room remained similar to those under the FERA/OERA control. The project had a triple purpose of sustaining women on work relief, saving or improving their skills, and reducing the public relief bill to the extent of what these products would have cost.[20] The sewing rooms ranged in size from plants employing thousands of women to small centers of ten, twelve, or twenty workers. The WPA sewing rooms continued to use the factory system started by the FERA, and the local communities continued to choose the items to be sewn.

Work duties in the sewing room were maintained in the FERA tradition, but with some variations. Women workers continued to make clothes, towels, quilts, bedding materials, layettes, and to renovate used clothing. But in sections of the country where there were surpluses of woolen materials, sheepskins, or leather, the women made heavy coats and jackets. Sometimes they made toys out of scrap material for children in the WPA nursery schools or for distribution to children of relief families.[21]

The WPA depended on the sewing room for teaching women skills they might use later to work in the textile industry, just as the FERA did. Most women assigned to the

sewing project did not know how to sew, but were promised that they would "soon learn the craft of making clothing."[22] The program included training in the selection of materials, tailoring, cutting techniques, and the proper care of clothing.[23] Cutters and machine operators were seen as having valuable technical skills that offered excellent job opportunities in the private sector.[24] This may have held true for many sections of the country, but not in Oklahoma where the textile industry had not fully developed.

The sewing project continued to help cotton mills and farmers. Not unlike the FERA, the WPA purchased surplus clothing and distributed it to the states, including Oklahoma. This reduced the cost of operation for the local community, making the sewing project more acceptable to the public. Between October 1, 1935 and January 1, 1937, approximately 217 million yards of textiles were purchased by the WPA Central Purchasing Division for distribution to sewing rooms across the country.[25] The sewing program received 6 1/2 million pounds of raw cotton from the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation in 1938 alone and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration contributed 32,000 cattle hides in 1938, which the women made into leather coats.[26] This helped the cotton industry as well as taking pressure off local funds for sewing operation and supplies.

The production of clothing helped the women's division compete with the heavily emphasized construction projects, which were measured in miles, streets, sidewalks, and number of buildings constructed. By 1938, the sewing rooms produced more than 121,700,000 articles of clothing for distribution by public agencies to needy families and charitable institutions.[27] This accomplishment substantiated the usefulness of sewing rooms and their importance to the community.

There were also some important differences in the operation of the WPA and FERA sewing rooms. Unlike the FERA, the WPA established a central pattern and design service in each state, with exchanges permitted between states and variations allowed on the local level. The WPA work was organized as a state-wide sewing project under the direction of state, then county, supervisors. Production involved an increase in the use of sewing machines as opposed to sewing by hand.[28] Each state sewing project varied depending on the number of women at work, how much the local community or government contributed to its performance, the size of the sewing room, and the location.[29]

The WPA was well received in Oklahoma where nearly half the population, men and women, was on some form of relief.[30] In October of 1935, the WPA put 29,000 of these people on work relief; employment peaked in January 1936 when 94,821 people had work relief jobs. In addition, the

Division of Women's and Professional Projects had employed approximately 13,000 women heads of families, widows, and single women of approximately 15,000 unemployed females across the state.[31] After 1936, employment on WPA projects decreased by one-half in the overall WPA and in its Women's Division in Oklahoma. Yet the sewing project remained the program employing the largest number of women in Oklahoma and continued to be second only to the farm-to-market roads project for men in the number employed and the amount of federal funds expended. For example, by November 30, 1937, the road project employed 20,581 male Oklahomans while the sewing project employed 4,293 women.

No other project for women came close to employing as many women as the sewing room program. Professional and clerical projects took 916 female Oklahomans from relief rolls, the education programs employed 345, and recreation activities involved 329.[32] Being the largest project for women made the sewing room the most important source of relief for the average woman in Oklahoma.

Many females helped promote women's work relief in Oklahoma. Those most influential worked as State Directors of the Women's and Professional Projects. All of these women were social workers in Oklahoma City. The first director was Mrs. Leslie G. Gammie, who established the sewing room as the foundation for women's work relief opportunities. With her resignation, Peggy McEwan was given the title and continued the lead of Gammie. When

McEwan was transferred to Oklahoma's First District Staff for Relief, Mrs. Sylvia D. Mariner assumed control of the office until the end of 1938. From late 1938 to the dissolution of the WPA in 1943, the dominating force directing the Division was Eula E. Fullerton. These women continually promoted women's projects in Oklahoma and encouraged and convinced local communities that these projects, particularly the sewing room, could provide the community with valuable services and wages for needy, unemployed women.

By September, 1936, Gammie, McEwan, and Mariner had succeeded in getting 75 sewing rooms with 587 units of activity operating despite a complex set of rules and procedures.[33] A state, county, or city government, or any other public agency applied to the WPA Women's Division for a sewing project and, following requirements, offered to sponsor the project. The agency agreed to provide a place for the operation of the sewing room -- a room in city hall, the basement of a school, in churches, bank buildings, orphan homes, hotels, or any other adequate location.[34] The sponsor also paid for utilities, supplies, and fifty percent of the materials used. The sponsoring agency prepared a plan of the sewing room and established its ability to pay for its share of the costs and documented the amount and type of labor needed.

All plans were forwarded by the sponsors to the state Women's Division for review. There they were evaluated for

eligibility under federal laws and compliance with WPA regulations. If the plan gained acceptance, the State Administrator, W. S. Key (later Ron Stephens), formally requested authority to spend federal funds on that sewing project by sending an application to the Washington office of the WPA where it was approved or rejected. The President then gave final approval. Then the establishment of sewing projects for operation, later suspension, or termination depended on the number of needy unemployed women in the community and the availability of funds.[35]

Once the project was established, the WPA paid the wages of all employees, organized the operation, and supplied at least fifty percent of the cotton or material used. The products produced were then distributed to the needy by the sponsor or local government. The federal government did not pay for any distribution costs. In Oklahoma, Boards of County Commissioners sponsored more sewing projects than any other agency.[36] Costs varied, but on average the WPA supplied eighty-five to ninety-five percent of the expenses for the sewing projects in the seventy-seven Oklahoma counties.[37]

Dorothy (Dewitt) Wilkinson, a social worker and former Home Economics instructor at Oklahoma A&M (Oklahoma State University), was Assistant Director of the Division of Employment and decided who could work in the sewing rooms. The women had to be the heads of families, widows, divorced, separated, single -- depending on her own

resources, or the only employable member of the family. In addition, married women whose husbands were unable to work acquired WPA work relief. In most cases the women were housewives, unskilled, and inexperienced.[38]

Mrs. Wilkinson always used the sewing project as the "last resort" for employable women on relief. If they had any skills whatsoever, she tried to place them in other projects that utilized their skills. But most of the women on relief rolls had no skills, which made them eligible for projects involving sewing, canning, cleaning, and serving food. She believed it was advantageous to place needy women in sewing rooms because, in her opinion, teaching women to sew was easier and faster than teaching them to type or file. The fact that the majority of women workers could be placed on sewing projects without major problems made it the largest project for women in Oklahoma.[39]

Wilkinson and her associates assigned a variety of women to the sewing project. Ages ranged from eighteen to seventy. Most of the older women knew how to sew and usually acquired a supervisory position. They helped the younger women learn the techniques of sewing. The supervisors and floorwomen also helped cut patterns and keep records on the hours worked by each woman. Many people believed that this project molded a diverse group of women into better citizens, wives, and mothers, thereby raising the standard of living in Oklahoma. With their new sewing skills, women made their own clothes and repaired

old ones -- an important duty for women according to many Oklahomans in the 1930s.[40]

Each sewing room within Oklahoma was unique because each sponsor had to work with the money available which varied in amounts for each project established. The sponsors always supplied tables, chairs, thread, and some of the material to be used. The larger cities such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City provided sewing machines, later power machines, and sewing tools. In smaller communities, women brought their own sewing machines or worked by hand and supplied their own scissors and rulers. After 1937, the WPA, in conjunction with local sponsors, provided the sewing rooms in the major towns of each county with sewing machines or power machines.[41]

With the variety of equipment and supplies available, the products produced in the sewing rooms varied throughout the state. They used patterns designed by supervisors or patterns provided by the state. The women working in the sewing room first made uniforms that they were to wear while at work. Later the women combed cotton and then used it to produce quilts and comforters. They used spinning wheels to transform the raw cotton into the finished material or bolts of material to make clothes for men, women, and children, sheets, pillowcases, tea towels, layettes, and anything requested by groups, organizations, or individuals such as graduation robes, caps, capes, hour glass diapers, rag rugs, or cloth toys.[42] They also

renovated old clothes. Each sewing room completed articles in addition to these according to local need, for example, choir robes in Sapulpa, making each sewing room unique.

The small sewing projects differed from the production programs in larger cities such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City in other ways as well. In smaller rooms women sat in circles, talked as they sewed, and asked questions of the floorwomen or supervisors. They often interrupted the usual production to fill an order for some article requested by a group in the community. In the larger factory-style sewing rooms, women worked on sewing machines and power machines and specialized in making one article per week or month. Each woman had a specialized duty -- sewing buttons, cutting cloth, attaching a sleeve, etc., in an assembly line fashion. The floorwomen timed each group completing a garment. For example, one group usually finished twelve pairs of pants in two hours.[43] The larger factory-style sewing rooms operated at a faster pace, and women felt much more pressure to complete a certain quota of clothing.

Both types of sewing rooms offered opportunities to learn during breaks and at lunch. Women gathered around the supervisor or floorwoman to receive additional instruction in sewing and on several occasions literacy teachers or adult education teachers conducted classes while the women ate their lunches.[44]

Realizing that making WPA clothes of one style and of one type of material might announce that their wearers were welfare recipients, the WPA sewing rooms in Oklahoma emphasized making quality clothing from attractive patterns and of pleasing colors.[45] The women in these rooms gave special attention to the colors and quality of material and, in some cases, insisted on having button holes sewn on by hand, giving each garment personal care. They also made certain that children of relief families did not go to school wearing identical garments.[46] As Fannie Fountain, Kay county sewing rooms supervisor, said, "The quality and construction of these garments are greater than a factory made garment at the same cost."[47] These women took pride in making clothes for indigents. It made them feel useful and proud to receive money from the WPA for such services.[48]

Finished sewing room products became the property of the city or county. Usually, they loaded the garments onto trucks, which transported them to a storage area. The sponsor was responsible for distributing the clothing to those in need. In Sapulpa, as a typical case, the completed garments were taken to the county courthouse by truck, individually listed on the WPA records, then taken to the commissary on East Hobson Street for distribution to those men, women, and children certified to receive them. Many of the garments were sent out on trucks with food to families in rural areas of the county.[49]

In addition to the basic Oklahoma sewing room, some of the women having particular skills were given a chance to use them in various projects. Health programs allowed nurses to care for the sick and undernourished, while other women prepared surgical dressings and obstetrical packages. Social agencies requested housekeeping aides (female home economists) who taught women how to fulfill the needs of their families and trained women to be housekeepers and cooks. Oklahoma had forty-six recreational centers that provided recreational and educational programs, including plays, games, and first-aid classes. Library projects created reading rooms supervised by women, and a book repair project employing women refurbished 366,480 books by March of 1937. As of September 15, 1936, 34,954 lunches had been served by unemployed women to underprivileged school children. Unemployed teachers, predominantly female, taught adult education classes and conducted correspondence classes. Women with special skills also participated in cultural projects such as painting, music concerts, music education programs, and theatrical performances. A small amount of women with professional and technical skills obtained work relief in areas in which they transcribed and indexed public records, cataloged newspapers and church records, collected manuscripts of Indian folklore, updated the military and service records of World War I veterans, revised city hall records, surveyed Oklahoma farm land values, and worked on many

other types of surveys.

Two special projects were established as well. In Stillwater, the Women's and Professional Projects Division established hook rug weaving programs and by March, 1937, 1,966 pounds of yarn had been woven into 572 rugs which the division placed in a new dormitory at the A&M College. A weaving project in Tulsa taught women to spin, card, dye, weave, knit, and crochet. The Women's Division was convinced that, "production of handcrafts was rapidly becoming a lost art among the younger Indians," so handicraft projects for Indian women began operation in order to teach and preserve their tribal crafts.[50] Yet all of these worthwhile projects employed less than half of the total amount of unemployed women. The largest project throughout the duration of the WPA in Oklahoma remained the sewing room.

The sewing rooms across Oklahoma provided many women with a wage that they then used to support their families. But it was not enough; many problems continued to obstruct the Oklahoma Women's Directors and Ellen Woodward in their struggle to provide economic relief to women during the Great Depression.

ENDNOTES

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CHAPTER V

AN ASSESSMENT OF WPA WORK RELIEF

The WPA extended relief work to many more women and used the sewing project on a larger scale, allowing for an impressive number of accomplishments, but the WPA continued to discriminate against women as the FERA before it. The WPA perpetuated many rules established under the FERA that hindered women in their search for work relief. These problems continued until the liquidation of the WPA in 1943, when men and women turned their complete attention to the war effort.

Women, unskilled or skilled, had problems getting on relief in the first place. Oklahoma was one of only two states in which the WPA did all the work of investigating and certifying the unemployed from the beginning of the program in 1935.[1] The WPA underrepresented women on work relief rolls suggesting that the agency attempted to limit the number of women certified for employment to avoid public criticism about giving jobs to too many females. The New Dealers did not want to undermine the traditional male role as head of the household and as breadwinner.[2]

Special eligibility requirements hampered women in acquiring work relief. Only one member of a household was eligible for a WPA job and preference always went to husbands or brothers in the family.[3] A woman acquired eligibility if she were the head of the family, the only employable member of the family, or single and not living at home, but the WPA gave preference in work assignments to women who were heads of families.[4] Women with husbands who were physically able to work, even if they had been unable or unwilling to find a job, were not certified, because the WPA automatically considered these men to be the breadwinners.[5] Husbands sometimes found inadequate full or part-time employment, but because they had a job, their wives could not assume work on a relief project. Mrs. W. C. Williams of Bristow, Oklahoma wrote to Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas with a typical complaint, "I went to the W.P.A. office here . . . and they told me they would not put a married women on [relief] unless she had a certificate from the doctor that her husband was disabled. My husband is able and willing to work . . . but can never get on." She complained that the only work her husband could obtain was two days a month at one of the local refineries, "not even enough to pay the rent."[6] Though many women received work relief, it is clear that they did have to struggle for recognition and benefits.[7]

The WPA continued the FERA pattern of lower wages and fewer hours for the average woman. The state WPA

administration determined the hours, but WPA rules said they could not exceed eight hours a day or forty hours a week. The WPA on the federal level preferred that workers receive no more than 130 hours per month.[8] Women usually received 100 to 120 hours of work per month. In Oklahoma, hours varied by county and city. The sewing project, being the most utilized project was representative of the problem within the state. For example, in Sand Springs two shifts of about thirty-two women worked one hundred hours a month.[9] Smaller Oklahoma sewing rooms might have operated twelve and one-half days each month, while women in the larger rooms, in Tulsa for example, worked seven hours a day, although the sewing room closed every other week and at noon on Thursdays.[10] In Sapulpa, the women worked on the sewing project for eight dollars per week on a rotation system in which a woman could work eight hours daily for a week or one-half a week, according to the hours assigned to her.

The wage scale situation also left women with less. On the national average, men received fifty-seven cents an hour for construction work or forty-three cents an hour for work on farm-to-market roads, while women in sewing rooms made an average of thirty-nine cents an hour. This made women the lowest paid WPA laborers along with sanitation workers who also averaged thirty-nine cents an hour.[11] Wage scales also varied among geographical regions and between urban and rural areas. City women worked in sewing

rooms at a higher wage than those in the rural parts of the country, making the low pay scale even worse for those women.

In Oklahoma work relief wages varied from seventy-five to twenty-one dollars per month for men and women. Women attained a monthly wage of between thirty-six and twenty-six dollars per month. Oklahoma sewing rooms paid women thirty-one to thirty-nine cents per hour. In Payne county, for example, unskilled seamstresses made thirty-two cents per hour for a total of 112 hours worked per month, as did canners and housekeeping aides. Those few lucky enough to be considered costume designers were grouped within the wage class labeled "Professional and Technical" and acquired fifty-eight cents for one hundred hours of work per month. Teachers, determined to be intermediate in skill, made fifty-six cents per hour for eighty hours, while stenographers, in the same classification, made forty-six cents per hour for ninety-six hours per month. Thus, the majority of women on relief jobs in sewing rooms worked longer than women with special skills and for less pay. Men received higher wages for about the same amount of time worked.[12]

The majority of women being assigned to sewing rooms shows that this stereotyped women's work demanded few skills, and offered no training for more challenging and profitable work when the Depression ended.[13] Many contemporary social workers and labor economists condemned

the sewing project for misleading women into thinking that legitimate employment would be waiting for them in the future or that marketable skills were being learned.[14] This was illustrated in a study conducted by the WPA of workers detached from WPA relief rolls in 1937. The study showed that sixty-six percent of the men in urban areas obtained employment while only forty-four percent of the women found other jobs. This percentage included women with professional and technical skills, making the percentage for women in sewing rooms even lower. The study also demonstrated that women in rural areas suffered greater handicaps in finding employment than in urban areas.

Despite these problems, Ellen Woodward continued to defend the sewing project. Even though many people denounced the program as "female ditch-digging" and as a "dumping ground" for women on work relief, Woodward was determined to keep the sewing rooms in operation by continually showing support for them. She believed that unskilled women could not be employed in the private sector or on any other WPA project. The only alternative would have been their return to direct relief or rather the dole system.[15] Woodward gave most of her attention to helping women acquire work skills during the economic crisis, but her attempts at conducting training programs had little affect on post-Depression employment for women.[16]

In Oklahoma, the objective for training women to sew

was much more clearly developed. The sewing project provided skills to be used in the family setting.[17] Through learning to sew, women could economize by making or renovating their own clothes rather than purchasing the more expensive store clothing. Sewing room training did not lead to jobs in the private sector on a large scale. The garment industry had just begun to develop in Oklahoma so very few jobs were open to women in this area. Some of the women later obtained jobs as cutters or alteration women in department stores or sewing shops, but most remained at home and did sewing for the family and relatives.[18]

The sewing room supervisor in Sapulpa, Hortence Burke, and Dorothy (Dewitt) Wilkinson, Assistant Director of Employment, agreed that women needed more of a variety of projects in Oklahoma. Training in clerical skills or education would have benefited women most, but both agreed that the hard times made it necessary to promote the training of women as they did a service to the community. Initial training in other projects failed to do this, while the sewing room succeeded in meeting all objectives. Sewing rooms also acquired the approval of those communities involved.[19] This hampered expansion of women's projects into other areas.

A large proportion of complaints about sewing rooms involved alleged favoritism and mishandling of operation and supplies.[20] In Oklahoma, local politics and influence

in the business community helped many women become sewing room supervisors, which many females resented.[21] Maud D. Phillips, supervisor of Tulsa Women's Projects in 1935, wrote to Senator Thomas complaining that the women's projects were unfair because they gave jobs to "certain society women" rather than to helpless poor women.[22] Mrs. Tessie N. Fast of Oklahoma City also wrote to express her view that single women with no one to support and women with husbands were given preference over widows and single mothers.[23] Mrs. Mamie Callahan, a 56 year old widow from Sand Springs, wrote that older women were the first to be taken off the relief rolls and out of the sewing room. She believed that favoritism permeated the operation of the sewing room. She wrote, "Young girls . . . Some who are pets of the Supervisor, who hardly work at all, but keep their good standing by bringing in plate lunches, ice cream, fruits, . . . to gain favor. These keep their jobs." Mrs. Callahan also reported that supplies were being misused. According to her, "Denim for pants was made into curtains for covering windows in the sewing room, but no one ever installed them." She accused the supervisor of improperly storing quilt scraps and also said that, "Tucked away under shelves are baby quilts, none of these having been turned in to 6th and Cheyenne streets for listing by the WPA."[24]

Black women had problems in addition to those mentioned. The WPA insisted that there be no

discrimination, first expressed by President Roosevelt's Executive Order in May, 1935 which specified that workers with the proper qualifications should be assigned to projects without discriminating on any grounds whatsoever.[25] Despite this and succeeding legislation, discrimination occurred. For example, a WPA report showed that in February 1939, the number of blacks certified as eligible for continued employment nation-wide was only 387,138. A small portion of this total included black women.[26]

A further difficulty involved the establishment of a work relief project for black women. In Oklahoma, while Indian women worked alongside white women, black females usually had separate projects. Since most black women were also unskilled or experienced only in domestic work, the project which used most of them in Oklahoma was the sewing project. The problem came in finding sponsors to fund the nonlabor costs of a sewing project for black women, because most communities wished to keep them in domestic service or agricultural employment.[27] Those towns in Oklahoma that could not afford to establish a black sewing room used black women as domestic servants in the white sewing room. Mrs. A. M. Tindle, Vice-Chairman of the Negro Democrats of Comanche County in 1938, wrote Thomas complaining that only eight black women worked for the WPA in sewing rooms. She added that they were, "only mades [sic] and laundresses for the white sewing rooms," and she asked Senator Thomas to

"pleas [sic] consider our condintion [sic] as we are in need of work."[28] Her plea had little impact. Sewing rooms remained black or white and many black women continued as domestic workers in the white sewing rooms without the chance to gain sewing skills or sewing room wages.

On the national level, Woodward was enthusiastic about setting up the Household Workers Training Project to provide ten-to-twelve week courses to prepare women for domestic service in private homes and public institutions.[29] This project was supposed to elevate domestic employment to a skilled profession,[30] but the project involved a disproportionate amount of black women. So rather than alleviate racial inequalities, this project actually perpetuated them.[31] The WPA gave black women three major work relief choices: training for domestic work, the chance to be a domestic worker in white sewing rooms, or the Jim Crowism of black sewing rooms.

Finally, the 250,000 to 400,000 women working on relief work projects must be offset against the approximately three million women who remained unemployed. Although the WPA employed more women than did the FERA, many females continued with no help at all. For example, in 1937 it was estimated that 398,000 women obtained WPA jobs, 211,770 of which were in sewing rooms, when actually over three million women were unemployed and an additional one and one-half million held only part-time jobs.[32] In Oklahoma, as on the national level, there were complaints

that the quota of women allowed to work in sewing rooms was too low. J. V. Dobbs, Chairman of the Board of Oklahoma County Commissioners, commented that the "arbitrary" quota limited the number of women in Oklahoma county eligible to work on relief at approximately 15 percent below the requirements needed to relieve all employable women.[33] In addition, up to the end of 1940, nation-wide, women workers constituted only twelve to eighteen percent of the total employment on WPA projects which was less than the proportion of women in the country's entire labor force, twenty-five percent, according to the 1940 census.[34]

Even with all of these problems, the WPA did help thousands of women in Oklahoma and nationally, especially through sewing programs. The $731.7 million the federal government spent on the sewing projects was more than the money allocated to any other project for women (see appendix D). Working on this project gave women a feeling of accomplishment and service to those in need. Through June 30, 1943, the sewing projects produced 382,756,000 garments nationally. In Oklahoma, black and white sewing projects combined produced 9,447,429 garments and 1,339,718 other articles.[35]

The accomplishments of the sewing projects were recognized by leaders in most communities. A national tabulation of forty-two state committee reports showed that ninety percent of the local leaders participating in the survey thought that all nonconstruction activities,

including sewing rooms, had been worthwhile, and ninety-three percent agreed that the work performed was badly needed and of benefit to the community.[36]

Oklahoma community appraisal reports from all counties usually cited farm-to-market road construction as the most important WPA project and the sewing room as second in importance. These two projects also involved the largest amount of federal money expended in Oklahoma. Typical of comments made about the sewing project, Cushing's City Manager J. W. Flint wrote, "Experience has indicated that of all the nonconstruction projects undertaken, the sewing room has proven the most valuable, in that it gives the unemployed women an opportunity and it should be continued." Some commented as did W. R. Downard of the Board of Coal County Commissioners that, "No project of the Works Progress Administration is considered to be of greater benefit than the sewing room project. It provides employment for skilled and unskilled workers that would not otherwise have been able to find work." In McCurtain county, Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners T. H. Pollard reported that the sewing room contributed to better morale more than any other project and mentioned that beyond usual duties, women in the sewing rooms helped clothe four hundred flood refugees finding temporary shelter in the Armory at Idabel, all in ten days.[37] Most county appraisal reports agreed that the sewing project had been the only project of any size furnishing continued

employment for women while providing a service to the community.

Other projects involving a large number of women also successfully contributed to community well-being in Oklahoma up to June 30, 1943. In the area of food preserving, female Oklahomans canned almost 3 million quarts of food and dried 2,734,685 pounds as well. They served approximately forty-seven million school lunches and taught about nine thousand students in education projects. The number of visits made by housekeeping aides totaled 1,248,191.[38]

Nationally, women's participation in New Deal work relief peaked in 1937 with 409,954 workers employed by the WPA.[39] By 1936, many in Congress believed that the emergency was over and began decreasing the amount of money appropriated for the WPA work relief. Congressional resistance increased and culminated with the Relief Act of 1939, which ordered that all relief workers who had been employed for eighteen consecutive months be terminated. It also stipulated that the WPA could reemploy those workers if recertified as needy thirty days after the initial dismissal.[40] The WPA would soon end, but the war kept it in operation until 1943.

In 1939 Ellen Woodward left the Division of Women's and Professional Projects to work on the Social Security board, while Florence S. Kerr, a regional supervisor, became the new assistant administrator, Woodward's old

division became the WPA Division of Professional and Service Projects, then renamed the Division of Community Service in 1941, and in 1942 its final title was the Division of Service Projects. With the new administrator and World War II on the way, the Division changed its focus in 1940 to national defense rather than emergency community service for the poor.

As the war continued, the service projects and training programs for women became increasingly important. In the first five years of operation, WPA construction projects furnished seventy-five to eighty percent of all work relief jobs, while the service projects, including sewing rooms, provided twenty to twenty-five percent of all WPA employment. By 1942 the construction projects fell to forty-four percent, service projects rose to forty-nine percent, and training projects provided seven percent of all WPA employment.[41] In some sewing rooms, women mended and reclaimed army clothing and equipment and made draperies, curtains, and other materials for recreation centers and military establishments. Many were shifted from service projects to training programs, so women formerly working in sewing projects were trained by the WPA to operate bench machines. In addition, they learned to be light aircraft riveters, welders, drill press and milling machine operators, tool grinders, solderers, molders, machine tool inspectors, electrical assemblers, blueprint readers, and workers in motor testing and repair.[42]

The new emphasis on defense benefited women through the private sector more so than through the WPA. By September, 1942 only 118,368 women were employed by the WPA, of which approximately 9,000 participated in the new WPA training projects.[43] But the dislocations caused by World War II left a void to be filled by women in the private sector. Men joined the army while women flocked to job openings in the war industries. From the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941 to March, 1944, about 6.5 million women newly entered the labor force.[44] Participation in domestic service declined while women's employment as craftsmen and foremen dramatically increased.[45] Women also contributed to the war effort through participation in the Red Cross, by bond drives, civilian defense, or by volunteer service on local ration boards.[46]

This new challenge to traditional practices held to be true in Oklahoma as well. Dorothy (Dewitt) Wilkinson, Assistant Director of Employment, left the WPA to join the Red Cross, while Sapulpa Sewing Room Supervisor, Hortence Burke, left the WPA to become a riveter.[47] Women began leaving work relief for jobs at the several air force bases and war industries in Oklahoma.[48]

The steady decline of relief rolls caused by the increase in war-time opportunities led to the liquidation of the WPA. In Oklahoma and nationally, all women's projects were gradually phased out. On June 30, 1943 by

order of President Roosevelt, all project operations officially ended. Women followed Oklahoma Governor Leon Phillips's lead in mobilizing the state for World War II by helping to develop the performance of military training stations and war industries. This eased the economic and employment problems for men and women in Oklahoma and produced full employment in the state for the first time since the 1920s.[49] So the war actually ended the Depression and the New Deal for women and led to another series of problems, challenges, and redefinitions about women's roles in the work force. Traditional roles emphasized during the New Deal were temporarily forgotten in order to promote women as the "reserve army" of employers needed at home in time of war.[50]

ENDNOTES

[1] Final Report, p. 19; Arthur M. MacMahon, John D. Millett, and Gladys Ogden, The Administration of Federal Work Relief (Chicage: Public Administration Service, 1941), pp. 334, 335.

[2] Howard, The WPA, p. 281; Ware, Beyond Suffrage, p. 110.

[3] Final Report, p. 17; Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, p. 172.

[4] Final Report, p. 17; Grace Adams, Workers on Relief, p. 314.

[5] Ware, Beyond Suffrage, p. 40.

[6] Mrs. W. C. Williams, Bristow, Oklahoma, to Elmer Thomas, January 7, 1938, Box 540, Elmer Thomas Papers.

[7] Ware, Beyond Suffrage, p. 40.

[8] MacMahon et. al., The Administration of Federal Work Relief, p. 154; Howard, The WPA, p. 213.

[9] Mrs. Mamie Callahan, Sand Springs, Oklahoma, to Elmer Thomas, October 5, 1937, Box 540, Elmer Thomas Papers.

[10] Community Appraisals in Oklahoma; Tulsa Tribune, 8 February 1936; Interview, Rogers, May 1, 1986.

[11] Final Report, p. 27.

12 Oklahoma State Planning Board, Preliminary Report, p. 184; Schedule of Hourly Wage Rates, Hours of Work, and Monthly Earnings, Payne County, October 20, 1938, Box 544, Elmer Thomas Papers.

13 Sitkoff, Fifty Years Later, p. 124.

14 Swain, "'The Forgotten Woman'," p. 208.

15 Ibid.; Marie D. Lane and Francis Steegmuller, America on Relief (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1938), p. 81.

16 Swain, "'The Forgotten Woman'," p. 209.

17 Interview, Burke, April 22, 1986; Interview, Wilkinson, May 1, 1986.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 MacMahon, et. al., The Administration of Federal Work Relief, p. 306.

21 Interview, Rogers. May 1, 1986.

22 Maud D. Phillips, Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Elmer Thomas, October 23, 1935, Box 538, Elmer Thomas Papers.

23 Ibid., Tessie N. Fast, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, December 4, 1939, Box 538.

24 Ibid., Mrs. Mamie Callahan, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, August 25, 1937, Box 540.

25 Howard, The WPA, p. 285.

[26] Ibid., p. 288.

[27] Swain, "'The Forgotten Woman'," p. 210.

[28] Mrs. A. M. Tindle, Lawton, Oklahoma, to Elmer Thomas, April 22, 1938, Box 540, Elmer Thomas Papers.

[29] Swain, "'The Forgotten Woman'," p. 210.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] U. S. Women's Bureau, "Women and the W. P. A.," The Woman Worker 18 (September 1938), p. 8.

[33] Community Appraisals of Oklahoma.

[34] Final Report, p. 44.

[35] U. S. Congress, House of Representatives, Operations and Employment of the Work Projects Administration, H. Doc. 392, 78th Cong., 2nd sess., 1944, pt. 10878; Final Report, p. 134.

[36] U. S. Works Progress Administration, U.S. Community Improvement Appraisals (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), p. 7.

[37] Community Appraisals of Oklahoma.

[38] Final Report, p. 134.

[39] Ware, Beyond Suffrage, p. 117.

[40] MacMahon, The Administration of Federal Work Relief, p. 339.

41 Final Report, p. 35.

42 Ibid., p. 92.

43 Ibid., pp. 44, 92.

44 Janet M. Hooks, "Women's Occupations Through 7 Decades," Women's Bureau Bulletin no. 218, p. 1.

45 Ibid.

46 Ware, Beyond Suffrage, p. 126.

47 Interview, Wilkinson, May 1, 1986; Interview, Burke, April 22, 1986.

48 Ibid.

49 Gibson, Oklahoma: A History, p. 228.

50 Milkman, "Women's Work and Economic Crisis," p. 75.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The decade from 1930 to 1940 witnessed complacency about women's problems. The country struggled with the Great Depression. Women were compelled to put their families first, and working outside the home was only a way of nurturing the family, not a defiance of tradition.

Once New Dealers decided that women needed help during the hard times, they established a work relief program for them. Their objective was not to end discrimination against women in the work force or to terminate public hostility toward women holding jobs in the private sector, but to provide assistance to the family during the Depression. The FERA, CWA, and the WPA emphasized the feeling that in times of crisis, women could perform activities, outside the home as well as inside it, in order to preserve the family. But women were regarded as temporary and secondary workers.

In general, New Deal work relief reinforced the existing definitions of male and female roles. The WPA, in particular, kept quotas for women on work relief low, and women were paid less than men in order to substantiate the

male role as the premier family head and breadwinner. Preference in work relief was always given to any male member of a family and then to women who were heads of families. Single women with no dependents and married women found it most difficult to acquire jobs in work relief programs. To further enhance traditional roles, work relief projects for women emphasized cooking, cleaning, serving, and sewing. These were the skills offered to women in training programs which left them without a highly marketable skill after the Depression. The majority of women given this sex-segregated relief continued to work at menial occupations for inadequate pay. The New Deal gave over half the women on relief rolls skills in sewing. Some of these women were lucky enough to work in textile factories (although not in Oklahoma), but most of these women ended up back at home sewing for family and friends or for a little money here and there.

A final assessment of the New Deal work relief programs for women must go beyond the percentages of women who did or did not acquire jobs or later private employment and the policies discriminating against women. Though women did not reach economic equality during the New Deal, they had a chance to be community builders. The Depression made it difficult for women to carry on their historical role of service to the community, but work relief programs provided this opportunity. Primarily because of women on work relief, destitute men, women, and children acquired

clothes they desperately needed. Women contributed much, especially through the sewing project to the country and in particular to Oklahoma. Most comments made by contemporaries about sewing rooms went into extensive detail explaining the accomplishments and services provided by these women. Many government officials wanted to see the sewing project become a permanent governmental service to communities. So as community builders women did succeed during the New Deal.

The economic progress of women in the 1930s did not establish permanent change, but did prepare some women for continued work during World War II. On average, fifteen percent of the total workers on WPA jobs were women and they became accustomed to employment outside the home as a legitimate role for them to play. The general public also gradually accepted the idea. So with the onset of war, women flocked to job openings in areas previously closed to them and once there, they proved to be effective workers. The war mobilization led to reforms the New Dealers had failed to try. The reserve army of women slowly allowed to emerge during the Depression to help ease the economic crisis came out with full force during World War II.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

FORMER EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN ON RELIEF

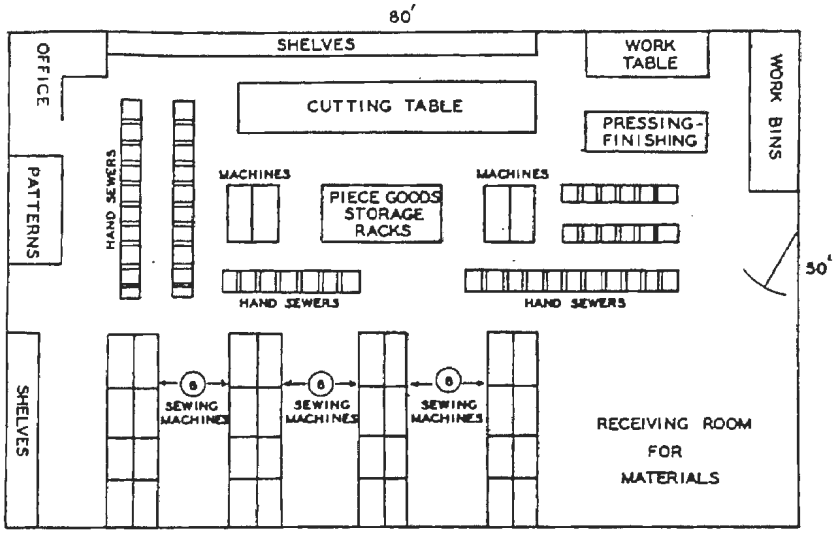
FORMER EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN ON RELIEF

Former Employment	% of Total
Total	100.0
Professional and Technical	6.4
Proprietors, Managers, and Officials	.6
Office Workers	9.0
Saleswomen and Kindred Workers	4.5
Skilled Workers and Foremen in Manufacturing and Other Industries	.3
Semiskilled Workers in Manufacturing and Other Industries	23.5
Unskilled (except Agriculture)	1.4
Domestic and Personal Service	34.1
Farm Operators and Laborers	3.1
Inexperienced	17.1

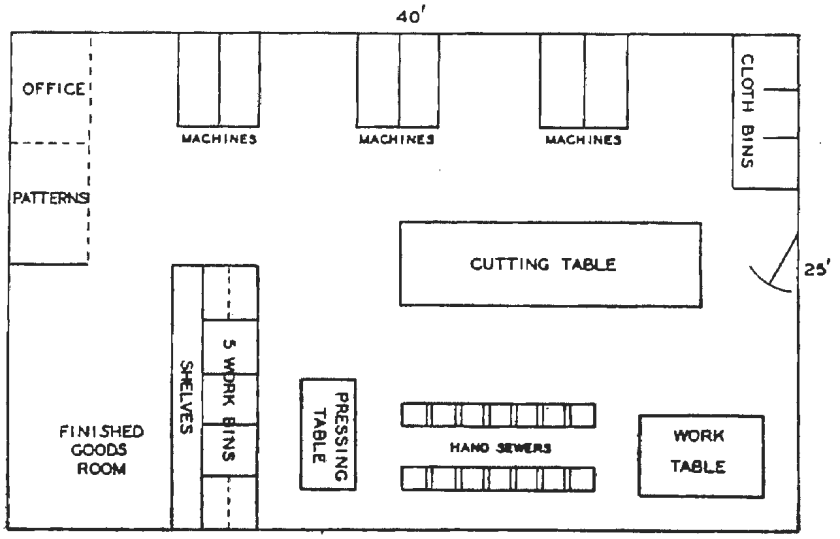
*From Marie D. Lane and Francis Steegmuller, America on Relief (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1938), p.67.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE PLANS OF SEWING UNITS



SAMPLE PLAN OF WORK-RELIEF SEWING UNIT (LARGE SIZE)



SAMPLE PLAN OF WORK-RELIEF SEWING UNIT (SMALL SIZE)

*U. S. Women's Work Division of the FERA, Work Relief Sewing Rooms (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1934), p. 9.

APPENDIX C

EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN ON WPA PROJECTS

JANUARY 15, 1936

EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN ON WPA PROJECTS

JANUARY 15, 1936

Type of Project	% of Total
Total	100.0
Sewing Projects	58.8
Canning	0.5
Other Production Projects	1.6
Clerical	3.4
Medical and Dental	1.1
Nursing	0.6
Library	3.6
Other Professional and Technical Projects	1.4
Statistical Surveys	1.9
Non-Statistical Surveys	1.0
Theater	1.0
Art	0.4
Music	0.7
Writing	0.5
Bookbinding and Repair	2.3
Hot School Lunches	1.2
Housekeeping Aides	4.4
Gardening Projects	0.4
Housekeeping Demonstration Projects	0.1
Braille Projects	0.1
Education Projects	7.0
Recreation Projects	4.1
Miscellaneous Technical and Clerical Projects	1.0
All Other Projects	2.9

*Marie D. Lane and Francis Steegmuller, America on Relief (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1938), p. 69.

APPENDIX D

TOTAL EXPENDITURES ON PROJECTS OPERATED BY THE WPA

TOTAL EXPENDITURES ON PROJECTS OPERATED BY THE WPA

JULY 1935 - JUNE 1941

(AMOUNTS IN MILLIONS)

Type of Project	Funds Spent
Sewing	731.7
Other Production Projects	72.7
Housekeeping Aides	85.8
Household Worker Training	3.8
School Lunches	92.7
Distribution of Surplus Commodities	97.4
Education	228.2
Recreation	229.0
Library	117.5
Museums	29.1
Art	33.1
Music	74.3
Writing	23.9
Research and Surveys	229.0
Public Records	170.8
Historical Records Survey	28.5

*From Samuel V. Bennett's Unemployment and Relief From the Local Point of View (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1955), p. 169.

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