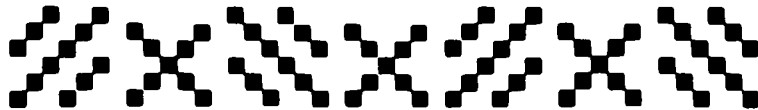


The Federal Writers' Project Files for Indiana

*Robert K. O'Neill**



The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was established in July, 1935, as one of four arts projects sponsored by the Works Progress Administration (WPA).¹ Designed to put unemployed writers to work in some socially useful capacity, FWP was never one of the New Deal's most popular programs. Critics of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Depression-oriented programs delivered some of their most stinging attacks against it. Even many who generally supported New Deal legislation expressed serious reservations about subsidizing writers at government expense. Some believed that the integrity and independence of the profession might be compromised; others considered the political views of most writers suspect and feared that the government would be providing writers an opportunity at taxpayer expense to disseminate radical political propaganda; and still others simply could not understand the plight of the unemployed writer. To the last group, Harry Hopkins, WPA administrator and Roosevelt confidant, acidly replied: "Hell, they've got to eat just like other people."² But no reply, however colorful, could easily erase the suspicions expressed by the first two groups.

The term "writer" was interpreted broadly to include virtually anyone who at some time in his or her life had earned money by writing. Researchers thus qualified for the program along with creative writers and journalists. Indeed, researchers made up the bulk of those employed as writers.³ Nevertheless,

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¹ The other projects were Art, Music, and Theater. Collectively, the four projects were officially known as Federal One. The Historical Records Project was added later.

² Quoted in Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Boston, 1972), 4.

³ Bernard De Voto, "The Writers' Project," *Harper's Magazine*, CLXXXIV (January, 1942), 221.



LIARS' BENCH, NASHVILLE, BROWN COUNTY, INDIANA

Courtesy of author.

a considerable number of talented and experienced writers were associated with the project, including Conrad Aiken, Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, Edward Dahlberg, Vincent McHugh, Claude McKay, Studs Terkel, and Richard Wright. On the average, the project employed some 5,000 persons annually, reaching a peak of 6,500 in 1936.⁴

Since one of the chief aims of FWP was to employ writers in some socially useful enterprise, project administrators decided early on that creative works, such as novels, plays, and poetry, would not be subsidized. The hours devoted to FWP work were generally short and flexible, however, leaving writers free time to devote to writing fiction and poetry for their own purposes. And project-sponsored work itself often allowed for a certain degree of creativity.⁵

What constituted socially useful projects proved a bit more difficult to decide than what did not, but eventually the idea for the American Guide Series and related projects won acceptance.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Katherine Kellock, "The WPA Writers: Portraitists of the United States," *American Scholar*, IX (Autumn, 1940), 477-78.

FWP first planned the guide series as a five-volume work, each volume covering a particular region of the country. A single-volume American guide was to follow. But this plan proved administratively unfeasible and was abandoned in favor of individual state guidebooks. The project also planned guidebooks for Alaska, Puerto Rico, certain key cities, some counties and towns, and even a few famous highways.⁶ The decision to publish individual state guides was popular in Indiana, for many Hoosiers lamented that much of the valuable material being gathered by FWP in Indiana would not reach the public because of the limited space to be allotted to each state in the regional guide.⁷

Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State was the collective product of several hundred people over a period of six years. Work began in the summer of 1935 under the supervision of Ross F. Lockridge, a noted historian of Indiana. Lockridge resigned in August, 1937, and was succeeded by Gordon F. Briggs, a former journalist and free-lance writer.⁸ Briggs served as state supervisor until the close of the Writers' Project in early 1943. At its peak, the Indiana project employed some 150 people, with at least one writer representing each of the state's ninety-two counties. The more populated counties were represented by as many as eight to ten writers.⁹

Despite the large pool of unemployed writers in Indiana, the project sometimes encountered recruitment difficulties. The most serious of these was the requirement that writers be on relief to qualify for the project. Many writers either could not or would not meet this requirement. In some of the smaller, more sparsely populated counties the project was unable to find even a single experienced writer on relief. In such cases the central office in Indianapolis had to petition Washington to waive the relief condition.¹⁰

In addition to the central office in Indianapolis, the Indiana project operated five district offices to provide closer supervisory assistance to writers in the field. For the most part, however, writers worked independently, gathering information on as-

⁶ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 47. See also the FWP manual, "Writers' Projects of the Works Progress Administration," (Washington, n.d.). A copy of this manual is in Administrative Folder, WPA Writers' Project Files for Indiana (Indiana State University Library, Terre Haute).

⁷ *Indianapolis News*, May 2, 1936.

⁸ *Ibid.*, August 3, 1937.

⁹ *Ibid.*, January 30, 1936.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, August 3, 1937.

signed topics and composing reports for submission to the central office. As the reports arrived in Indianapolis they were carefully edited and checked for accuracy. A large pool of consultants, mostly academicians, aided editor and writer alike. The edited reports were forwarded to Washington to be reviewed by the editorial staff at FWP headquarters.

The quality of the reports submitted by Indiana writers varied considerably. In general, they were little better than mediocre. Although some were models of scholarly research and lucid writing, these were the exceptions. Good editing was chiefly responsible for the high quality of the finished product, *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State*.

To maintain uniformity among the guides, the FWP office in Washington prescribed a basic arrangement and makeup and provided close editorial supervision. All guides were required to conform to the following formula:

The geological background, natural setting and natural resources, the commercial, industrial, agricultural, religious, and educational development of the State will be described; its history from the earliest times to the present will be related; the story of the founding and growth of all principal cities and towns will be told; racial groups, points of interest, and noted personalities who have influenced the development of the State will be discussed; folklore and folkways, architecture, the labor situation, and all other pertinent facts, as well as the contemporary scene of the State, will be reviewed. The book will contain a chronological history of the State from the earliest times to the present, as well as a comprehensive bibliography. Tours describing all principal highways on a mile-by-mile basis will be included. A State map, a tour key map, and maps of all cities which are separately treated, will be included.¹¹

Nevertheless, Washington left to individual projects sufficient freedom to interpret and articulate the information collected so that, while similar in organization and makeup, each guide was a distinct entity with its own special character.

Work on the Indiana guide progressed slowly, and the public grew increasingly impatient as a result. Charges of boondoggling were commonplace. Whereas a WPA-sponsored construction project generally yielded some immediate and tangible evidence that taxpayers were getting something for their money, the Writers' Project did not. Without a published guide to show for its labors, the Writers' Project in Indiana was in a vulnerable position. By the summer of 1937, its staff, already down to eighty-five, was further cut back to sixty.¹²

¹¹ Article 7 of the WPA Writers' Program's application for permission to publish *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State*, Sponsor Folder, WPA Writers' Project Files for Indiana.

¹² Indianapolis News, June 14, 21, 1937.

The controversy surrounding the publication that same summer of the Massachusetts guide did little to improve matters. The Massachusetts guide, the third in the series to be published, clearly reflected the liberal and pro-labor sympathies of its authors. It dealt with a number of controversial issues, sometimes to the exclusion of what many prominent Bay Staters considered to be more suitable topics for a tax-supported guide ostensibly intended to promote the best interests of the commonwealth. For example, the guide devoted forty-one lines to the Sacco-Vanzetti case but not a single line to the Boston Tea Party. An outraged Governor Charles F. Hurley demanded that those responsible for besmirching the honor of Massachusetts be fired. Both United States senators from Massachusetts called for investigations, while other prominent political leaders advocated strict censorship or outright suppression of future printings. At least one suggested that the guide be burned.¹³

Reaction in Indiana to this controversy was swift and predictable. The Indianapolis *News* charged that the authors of the Massachusetts guide had distorted the original purpose of the guidebook to propogate their radical political ideas. The *News* recommended that the Indiana guide be thoroughly scrutinized and edited by responsible citizens before it be allowed to go to press. "Now is the time," declared the *News*, "to determine whether the project is what it is supposed to be or is tainted with radical political propaganda."¹⁴

The Washington office of FWP, troubled by the political and censorship implications of the Massachusetts guide controversy, advised all states to exercise additional care in curbing what might be construed as controversial material.¹⁵ Some writers objected to this form of self-imposed censorship, but most seem to have accepted it as preferable to having censorship imposed from without. This action substantially defused the censorship issue, and no subsequent state guide publication stirred up quite so much controversy.

But FWP's troubles were far from over. By the spring, 1939, the political and economic climate in America had changed, and the Roosevelt administration decided to deemphasize its Depression-oriented programs. In April, the President submitted to Congress a reorganization plan which deprived the Works Progress Administration of its independent

¹³ Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana, Ill., 1977), 101-107.

¹⁴ Indianapolis *News*, August 21, 1937.

¹⁵ Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 108-109.

status and placed it under the jurisdiction of the Federal Works Administration. Under this new arrangement the Works Progress Administration was renamed the Works Projects Administration. The arts projects were among the first casualties of the administration's new orientation. Hopkins' successor as head of WPA, Colonel Francis Harrington, regarded the four arts programs as a nuisance and believed that WPA could be operated more efficiently without them. Congress shared this conviction. Toward the end of June it passed the Emergency Relief Act which abolished the Theater Project altogether and discontinued federal sponsorship of the remaining programs—writers', music, art, and historical records. Congress did agree, however, to permit these surviving programs to continue under state sponsorship provided that sponsors could be found for them by September 30. Sponsors were required to contribute at least 25 percent of the total cost of each program. Despite the shortage of time, the Writers' Project was able to line up sponsors in every state but Idaho and North Dakota, and those two exceptions had already published their guides.¹⁶

In Indiana, the Department of Public Relations at Indiana State Teachers College, Terre Haute (now Indiana State University), became the official statewide sponsor of the Indiana Writers' Project. The Indianapolis office continued to operate much as it did under federal sponsorship, providing administrative, editorial, and consultative services. The new sponsor assumed certain administrative, advisory, and editorial functions, but it concentrated its efforts on making publication arrangements for the guide, preparing new project proposals, and improving the image of the writers' program.

The most immediate concern of the new sponsor was, of course, the publication of the Indiana guide. The Department of Public Relations at Indiana State inherited a nearly complete manuscript and immediately began a search for a publisher. On April 11, 1940, John Sembower, director of public relations at Indiana State Teachers College, contracted with Oxford University Press for the publication rights to the Indiana guide.¹⁷ The following month, Sembower formally petitioned the WPA Writers' Project to publish *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State* at a retail cost per copy of \$2.75.¹⁸ The petition was quickly approved, but the guide did not appear in print until September, 1941.

¹⁶ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 329-30.

¹⁷ Sponsor Folder, WPA Writers' Project Files for Indiana.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State, as Gordon Briggs stated in his preface, "goes beyond the usual limits of a guidebook and portrays Indiana in terms of its people and their background, its points of interest, natural setting and resources, and its social and economic development."¹⁹ In format and organization, the guide is similar to other state guides, as required by the WPA Writers' Project. The volume is highly readable, informative, and interesting. Though now dated in many respects, it nevertheless contains a wealth of interesting and still useful material on Indiana. Somerset Publishers reprinted the guide in 1973 and copies are therefore readily available. Copies of the original printing by Oxford University Press turn up occasionally on the shelves of used book stores and in the catalogs of antiquarian book dealers, but these are regarded as prized collectors items and in good condition cost considerably more than the original price of \$2.75.

The Indiana guide was not the only project in the state undertaken by the Writers' Project. In 1937 the Indiana project published a small pamphlet entitled *Hoosier Tall Stories*, a collection of thirty-seven of the most popular and time-honored yarns or tales. Most supposedly had their origin at the "liar's" or "community bench," a popular spot in many Indiana towns where Hoosiers gathered to swap yarns. According to the pamphlet, the most frequently repeated of these tall stories was "Drive on!":

Jeff Dawson was said to be the laziest man in Fountain or any other county. His neighbors labored with him on behalf of his family, hard up because he was so lazy, but appeals were of no use. Finally the citizens told him in so many words that there was no need of a dead man walking around on top the ground and he could take his choice of getting down to work or being buried alive. He chose to be buried.

On the way to the cemetery, with Jeff in a coffin on the wagon, they met a man who inquired the reason for such unusual doings, since the "corpse" was calmly puffing a corncob pipe. When it was explained to him, he offered to help Jeff get a start in life by giving him a bushel of corn. Jeff pondered this a moment and finally rose up to ask "Is the corn shelled?" "Why, no!" replied the Good Samaritan in astonishment. Jeff resignedly lay back again in the coffin. "Drive on, boys" said he, "drive on!"²⁰

The Indiana Writers' Project also compiled one regional guide, *Indiana: the Calumet Region Historical Guide*. It was published in 1939, while the program was still under federal sponsorship. The Calumet guide is 271 pages in length and follows roughly

¹⁹ *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State* (New York, 1941), vii.

²⁰ *Hoosier Tall Stories* (1937), 24.

the outline established for state guides. It is replete with interesting facts about the history, economy, and people of the Calumet region, embracing the cities of Whiting, Hammond, East Chicago, and Gary. Perhaps the guide's most attractive feature to the present-day reader is its numerous illustrations and maps. Like copies of the original printings of *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State* and *Hoosier Tall Stories*, copies of the Calumet guide are relatively scarce in the market place.

Shortly after the Department of Public Relations at Indiana State Teachers College assumed sponsorship of the Writers' Project in Indiana, it began compiling and furnishing to approximately one hundred Indiana newspapers a free weekly column entitled "It Happened in Indiana." These columns dealt with "little-known sidelights on Indiana history, humorous happenings in the past, bits of interesting folklore, and other miscellany of an interesting or unusual nature."²¹ The files of the Writers' Project provided material for columns. "It Happened in Indiana" immediately became a favorite feature in Hoosier newspapers and ran for more than two years. It doubtless gave the Writers' Project increased visibility and did much to improve its image among Hoosiers.

During the winter of 1939-1940 sponsors at Indiana State Teachers College proposed several additional projects. These included county histories, an Indiana fact book, sociological studies, and a pictorial guide to Indiana. The most ambitious was the series of county histories, to include twenty-four abridged histories and guides patterned after the state guide. The files of the Writers' Project housed at Indiana State University contain no fewer than nineteen county history manuscripts at various stages of completion, the largest being the 600 page history of Delaware County. The sociological studies were to focus on the cities of Lafayette and Terre Haute. Regrettably, little came of these proposals. The Indiana guide occupied the project's main attention until its publication in September, 1941. Shortly afterwards, the United States entered World War II, and the fate of the Writers' Project was all but sealed as national defense took precedence over all other programs.

Sembower saw the difficulties ahead for the Writers' Project as a result of Pearl Harbor, and he tried desperately to rescue some if not all of the program from being discontinued. In early 1942 he wrote to Mildred Schmitt, WPA state director

²¹ Proposal request for Writers' Project activity entitled "It Happened in Indiana," Sponsor Folder, WPA Writers' Project files for Indiana.

for Community Service Projects, of the "storm warnings" appearing in connection with many of the projects. Sembower emphasized that certain of the projects, especially the county histories, might help national defense efforts by improving general morale. He also appealed for the projects on humanitarian grounds. Noting that 90 percent of the sixty-five persons still employed on the Writers' Project were elderly or physically-handicapped persons who would be unable to fit into defense labor, he expressed concern for what might become of them if the project were discontinued.²²

Schmitt shared Sembower's concerns. Only the day before Sembower had written to her, she sent off a lengthy letter to Washington proposing new publications to be undertaken by the Indiana Writers' Project. The majority of these were geared to the defense effort, such as a "Weekly Civilian Defense Information Service," to be supplied by the sponsor to 300 Indiana newspapers, or "brief scripts prepared for grammar schools showing the efforts made by the American people to win previous wars." Another proposal called for a "Recreational Guide to Indianapolis and central Indiana for soldiers, naval cadets and other members of the armed forces."²³ The Washington office of the WPA Writers' Project reacted favorably to most of these proposals.²⁴ But there was little even the central office could do for WPA itself was nearing its end. Always regarded in Washington as a stop-gap program, WPA by 1942 was but a mere shadow of what it had once been. Economic recovery after the outbreak of World War II assured the demise of WPA. By gearing itself almost exclusively to the defense effort, WPA merely postponed the inevitable. The entire WPA was liquidated on June 30, 1943, bringing an end to an epic era in federal support of the arts.²⁵

In early 1942 Schmitt also proposed that Indiana State Teachers College at Terre Haute, as statewide sponsor of the Indiana Writers' Project, be designated "as the agency for possible housing of the Writers' Project files." Washington promptly approved this proposal,²⁶ and when the Indiana Writers' Project was discontinued, the files in Indianapolis were delivered to Terre Haute. Housed in the old library at Indiana State, the files apparently remained undisturbed and unnoticed

²² John Sembower to Mildred Schmidt [sic], January 8, 1942, *ibid.*

²³ Schmitt to Florence Kerr, January 7, 1942, *ibid.*

²⁴ Walter M. Kilinger to John K. Jennings, January 13, 1942, *ibid.*

²⁵ Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 227-37.

²⁶ Kiplinger to Jennings, January 13, 1942; Kerr to Jennings, n.d., Sponsor Folder, WPA Writers' Project Files for Indiana.

for more than a decade. In 1954, Stith Thompson, director of the Folklore Institute at Indiana University and a former consultant to the Writers' Project, received permission from Raleigh Holmstedt, president of Indiana State Teachers College, to remove the files on folklore to Indiana University on extended loan.²⁷ Some three years later, Donald Scheick, professor of history at Indiana State, fortuitously came upon the remaining papers in their original wood and cardboard file cabinets while poking around in one of the library's storage areas. The cabinets were in terrible disrepair and covered with dust and ceiling plaster. Scheick made some inquiries about the papers, but no one seemed to know much if anything about their provenance. Fearing that a valuable collection of source materials on Indiana history might continue to go unused or possibly even be discarded, Scheick asked for and was granted permission to remove the papers to his office. Both he and Professor Herbert Rissler subsequently made good use of the files in their classes on Indiana history.²⁸

When Indiana State University unveiled plans for a new library in 1970, all parties agreed that the Writers' Project files should be housed there. Indiana University returned the folklore materials, and the whole collection is now housed in the archives section of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections of the Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University. To facilitate use, the materials have been arranged according to county, with separate files for administrative papers. Materials in each county folder have been alphabetized, and an inventory is in preparation. Because much of the paper is in poor condition the entire collection has been microfilmed. And plans are being made to encapsulate in Mylar (a polyester film) the more important papers to enhance their life and usability.²⁹

The Writers' Project files constitute a rich and largely unused source of valuable material on Indiana. The files occupy nineteen file drawers and measure approximately twenty-four linear feet in length. Only a small fraction of this material

²⁷ Earl Tannenbaum to Richard Dorson, January 7, February 1, 1971, Administrative Folder, *ibid.*

²⁸ Interview with Donald Scheick, Indiana State University, July 17, 1978.

²⁹ For the time being, there are no plans to make microfilm copies of the collection available outside the Library. Limited photocopying of the materials may be done with the approval of the Head of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. Understandably, the condition of the material to be copied will be the main factor to be considered in making a decision to grant or to deny a photocopying request. But every reasonable effort will be made to assist patrons who wish to use the materials.

found its way into print. Much of this unpublished material was gathered for the county history project and several other less ambitious projects. Most of the files contain information far in excess of what was required for the guide, including gazetteers, photos, newspaper clippings, maps, and graphs. As expected, this information does reflect the major categories incorporated in the state guide, such as history, culture, traditions, industry, education, agriculture, geography, and architecture.

The size and scope of each file varies widely from county to county, but there is generally a direct correlation between the size of a county's population and the size of its file. The files for Allen, Lake, La Porte, St. Joseph, Marion, Vanderburgh, and Vigo counties all exceed six inches in thickness while those of Benton, Jackson, Clinton, Pike, and Scott are all less than three inches in thickness. But a county's population is not always an accurate indicator of the size of its file. For example, the file for Tippecanoe County is smaller than expected while that for Crawford County is larger. The file for Knox County, in which Vincennes is located, is larger than the county's population would suggest but understandable because of its special place in eighteenth-century Indiana history. The number of writers assigned to a county at any one time depended in large measure on the size of the county. In the early stages of the project as many as ten writers were working at the same time in Marion County. What is surprising is that the file for Marion County is not larger than it is. Some writers, of course, were more prolific than others. Or, what may also be true is that some writers, or their supervisors, were more selective in what was submitted to the central or regional offices. The degree of supervision seems not only to have affected the amount of material submitted but also the type of material. In many parts of the state supervision seems to have been minimal and writers were allowed considerable latitude both in the choice of and approach to assignments. This freedom accounts in some part, perhaps in large part, for the great diversity of material found in the files. While some writers emphasized folklore or history, others emphasized archaeology or architecture. What is clear from even a hasty perusal of the files is a lack of balance in the type of materials found in the folders. It is therefore difficult to make generalizations about what is to be found in the files. What is there is a potpourri, albeit a fascinating potpourri.

The Writers' Project files vary in quality as much as in size and type. Few writers were trained professionally as re-

searchers or interviewers. And their lack of training is often reflected in the quality of their reports. Nevertheless, there is little in the files that is not of some merit. And there is much deserving of careful study. The county histories are of particular interest. The nearly 300-page manuscript entitled "The Creole (French) Pioneers at Old Post Vincennes" is perhaps the best of several impressive special studies found in the files. With sound editing, it would be worthy of publication. There are many photographs, charts, maps, and other miscellaneous materials that may not exist anywhere else. Information collected from interviews may be among the most important material to be found in the files. True, interviewers were seldom schooled in the techniques of conducting interviews or in the disciplines of history or folklore, but much of the information they gathered might otherwise have died with the persons whom they interviewed. In brief, the files provide a wealth of material to attract the interest of scholars from a variety of disciplines or simply the curious who wish to explore in more depth Indiana's past.