



Coming in 2009!

In penniless America of the 1930s, even writers had to eat



In the grip of the Great Depression, Americans endured a crisis not just of economy, but of identity. Millions of unemployed men and women looked to the government for a life raft. Hundreds of thousands found jobs with the Works Progress Administration (WPA), most wielding picks and shovels to build roads and schools. For a smaller cadre, however, the tools were little more than pen, paper, and the spirit of investigation.

A Noble and Absurd Undertaking



The Federal Writers' Project is the story of an eccentric cultural experiment funded entirely by the U.S. government. The Project, one of four arts programs under the WPA (others were for visual art, music and theatre), fed thousands of unemployed writers and “would-be” writers. They included a handful of published authors, and a diverse, energetic goulash of old newspaper hands, former schoolteachers, typists, high-school dropouts, bohemians, drunks, hacks, and informers.

None earned more than \$100 a month. Even so, the money came as a godsend, for those who came to the Project had fallen on the hardest of times. In describing the depth of their plight, the director of the Minnesota office wrote that at the end of a few weeks the forlorn men and women she had hired became different human beings. “Heads were raised, shoulders squared, and eyes lost their haunting fear. How can you compute human morale in terms of dollars? At that stage little mattered, except that hopeless men and women found their hope again.”

Had it not been for the Project, the suicide rate would have been much higher. It gave new life to people who had thought their lives were over. – Nelson Algren

A Glorious Hardship

At the peak of its short span (1935 – 1939), the Project employed over 6,600 people in all 48 states. Their job was to fan out over America, read its history, interview its citizens, and produce a portrait of America from the ground up in a series of state travel guides. Those guides, far from being glossy tourist pamphlets, showed states and cities in a rich, idiosyncratic tapestry, “warts and all.” Today they remain a fascinating but little-known trove of American life. Their creation involved a contest of ideas, petty feuds, strikes, the hot lights of a Congressional investigation, police raids, and a few outsized personalities.



The film traces the grand drama of this brief episode in America. That drama centers on the struggle between two visions of our country – between an idyllic version and the iconoclastic picture that went into the state guides – and how that struggle played out in the effort to hold up a mirror to America.

The WPA accomplished what nobody believed was possible at that time – a renaissance of the arts and American culture... It afforded a rich intellectual camaraderie... and some of the most valued friendships in the literary history of the period.

– Margaret Walker

When American self-sufficiency and enterprise fail, who is American?



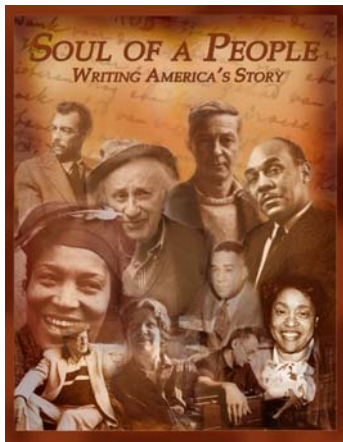
On the national stage, FDR and his New Deal cohorts launch the Project to give desperate people a paycheck and document a diverse America. Against them stand Texas congressman Martin Dies and his House Un-American Activities Committee, who see the red brush of Communism and un-American ideas in the text of the Project’s guidebooks. On the front lines, the dramas are more personal: a secretary in Maine commits suicide after being laid off, a lone editor in Idaho hordes all the tasks of writing a state guide for himself, and the New York City office seethes with the brawling energy of an insane asylum.

Soon, Congress puts the whole project on trial as the travel guides lurch toward publication. Alongside the political battles, Project research uncovers shattering revelations, including modern-day slavery in the turpentine camps of Florida. The stories of the writers and the people they chronicled take viewers beyond stock images of the Depression into the trials and fragile joys of people’s lives. It’s as if the strongest, iconic photographs from the Farm Security Administration suddenly start speaking to us. (FSA photographers like Gordon Parks and Dorothea Lange often worked and traveled with the Project’s field workers.) The film shows a spectacular range from New York to the West Coast, from Chicago to the Deep South. The

Project workers are assembling guides and interviews, but they are also knitting together the cultural fabric torn apart by the national crisis.

The Project's end comes with courtroom drama, red-baiting, and Congressional fireworks as World War II looms. Ultimately, publicity spin and the start of war transform the American Guides from "subversive propaganda" into a patriotic mosaic of a diverse people. Today, a fresh look at those guides and long-hidden interviews reveals a rich legacy that speaks to us anew.

A Road Trip Through First-Person America



For this sweeping subject, the film will use a broad palette of archival film and audio from the 1920s and '30s, murals from the arts project, FSA photographs, live-action footage and spellbinding interview commentary shot in High Definition. Interviews with surviving Project workers Stetson Kennedy in Florida and Studs Terkel in Chicago provide riveting stories that help anchor the narrative. A diverse group of leading authors, poets and historians provide witty and heartbreaking insights on an extraordinary vision of the America we never knew. Rarely seen footage from early social documentarians from the 1930s reinforce the immediacy of these perspectives.

The soundtrack will feature a collection of original field recordings made by the Project on acetate disk using a massive machine the size of a coffee table lugged into the field by human brawn. Newly restored by the Library of Congress, we will see this recording device "in action" in the film. Sound elements include Cuban and gospel songs, audio of Zora Neale Hurston singing and collecting stories in Florida, street vendors in New York and folk songs of the West. A number of commissioned musical works by artists such as Taj Mahal, the Gypsy Kings and Peter Ostrushko, and a musical score by Joseph Vitarelli, will highlight the range of cultures that the Writers' Project set out to capture. We also draw upon a rich reservoir of radio broadcasts, including a passionate defense of the WPA arts projects (in the face of scrutiny by the Dies Committee) from a young Richard Wright in 1939.

The Writers' Project influenced me a great deal. Without it I would not have thought of writing. – Studs Terkel

An Irreverent Legacy



The film will show the most chaotic publishing venture in history and the remarkable national biography it produced. It will show how out-of-work Americans, young and old, found hope in the country's darkest days and created a legacy for American culture. It changed the lives of many who survived it, and gave rise to a vital new generation of American writing. The film will leave viewers with a deep feeling of how that legacy has renewed meaning today.

The focus on imagination is very important. No one has really recognized that before.
– Ann Banks, author of *First-Person America*.