

Reflections on the New Deal in Oregon

Essays in Honor of an OHS Exhibit



Virginia Darcé, *Pouring Concrete*, woodcut print, published in *The Builders of Timberline* (Portland, Ore.: Works Progress Administration, 1937)

The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the New Deal Oregon's Legacy

by Sarah Baker Munro

LOGGING, FARMING, AND MINING — industries that formed the backbone of Oregon's economy — began sliding during the 1920s and plummeted when the stock market crashed in October 1929. Ten billion board feet of lumber had been produced in Oregon during 1929. The following year, demand for lumber weakened because of a decline in construction, and production decreased 25 percent to 7.5 billion board feet.¹ Drought plagued the dry desert and plateau areas of eastern Oregon, wreaking havoc on farm production and causing increased layoffs in the agricultural sector. Oregon's mining industry also experienced a slowdown. As unemployment rose in Oregon, consumer spending declined, reflecting national trends. Nationally, unemployment peaked at 25 percent in 1933, and many who remained in the workforce were employed at reduced wages.² Over half of workers were underemployed or unemployed, impacting many Oregonians and leaving some homeless. In Portland, over 330 people lived at one shantytown at Sullivan's Gulch.³

President Herbert Hoover had initiated significant recovery efforts in

1930. Under his leadership, for example, the Federal Reserve System eased credit. Hoover also held conferences in Washington, D.C., encouraging businesses to maintain wages and railroads and utilities to expand construction. He substantially increased the budget for federal public works.⁴ As the Depression deepened due to the ensuing banking crisis, however, Hoover's initiatives proved weak and ineffective. The public blamed Hoover for the economic hardships, naming homeless shantytowns "Hoovervilles." Oregon voters joined the rest of the nation in hoping that a political change would bring economic relief.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president of the United States on March 4, 1933, he launched a barrage of legislation — collectively known as the New Deal — aimed at providing reform, relief, and recovery from the Great Depression. Because Oregon's economy revolved around rural industries that were ravaged by the Depression, Oregon was situated particularly well to benefit from Roosevelt's legislation. During the initial "Hundred Days" of Roosevelt's first term, he introduced and Congress

enacted legislation that restructured banking, agriculture, industry, and labor relations. One of Roosevelt's first acts, developed cooperatively by members of both his and Hoover's staffs, was the Emergency Banking Relief Act, which was introduced, passed, and signed into law on the same day.⁵

Major legislation from the Hundred Days that impacted Oregonians also included the National Industrial Recovery Act, which created the Public Works Administration (PWA); the Civilian Conservation Corps Reforestation Relief Act, which established the CCC; the Federal Emergency Relief Act; and the Beer-Wine Revenue Act, which affected Oregon's brewing industry. Legislation enacted during 1935, called the Second New Deal, launched the Social Security System and, under the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, established the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Collectively, these programs changed the nation, including Oregon, in significant and visible ways.

The public works programs, such as the PWA, CCC, and WPA, created jobs for many unemployed, destitute citizens. Their work dramatically developed or enhanced use of rivers, national forests, state parks, roads and highways, schools, and post offices throughout the state. The year 2008 marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the inauguration of Roosevelt's New Deal and is an opportunity to acknowledge its legacy, a bequest that transformed Oregon. An exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society (OHS), *Oregon's Legacy: The New Deal* at 75,

showcases a variety of projects that changed the face of Oregon during the 1930s.

BUILT UNDER THE PWA, BONNEVILLE Dam generated electricity that, starting in 1938, was transmitted to rural regions, some of which had never before been electrified, including isolated farms and towns in valleys throughout Oregon. With funding from the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act and in conjunction with the Oregon Transportation Department, construction of bridges along the Oregon coast (the Coos Bay, Siuslaw, Alsea, and Yaquina bridges), tunnels (the Sunset — now Dennis L. Edwards, — Toothrock, and Salt Creek tunnels), and roads and highways (the Wolf Creek-Wilson River highway) opened coastal areas to visitors and improved economic opportunities.

Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrollees built trails and campgrounds in national forests and state parks, opening them to visitors. According to U.S. Forest Service records, CCC camps occupied at various times between 1933 and 1942 in the Mount Hood National Forest included Zigzag, Cascade Locks, Dee, Friend, Bear Springs, Summit Meadows (later a WPA camp), High Rock, Plaza, Oak Grove, Oak Grove/Estacada, and Latourelle. The Timberline Trail, which circumnavigates Mount Hood, was built by CCC workers, who also worked on road construction, ground preparation, and stonework at Timberline Lodge. CCC workers constructed buildings and laid out trails at Silver Falls and Jessie M. Honeyman Memorial state



Located at the U.S. Federal Highway Administration

Stonemasons place large boulders on one portal to the Toothrock Tunnel on the Columbia River Highway in about 1937. Works Progress Administration funds supported road building and improvements throughout Oregon.

parks, and others. A separate Native American unit from Umatilla worked on a monument to Chief Joseph at Wallowa Lake.

WPA workers who built Timberline Lodge and a ski lift on Mount Hood expanded the recreational opportunities for skiers and visitors to the Mount Hood National Forest. Timberline Lodge was a dream pursued by Oregon's WPA director, Emerson J. Griffith. Many programs of the WPA in Oregon participated in Timberline Lodge: WPA and CCC workers built the lodge and its surrounding landscape; funds from the Federal Art Project (FAP) furnished and decorated it; participants in the Federal Theatre Project produced theatrical sketches for its dedication and opening, and Federal Music Project musicians played at the same events; and writers for the Federal Writer's

Project wrote about the lodge. Griffith personally promoted Timberline to members of the administration in Washington, D.C., by sending them samples of Christmas cards depicting the lodge, news articles about Timberline, and *Timberline Lodge*, a book decorated with woodcuts by Oregon artists on the Oregon Art Project. Timberline is an icon of the WPA — a lodge for the public in a national forest.

The art collection of Timberline includes work by Oregon's most prominent artists of the 1930s, including C.S. Price's *Huckleberry Pickers* and three other oil paintings; Howard Sewell's murals *Symbolizing Lodge Builders*; Charles Heaney's *The Mountain*; Darrel Austin's *Dishwashers*, among others; Douglas Lynch's *Calendar of Mountain Sports*, a series of carved linoleum panels; and Virginia Darcé's

Paul Bunyan opus sectile murals. The exhibit at OHS includes original furnishings seen by President and Eleanor Roosevelt when he dedicated the lodge on September 28, 1937, including an armchair built specifically for the president by the WPA woodworking shop under Ray Neuffer. Some of the furnishings that reportedly caused Eleanor Roosevelt to exclaim that the craft at the lodge was the best she had seen are also included in the exhibit. Another part of the seventy-fifth anniversary exhibit at OHS offers a glimpse of the work of Oregon artists, actors, writers, and musicians who participated in the Federal Art Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Music Project.

ON OCTOBER 9, 2004, A LABOR Arts Symposium — Oregon Art During the Roosevelt Era: 1933–1945 — held at the Portland Art Museum brought renewed attention to the art produced under New Deal projects in Oregon. One participant described efforts to create an inventory of New Deal-funded art in the state — in schools, post offices, libraries, and other public buildings — starting from an inventory of art in Portland Public Schools done by a local college student.⁶ Two other participants, scholars William G. Robbins and David A. Horowitz, presented papers that are published here in conjunction with the exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society.

Robbins's overview, "Surviving the Great Depression: The New Deal in Oregon," compares Oregon legislators' responses to Roosevelt's legislation.

Senator Charles McNary and Congressman Walter Pierce supported New Deal legislation, but Portland Mayor John Carson and Oregon Governor Charles Martin opposed Roosevelt's reforms. Robbins concludes that the New Deal was generally popular in the West, especially in places where hydroelectric projects tilted the per-capita expenditures of New Deal programs in the region's favor. Robbins specifically describes the impacts of the CCC in the national forests and state parks and of the WPA on bridge and road building and in the arts, projects that are illustrated in the exhibit.

Robbins also emphasizes the sexual discrimination that was commonplace in the New Deal, reiterating Neil Barker's description of "institutionalized sexism in the WPA guidelines."⁷ Since a family could have only one member employed under the WPA, the women's division employed mostly unmarried, divorced, or widowed women. Of the 14,372 individuals employed on WPA projects in Oregon in 1936, 3,172 were women; of those, 2,500 — over 78 percent — were employed on sewing projects.⁸ Women held very few jobs under the WPA, and many who did were employed by the Women's and Professional Project to sew appliquéd draperies, weave fabrics for bedspreads or upholstery, and hook rugs to furnish Timberline Lodge. Other women were trained as domestic workers. Robbins also explains that rural families did not benefit from New Deal programs proportionally and describes people in rural areas as existing on a subsistence basis by bartering fruits, vegetables, and dairy products; exchanging labor;

Courtesy of Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon; on loan from the WPA Negatives Collection



Women employed under the Division of Professional and Service Projects in Oregon hook rugs to furnish Timberline Lodge in about 1937. Others wove fabrics for drapery, bedspreads, and upholstery or sewed appliquéd draperies for guest rooms before the lodge opened in February 1938.

poaching game and fish; and picking berries. He states that the Depression lasted a full decade for many people in Oregon.

Horowitz delivered a complementary paper, "The New Deal and People's Art: Market Planners and Radical Artists," in which he identifies the major economic and social reforms effected through New Deal programs. In particular, he examines the cultural programs of the FAP, which, he argues, shared the consumerist goals of other New Deal reforms. Horowitz explains that New Deal administrators believed employment should be restored for artists as well as for other workers and that artists could support themselves if patrons existed. He cites Michael Denning's argument in *The Cultural Front* that involving working-class

people in culture was, as Horowitz says, an "act of self-development." Denning states that these "plebeian artists and intellectuals," the political left, were the Cultural Front who had an unprecedented influence on American culture during the Depression.⁹ Horowitz states that New Deal art exhibited a "melding of pragmatism and idealism" that "provides important clues to the way the visual arts provided a bridge between government policy and radical visions." One way the FAP reached out to the public in Oregon and elsewhere was through the creation of art centers.

The work of artists Elizabeth Edmondson and Charlotte Mish in the Curry County Art Center — the smallest art center in the country — is illustrated in the seventy-fifth anniversary



Artists painted botanical watercolors native to the Oregon coast at the Curry County Art Center. The Oregon Art Project funded art centers in three Oregon communities: Salem Art Center opened on June 5, 1938; Curry County Art Center in Gold Beach opened in September 1939; and the La Grande Art Center opened in May 1940.

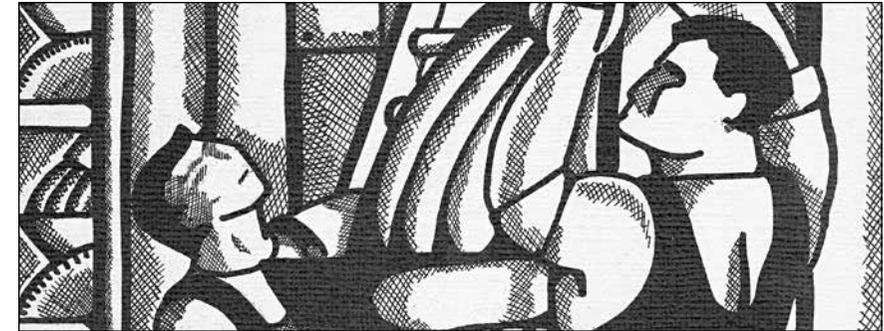
sary exhibit, probably for the first time since the center closed during the 1940s. The Oregon Ceramic Studio (now the Museum of Contemporary Craft) was organized during the New Deal, and the building was constructed with WPA labor. It became a local venue for artists and craftspeople to create, show, and sell their work. Another avenue for putting art before the public was creation of murals in public schools. Horowitz focuses on Martina Gangle, a politically radical artist employed by Oregon's art program to complete school murals, including the ones at Rose City Park School, and to paint wildflower watercolors for Timberline Lodge. Horowitz acknowledges that some of Gangle's other work is politically provocative, including works such as *County Hospital*, which depicts destitute people waiting for medical care. In another of

Gangle's social commentaries, *Children of the Poor*, a print in the Timberline collection, a hungry mother has placed her child symbolically in what appears to be a garbage can.

Both Horowitz and Robbins address the psychological devastation dealt by the Depression, and both suggest that New Deal reform offered an opportunity to heal "broken spirits" (Horowitz) and build a nation where "benefits and privileges would be extended to everyone" (Robbins). In a 1939 scripted program about building Timberline Lodge, Ray Neuffer, supervisor of the WPA woodworking shop where the furniture and carved detailing were created for Timberline Lodge and Silver Falls State Park, described the workers who joined him: "Most of the men came in from construction projects and they didn't know they COULD

do some of the things they did. Most of them had been out of work a long time, then on construction jobs, and they had lost their self-confidence."¹⁰ A significant legacy of the New Deal was that spirit of new-found hopefulness and confidence, a legacy that is

reflected in the president's chair from Timberline Lodge, the watercolors from a tiny art center at Gold Beach in Curry County, and other objects and photographs included in the seventy-fifth anniversary exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society.



Surviving the Great Depression

The New Deal in Oregon

by William G. Robbins

IT WAS A SPECIAL MOMENT IN time, a gathering place on the arid northern rim of the Columbia Plain where more than twenty thousand people came to hear President Franklin D. Roosevelt speak in August 1934, during the early construction stages

of Grand Coulee Dam. When it was completed, the president predicted, the gigantic project would help "develop" the Far West and provide opportunity for common folk, people suffering from want and hardship. But Grand Coulee and the lower-river Bonneville

An earlier version of this essay was presented before the Labor Arts Forum on the Art of the Roosevelt Era at the Portland Art Museum, October 9, 2004.

projects were much more; they were visible symbols of the New Deal's propensity for social innovation and experiment — the administration's hasty and sometimes disorderly planning strategies to seek a way out of the nation's economic and social crisis. Despite its sometimes helter-skelter approach, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal administration marked the emergence of a vastly expanded federal presence in the American West. Triggered by the demoralized economic conditions and wrenching poverty of the Great Depression, the 1930s witnessed the emergence of an activist federal government, an effort at centralized planning to advance the public good.

In subsequent addresses on the development of the Columbia River, Roosevelt praised the rehabilitative social, economic, and environmental benefits of such work — the amenities that cheap electrical power would bring to all citizens, an end to the

ravages of downstream flooding, and the irrigation of arid, unproductive lands. There were still other dimensions to the New Deal's influence in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest — and that was vested in the government's willingness to engage in public works projects to create jobs, and to regenerate local economies, to use federal moneys to serve the needs of its less-fortunate citizens. Roosevelt's overwhelming electoral successes in the West — he carried *every* Western state in 1932 *and* 1936 — provides some indication of the enormous popularity of New Deal projects in the region. It also attests to the skills of a powerful political personality, a man whose appeal bridged social classes. In his four successful campaigns for president, Roosevelt ran ahead of other Democratic candidates in Oregon and the Northwest, garnering an average of 20 percent more votes than other Democrats on the same ticket.

The top fourteen states in per capita federal expenditures were *all* in the West. There was another interesting twist to the New Deal story in the region: although many Western political leaders greeted federal relief with skepticism — and this was especially true in Oregon — the general public was largely enthusiastic for newly established agencies like the Civilian Con-

servation Corps, the National Youth Administration, and, later, the Works Progress Administration. The state of Oregon mirrored the rest of the nation with its bank failures, bankruptcies, business foreclosures, and high unemployment. Amid the general demoralization of the American economy and the lengthening unemployment lines, President Herbert Hoover — a graduate of Stanford University and the first president from the West — insisted that charities and local communities should care for the destitute. Portland's political and business leaders were in agreement with the president in opposing direct relief.

The economic collapse, however, was colossal, completely overwhelming local relief agencies. County and local taxes went delinquent, making it difficult to pay public employees, including teachers. Desperation, protest, and, in some instances, direct action were the order of the day. In the City of Portland, "Hoovervilles" appeared along the Willamette River: one hundred people were living under the Ross Island Bridge; more than three hundred were bivouacked in Sullivan's Gulch; and another large group lived at the old Guild's Lake site. Fearing social disruption in the summer of 1932, Governor Julius Meier wrote President Hoover: "We must have help from the federal government if we are to avert suffering . . . and possible uprisings."¹

When Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated in March 1933, 40,000 Portlanders were on relief and 24,000 people had registered with the local

employment bureau. In Multnomah County, a group of labor progressives organized an Unemployed Citizens' League. In Coos Bay, residents formed Workers' Alliances to speak for the unemployed. The Portland League and others like it organized the unemployed into urban cooperatives and made appeals for public works projects. Portland's establishment treated the League with contempt, as a group of people looking for handouts. Mayor Joseph Carson, voted into office in the same election that brought Franklin Roosevelt to the presidency, told local business leaders that his administration would not be looking to the federal government for charity. Through his long tenure in office, Carson opposed public power, and during the West Coast dock strike of 1934, the mayor gave his full support to waterfront employers. Carson's language became even more inflammatory in opposing Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA). With the support of a majority on the City Council, Carson also fought efforts in 1938 to form a City Housing Authority, with one of his councilmen arguing that public housing was akin to "unadulterated Communism entirely" and would depress housing values.²

In contrast, other Oregon politicians — Republican Senator Charles McNary and Democratic Congressman Walter Pierce — enjoyed cordial relations with President Roosevelt and fully participated in pushing through Congress the most famous schedule of reform legislation in American history: the Civil Works Administration,

Located at the U.S. Federal Highway Administration



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt travels from Bonneville Dam to Timberline Lodge to dedicate the lodge on September 28, 1937.

the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Farm Credit Administration. Both men also supported the Social Security Act of 1935, with Pierce disappointed only in its inadequate provisions for old-age pensions. Oregon also elected Democrat Charles Martin, a conservative who opposed unions and anything that he considered radical, to the governor's office in 1934. Martin, who became a stock character for ridicule, was an anti-New Dealer, opposing public power and all New Deal programs. The Democratic Party refused to endorse Martin for a second term in office.

Despite the opposition of Portland's political leadership and Oregon's governor, New Deal programs were immensely popular in the state. Perhaps the most celebrated, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), operated camps all across the state, providing modest wages, food and shelter, and productive outdoor work for young men. The CCC eventually included American Indian tribes in its programs. Before the Second World War made the CCC redundant, the agency employed thousands of "boys" in forty-nine camps across the state. (There were no women in the CCC.) Young men worked in forestry and conservation jobs, building roads, trails, shelters, lookouts, and providing foot soldiers for a vastly expanded labor force for fighting forest fires. Among the more notable and lasting public venues constructed with CCC labor were Silver Falls State Park, east of Salem, and Jessie M. Honeyman State Park on the central coast.

CCC and WPA workers also built Timberline Lodge on the southern slopes of Mt. Hood and the Oregon Department of Forestry buildings in Salem.

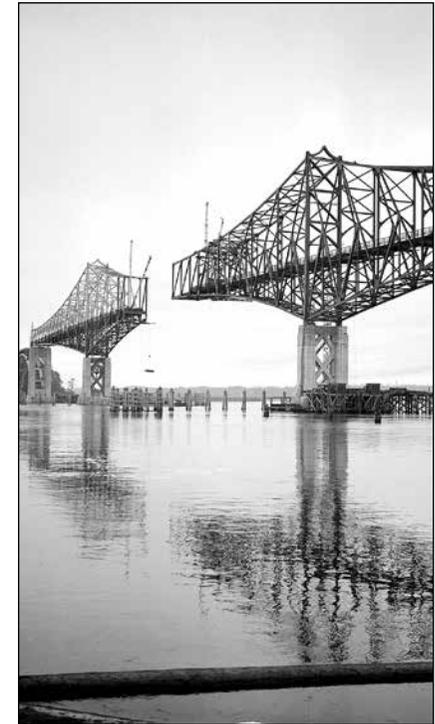
When the Roosevelt administration used the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1935 to establish the Works Progress Administration, the initiative launched the largest, most significant, and most controversial of all New Deal programs. The WPA was the most visible of all government relief efforts, and before it was dismantled in 1942, the agency employed more than 8.5 million people nationwide. The WPA's chief function was to provide people with pride and a small income when there were few employment prospects anywhere. The agency's larger achievement was to lessen the potential for social disorder and to assure that the basic framework of America's capitalist economy would remain intact following the Depression.

WPA workers constructed the artfully crafted bridges over Oregon's coastal streams and estuaries. Designed by Oregon's famous highway engineer, Conde McCullough, the still standing and aesthetically pleasing bridges offer visual testimony to both design and engineering expertise and workers' skills. When it was completed in 1936, the 1,700 foot cantilever bridge spanning Coos Bay was the longest in the Pacific Northwest. Because of its vaulting height to allow ocean-going ships to pass underneath, the engineering blueprint for the bridge involved complicated planning, lay-out, and design strategies. Work on the Coos Bay and

other bridges also provided employment for a large number of people. When the coastal bridge network was completed, it vastly quickened travel along Oregon's Highway 101, eliminating slow and laborious ferry crossings operating on the many streams and estuaries.

The WPA put more than 25,000 people on the federal payroll in Portland during its existence, employing citizens to work on projects large and small. To maximize its potential for direct relief, the WPA shied away from heavy construction equipment and relied on hand tools for most of its work tasks. Local projects included Portland's Rocky Butte Scenic Drive, Portland Municipal Airport (the most significant effort in Multnomah County), and hundreds of small-scale enterprises such as the now controversial rock wall along Johnson Creek. One of the WPA's more significant public works involved improvements to Macleay Park in Portland's west hills, where laborers cleared brush and built an extensive trail system.

The WPA hired Portlanders to build the Wolf Creek and Wilson River highways, construction projects that greatly speeded travel to the coast. The WPA also hired skilled Portland-area artisans to produce ornamental wrought iron for a variety of public buildings and places across the state. These included straps, hinges, handles, and other items made specifically for Timberline Lodge. The University of Oregon and Oregon State University also display some of this magnificent wrought-iron workmanship.



Located at the Oregon Department of Transportation Collection

Among Oregon highway engineer Conde McCullough's most technically challenging bridge designs is the 17,000-foot cantilever bridge spanning Coos Bay. Completed in 1936, the structure is sufficiently high to allow ocean-going ships to pass underneath.

In still another initiative, the WPA supported Portland musicians to put on public performances around the city, including the Portland Art Museum and Marylhurst and Reed colleges. The Federal Arts' Theater and Writers' projects were other activities that attracted a good deal of attention — and controversy. The agency hired actors, writers, and artists for civic and public projects. WPA workers inventoried historical materials in county

courthouses, and the Writers' Project produced the *Oregon Guide*, a descriptive narrative of the state's history, its physical landscape, and its cultural heritage. Many public buildings in Oregon still display WPA-funded artwork and murals, such as one visible in the Ontario post office.

Although WPA-funded work included women, they comprised only a small percentage of overall agency employment. Federal, state, and local administrators operated on the assumption that useful and productive work primarily involved construction jobs, traditionally the province of males. While Eleanor Roosevelt and a few others spoke out on behalf of WPA employment for women, "institutionalized sexism in the WPA guidelines," writer Neil Barker argues, "made most women ineligible for work relief."³ Moreover, women able to obtain relief work were placed mostly in sewing-related jobs, house-keeping, or serving school lunches to needy children. Portland-area women also found WPA jobs through the household service-training program, a closely supervised, class-based plan that provided domestic labor for the city's elite families.

In Portland and Oregon's lesser urban centers, people muddled through the depression years, birthing fewer children, living in multiple-family households, surviving on sporadic and part-time employment, and doing occasional work-relief jobs. In the outback — where families still practiced semi-subsistence lifestyles — barter, labor exchanges, and the time-

worn practice of poaching fish and game usually meant enough food on the table. Family members frequently exchanged labor on neighboring farms and ranches for fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. Across most of Oregon, supplies of wood for cooking and heating were readily accessible, and wild fruits, especially black berries west of the Cascades, were seasonally abundant and easy to preserve.

The Great Depression remained a fact of life in Oregon for a full decade and began to ease only when war orders slowly began to energize the American economy. Despite improved conditions in the late 1930s, the WPA continued to provide employment for a large number of workers in the state's more heavily populated counties. Other public works projects employed an even larger number of people at marginal wages. Although the pay was low, federally subsidized work enabled citizens to earn a modest income at a time when job prospects were few. Throughout the 1930s, the number of people receiving some form of direct relief remained high. Such help included support for dependent children and seniors, surplus food, and a category referred to as general assistance. Despite the variety of New Deal work-relief programs, the economy moved unevenly through partial recoveries and slumps for the remainder of the decade.

As for Portland at the end of the Depression decade, urban historian Carl Abbott describes "a city that had ceased to grow."⁴ Portland had also grown older during the decade, a trait



Located at Oregon State Library

The Works Progress Administrations' Federal Music Project supported free public musical performances, providing small stipends for out-of-work musicians. The Portland Symphony performed at various public venues around the city, including the South Park Blocks.

reflected in its declining number of school-age children. But those population characteristics were transitory, subject to watershed events such as the Second World War, a profoundly dramatic and transforming period in modern American history. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought an end to years of unemployment and stagnation, and workers accustomed to long periods of unemployment suddenly found themselves sellers in a buyers' market.

But the New Deal left lasting legacies — which have seemingly been under attack ever since, especially during the twenty-first century. Although New Deal reforms have proved endlessly contentious, and although not all of the social experiments were successful and lasting, the social vision and common purpose of New Deal

reform was pointed toward building a nation whose benefits and privileges would be extended to everyone. In an August 1934 address at Glacier National Park's Two Medicine Chalet, President Roosevelt observed that the great construction projects in the American West would benefit the entire citizenry, with the "objective of building human happiness."⁵ The president shared some of that vision when he dedicated Timberline Lodge on the south slope of Mount Hood in September 1937. A bronze tablet on the second floor balcony overlooking the parking lot commemorates the event:

Timberline Lodge, Mount Hood National Forest dedicated September 28, 1937, by the President of the United States as a monument to the skill and faithful performance of workers on the rolls of the Works Progress Administration.



The New Deal and People's Art

Market Planners and Radical Artists

by David A. Horowitz

RESPONDING AFTER THE 1932 election to 25 percent unemployment, falling demand for goods, demoralizing deflation, and massive evaporation of investment, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal committed the federal government to unprecedented intervention in a peacetime economy with an agenda of relief, recovery, and reform. Banks, public utilities, stock exchanges, mines, agriculture, and working conditions all now came under regulation from

Washington. Agencies like the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) expanded or rebuilt elements of the nation's infrastructure such as Oregon's Pacific Coast Highway and Mt. Hood's Timberline Lodge. New Deal policies backed industrial labor unions, enacted minimum wage laws, established the social security system, and provided work and cash relief to

An earlier version of this essay was presented before the Labor Arts Forum on the Art of the Roosevelt Era at the Portland Art Museum, October 9, 2004.

needy families. Millions of others were assisted through low-interest loans and refinanced farm and home mortgages.

Almost all of these activities, from social welfare subsidies to public works, were designed to revitalize or protect the economy by stimulating mass purchasing power. By the late-1930s, a coalition of retail, banking, and labor interests, led by Federal Reserve Board Chair Marriner Eccles, had worked with administration economists to enact fiscal and monetary policies embracing deficit spending, huge public investment, progressive tax policies, and relief programs. By distributing government benefits, credit, and infrastructure grants, they hoped to stimulate private investment, get people back to work, and reinvigorate the market. As reformers, New Dealers believed that the economy could be salvaged through intelligent planning and constructive social action. One result was the social security system of unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, assistance to single mothers, and help for the physically disabled. The final example of their work was the GI Bill of 1944, the massive public investment in education, aid, training, and home financing for World War II veterans that facilitated the rise of the post-World War II middle class.

The New Deal sought to accomplish these goals through a discourse emphasizing the government's role in unifying the people around common citizenship and service to the nation. Although mainly directed toward European ethnics, particularly Roman Catholics and Jews, in contrast to African American, Hispanic, or Asian minorities, Roosevelt

rhetoric identified citizenship with "the people," whose strength and common purpose were to lift the nation out of the Depression. Public art was to be compatible with this newly emerging national culture. New Deal officials saw art as a public commodity. They believed that the government could take the lead in popularizing the production and consumption of art among ordinary Americans so that the arts would no longer be the privileged preserve of the rich. Articulating a philosophy of aesthetic populism, federal administrators hoped to bring representational art to the masses through works that addressed the lives of ordinary people and the experiences of an authentically American culture.

Artistic realism contrasted with the revolution in abstract canvases that had begun in the 1910s with Cubists like Pablo Picasso — who painted images from multiple perspectives, a phenomenon viewed as an unwelcome symbol of social and cultural fragmentation by Roosevelt arts officials. New Dealers preferred genres like the mural — which could deliver images to people in public arenas like housing projects, schools, hospitals, correctional institutions, or post offices. Roosevelt era projects often relied on print reproductions to make art accessible to millions of Americans. The federal government even created an Index of American Design — a collection of twenty-two thousand graphic recreations (usually watercolors or drawings) of handicraft artifacts dating as far back as the eighteenth century. These exhibits were displayed in popular gathering places such as department stores. More than half of the five hundred participants in



Martina Gangle's *The Homesteaders*, one of two mural panels of *The Columbia River Pioneer Migration*, was installed in 1940 at Portland's Rose City Grade School under the auspices of the federally funded Oregon Art Project.

the federal government's Painting Project were involved in documentary photography or applied arts like stage design or archival documentation. Art was further brought to the people through six hundred local art centers across the nation, including facilities in Salem, La Grande, and the Oregon Coast.

Inaugurated under the WPA in 1935, the Federal Arts Project (FAP) shared the consumerist and populist aesthetic goals of the Roosevelt administration. There were some practical reasons for this approach. First, the administration believed that economic recovery depended upon restoration of employment for *all* workers — including those who made their living in the arts. Four

thousand painters and sculptors were on relief and another fifteen hundred without means of support when the WPA initiated the FAP. To qualify for the program, artists were required to get on relief except for the 10 percent of participants who could be selected as instructors or administrators without regard for financial need. Second, Roosevelt officials saw the arts as an industry whose ability to market products aided the long-run health of capitalism. If Americans learned to become art patrons, the arts could become self-supporting, returning artists to work and contributing to enhanced economic activity. To accomplish this, however, New Deal leaders insisted that

the arts had to be restructured through democratization.

Because Roosevelt's economic recovery plan required the restoration of psychological morale and social solidarity, creation of a cultural democracy was an essential goal of the federal arts program. Art could be accessible to ordinary people if artists engaged the national spirit by depicting the experiences and aspirations of common citizens. Such an effort could also serve to portray the dignity of ordinary people, whose economic empowerment as consumers was an essential part of the New Deal recovery scheme. Visual imagery, moreover, could be used to cement the administration's political base by documenting the social and economic conditions that it hoped to improve. Such a populist emphasis no doubt discomforted some political conservatives but served the strategic needs of Roosevelt Democrats.

The importance of cultural democracy received full exposure by Holger Cahill, the director of the FAP's Painting Project. The program's organization, wrote Cahill, proceeded "on the principle that it is not the solitary genius but a sound general movement which maintains art as a functioning part of any cultural scheme."¹ A long exposition on WPA arts projects in *Fortune* magazine in 1937 expounded on these insights. Federally subsidized art programs, it suggested, functioned "not only to let the artists produce art, but to educate and interest the masses of the people and prepare . . . the kind of soil in which 'a genuine art movement' might be expected to flower."² Although

the article expressed concern that government sponsorship might encourage stylistic rigidity and even isolation from public taste, it acknowledged that the New Deal had induced a cultural revolution by bringing the American audience and artist face to face.

Representational artists C.S. Price, Charles Heaney, Doug Lynch, Lucia Wiley, Louis Buntz, Andrew Vincent, Rachel Griffin, Harry Wentz, Martina Gangle, and Arthur and Albert Runquist were among the thirty-three painters and artisans to participate in the Oregon Federal Arts Project. Between 1935 and 1938, government subsidies resulted in over seventy-five murals and paintings for the state's public schools and libraries, colleges and universities, hospitals, military installations, and facilities like the Port of Portland and Timberline Lodge. Unlike most of their colleagues, who accepted federal sponsorship primarily out of economic necessity, three of the program's artists, Arthur and Albert Runquist and their colleague Martina Gangle, came to their work as self-conscious political radicals associated with a communist movement that viewed art as a medium for advancing social consciousness and class solidarity.

To understand why decided critics of capitalism could eagerly participate in a reformist New Deal program to bolster a faltering market and sustain social morale, one must understand that the inception of the Federal Arts Project coincided with the advent in 1935 of the People's or Popular Front, the broad coalition promoted by the

Courtesy of Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon; on loan from the WPA Negatives Collection



Martina Gangle works on a sculpture for the Benjamin Franklin statue at Portland's Franklin High School.

international communist movement to forge a united stance against fascism. To be a Communist in the late-1930s was to stand for antifascism, world peace, industrial labor solidarity, and racial/ethnic pluralism as well as to support liberal governments like the New Deal. At the American Writers' Congress of 1935, literary figures like Kenneth Burke and Edmund Wilson asked leftists to shift their focus from the "worker" to the "people" and to replace sectarian calls for "revolution" with appeals to humanism and democracy.³

As Michael Denning has suggested, a broad "cultural front" of progressives emerged alongside the "popular front." For these working-class activists, culture represented an act of self-

development that promised to prepare them for tasks beyond menial labor. At the same time, progressive culture focused on proletarian themes and experiences and conveyed a "labor metaphysic" that asserted the dignity and beauty of working-class arts and entertainment, the involvement of the arts in the union movement, and a defense of arts and crafts against commercial exploitation. The "cultural front" would leave a distinctly vernacular influence on American fiction, theater, film, broadcasting, and painting.⁴

About a year after leaving Portland's Museum Art School in 1934, Martina Gangle joined the Communist Party. One of seven children,

she had been born in 1906 into a poor Roman Catholic family near Woodland, Washington. At first, she attended a country grade school and worked with her family as a migrant fruit picker before moving to live with her grandmother in the Lents district of southeast Portland, where she attended Franklin High School while working as a domestic. Considered a promising artist by teachers, she borrowed two hundred dollars to attend the Oregon Normal School (now Western Oregon University) for a year, followed by a brief stint as an elementary school teacher. Unmarried, she gave birth to a son in 1926 and supported herself for four years by helping to run a boarding house.

With meager savings and a personal loan, Martina gained admission to the Portland Art Museum School in 1931, where she eventually earned a scholarship for two years. There she came under the influence of the legendary painter and teacher, Harry Wentz, who taught students to take an intuitive approach to their surroundings once principles of color and design were mastered. While most of her classmates hailed from the local social elite, Gangle had to work as a domestic during the school years and pick fruit during the summers. Despite these disadvantages, Wentz helped her get on the federal government's Public Works of Art program in 1934, for which she was paid twenty-five dollars a piece for three oil panels depicting her mother feeding chickens, road laborers, and a group of prune orchard pickers (the latter is on permanent display in the

Portland Art Museum's American Art Collection).

Gangle's conversion to radicalism occurred that same year, when she came across a Portland demonstration on behalf of imprisoned San Francisco labor activist Tom Mooney. Frustrated at slim Depression prospects for making a living in the vocation she loved and horrified at the widespread poverty of the 1930s, she joined the Party. Socialism, she believed, incorporated the Christian ideals taught by her mother and seemed to offer the chance that her dreams of a better society could be turned into practical reality.

In 1936, Wentz helped Gangle secure a ninety-dollar-a-month position with the Federal Arts Project. She was assigned to the Timberline Lodge project, the ambitious new ski lodge and tourist facility that the WPA was building on Mt. Hood. Over the next three years, Gangle contributed to the project with a series of wildflower watercolors and several woodcut engravings including *Sunrise*, *Wood Carvers*, and *Mess Hall*, each of which was included in *Builders of Timberline*, a pamphlet published by the WPA in 1937. Other Timberline works by Gangle included a linoleum block entitled *WPA Workshop* and a wood carving of cherry pickers.

Initially assigned to a Communist club of intellectuals and artists, Martina met the Runquist brothers, who, as she once reminisced, "took me under their wing and educated me about life in general and helped me with my art work."⁵ Gangle soon became treasurer of the Oregon branch of the Union of

Cultural Workers, joined the Oregon Arts Guild, became secretary of the Workers Alliance of Oregon, sat-in at welfare offices on behalf of Dust Bowl migrants, and was arrested in Portland as part of an antifascist protest against a visit by a Japanese training ship. She loved to paint flowers, trees, chickens, and nurturing women, the latter no doubt a tribute to her beloved mother. By the late 1930s, however, her work reflected a decided progressive political consciousness. A block print entitled *Fruit Tramps* was included in the 1937 Portland exhibition of the radical American Artists' Congress. Her *County Hospital*, a linoleum cut of poor people patiently waiting for emergency room care, was accepted for the 1939 New York World's Fair American Art Today Exhibition. *Workers Alliance Conference*, an oil painting, was shown at the Portland Art Museum in 1940.

Just as Martina Gangle assumed a radical political persona, anti-New Deal sentiments and an attempt to purge communists from federal agencies led Congress to virtually abandon the WPA in 1939 by turning the Federal Arts Project over to the states. By the "eighteen-month ruling," no employee in these programs could be retained for a total of eighteen months. Hired under the Oregon Art Project in 1940, Gangle was assigned to complete two murals for Portland's Rose City Grade School. Entitled *The Columbia River Pioneer Migration*, the work consisted of two panels depicting *Homesteaders* and *Rafting*. Although arts administrators steered mural content toward

historical themes with as little political controversy as possible, the Rose City panels enabled Martina to emphasize the egalitarian cooperation among ordinary men and women that sustained her radical faith.

When Gangle assisted the Runquists on *Early Oregon* (1941), an Oregon Art Project mural for Pendleton High School, the depiction of western Indians and cattle drivers in idealized harmony was one that appealed to the sensibilities she shared with the brothers. Albert and Arthur had been born to Swedish dairy farmers in the Aberdeen, Washington, area during the 1890s. Coming to the University of Oregon to play football, they became fascinated by painting and later studied with Harry Wentz at the Portland Art Museum and with John Sloan at the Art Students League of New York. After brief stints as commercial artists, the brothers settled in at Wentz's house on Portland's Northeast Clackamas Street. Between 1934 and 1941, Arthur completed easel paintings for New Deal arts projects such as *Early Portland Fire Drill* (1937) and *Homesteaders* (1939). Murals included the Pendleton project as well as *The Tree of Knowledge* (1937), a work placed on the main stairway at the University of Oregon Library, as well as installations at the Sedro Woolley, Washington, post office (1940) and the Tongue Point Naval Air Station near Astoria (now a Job Corps Center).

Like their politicized comrade, Martina Gangle, the Runquists pursued projects independent of government sponsorship. Arthur's *Pensioned*,

Courtesy of John Wilson Special Collections, Multnomah County Library, Portland, Oregon



Martina Gangle assists in painting the idealized *Early Oregon* (1941), an Oregon Art Project mural for Pendleton High School by Arthur and Albert Runquist.

a portrait of working-class destitution and despair, was featured at the 1939 World's Fair exhibition followed by *Scrapped* (1941), a symbolic lament over the exploitation of labor. Once the United States entered World War II, Arthur signed on as a welder and crew supervisor at the Kaiser Shipyards in Vancouver, Washington, where Gangle worked as a welder and occasional drafting room technician. Involving an antifascist alliance between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, the war took the shape of a people's crusade against dictatorship and tyranny. Indeed, the term "free world" was invented by Roosevelt administration liberals

to depict those countries free of the horrors of Nazi, Fascist, and Japanese imperialism.⁶ Both Arthur Runquist and Gangle produced an incredible number of gouache paintings, watercolors, and drawings documenting the work of the Vancouver yards, which employed 38,000 people at one point and produced 141 Navy ships. Their work profiles the grandeur of the shipbuilding process as represented by the mighty cranes and construction "ways." It also pictures the dignity of the yard's diverse work force, the private moments and shared jokes of the labor crews, and the price that long hours and dangerous work exacted on the crews.

Following the war, Gangle temporarily returned to the fruit orchards and, after marrying merchant seaman and logger Hank Curl, took on a full agenda of social and political causes both inside and out the Communist Party until her death in 1994. Meanwhile, the Runquists survived at Wentz's North Coast cottage at Neahkahnie Beach between 1945 and 1963, where their paintings focused on the resilience of nature amid logging clear-cuts and commercial development. Eight years after they returned to Portland, the bachelor brothers both died in 1971.

As committed socialists and politically sensitive artists, the Runquists and Gangle seldom sold paintings, more often trading them for bail money for demonstration arrests, medical assistance, or other needs. It is perhaps ironic that the spiritual roots of their artwork were nurtured in the Age of Roosevelt, that period from 1932 to 1945 when a pragmatic and consumerist-oriented government in Washington, D.C., fostered a reformulated capitalist agenda that could include radical artists with socialist allegiances. Most likely, such a combination would not have been possible were it not for the fact the strategic interests of Popular Front communism pushed the movement toward reformism and democratic humanism while a global war brought communists and capitalist internationalists together in the same coalition. The resulting fusion of energies left Oregonians and the world with a rich legacy of publicly sponsored art



Bill Allen, photographer

Arthur Runquist, *The Tree of Knowledge* (1937), a Federal Arts Project mural for the University of Oregon Library

and privately initiated work that met the needs of both parties by dignifying ordinary people and expressing the hope of a better life.

In later years, Gangle complained that upper-class Federal Arts Project administrators had exploited artists like herself and denigrated the political activists amongst them. Yet, New Deal and World War II art was not about the artists or a revolutionary view of society. Rather, these works offered a

creative way to work toward the reconstruction of an ailing economy, the healing of broken spirits, the dream of a peaceful life following a terrible war, and the restoration of hope. From hindsight, the melding of pragmatism

and idealism in these paintings, drawings, and prints provides important clues to the way the visual arts provided a bridge between government policy and radical visions in the Age of Roosevelt.

NOTES

“The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the New Deal”

by Sarah Baker Munro

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1. Ivan Doig, “Counting the Trees,” in *Early Forestry Research: A History of the Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station, 1925–1975* (Washington, D.C.: Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, November 1977), 10.

2. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 163–66.

3. Neil Barker, “Portland’s Works Progress Administration,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 101:4 (Winter 2000): 415.

4. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 54–69.

5. *Ibid.*, 135–36.

6. A non-profit group in Portland, Friends of Art in the Schools, has recently picked up where the initial inventory left off and is seeking to complete it and to preserve art in the schools from the New Deal and other eras.

7. Barker, “Portland’s Works Progress Administration,” 428.

8. Report on Women’s and White Collar Project for October, November 18, 1936, Federal Project No. 1 Materials for Oregon (651.3), Records of the WPA (Record Group 69), National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

9. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), xv, xvii.

10. *Builders of Tomorrow*, a Radio Program prepared especially for the Works Progress Administration of Oregon, program number 15, September 30, 1939, continuity written by Frances Fleming Selleck with research by the Oregon Writers’ Project, Oregon State Library, Salem.

“Surviving the Great Depression”

by William G. Robbins

1. Meier is quoted in Neil Barker, “Portland’s Works Progress Administration,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 101:4 (Winter 2000), 415.

2. Carson is quoted in Carl Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 117.

3. Barker, “Portland’s Works Progress Administration,” 428.

4. Abbott, *Portland*, 109.

5. The speech is quoted in Richard L. Neuberger, *Our Promised Land*, Introduction by David Nicandri (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1938, reprint 1989), 90.

Suggested Readings (Robbins)

Neil Barker, "Portland's Works Progress Administration," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 101:4 (Winter 2000).

Jewel Lansing, *Portland: People, Politics, and Power, 1851–2001*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2003.

Richard Lowitt. *The New Deal and the West*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

E. Kimbark MacColl. *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915–1950*. Portland: The Georgian Press, 1979.

William H. Mullins. *The Depression and the Urban West Coast 1929–1933: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

William G. Robbins. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Emergence of the Modern West," *Journal of the West*, 34:2. (April 1995), 43–48.

William G. Robbins, *Oregon, This Storied Land*. Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2005.

"The New Deal and People's Art"

by David A. Horowitz

1. Holger Cahill, quoted in "Unemployed Arts: WPA's Four Art Projects: Their Origins, Their Operations," *Fortune* (May 1937), 114.

2. *Ibid.*, 115.

3. The most definitive treatment of the manner in which 1930s Popular Front radicals brought the celebration of "the people" to expressive culture can be found in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, New York: Verso, 1997), esp. 123–25.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Martina Gangle to Tillie Aune, n.d. [circa 1988–89], Papers of Martina Gangle Curl, Museum of People's Art: Labor, Life, and Landscape of the Pacific Northwest, Bay City, Oregon.

6. For the context of the term "free world," see David A. Horowitz, *America's Political Class under Fire: The Twentieth Century's Great Culture War* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 85.

Suggested Readings (Horowitz)

New Deal emphasis on the restoration of consumer purchasing power is one of the main themes of Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). For public arts programs, see Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Bruce I. Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997). See also the relevant sections of Francis Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

For Oregon's public art programs during the 1930s, see Carolyn Howe, "The Production of Culture on the Oregon Federal Art Projects of the Works Progress Administration" (M.A. thesis, Portland State University, 1980). Overviews of the state's role in creating a regional art tradition can be found in Roger Hull, "The Lure of Pacific Northwest Art," *American Art Review* 11:1 (1999), 168–77, and in Rachael Griffin, *Art of the Pacific Northwest from the Thirties to the Present* (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts for the Smithsonian Institution, 1974). See also Ginny Allen and Jody Klevit, *Oregon Painters: The First Hundred Years, 1859–1959* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1999).

For two of the region's radical painters, see Katrina Lee Gilkey, "Observations of Resilience and Defeat in Arthur Runquist's Paintings of Labor and the Land" (M.A. thesis, Reed College, 2004), and David A. Horowitz, *Martina Gangle Curl: People's Art and the Mothering of Humanity* (Portland: Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission, 2004). Samples of the work of Martina Gangle and others can be found in *The Builders of Timberline Lodge* (Portland, Ore.: Works Progress Administration, 1937) and in Chauncey Del French, *Waging War on the Home Front: An Illustrated Memoir of World War II* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press and Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission, 2004).