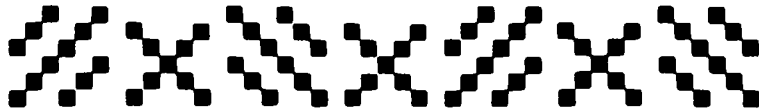


The Federal Writers' Project Revisited:  
The Indiana Historical Society's New Guide  
to the State of Indiana

*Errol Wayne Stevens\**



The Indiana Historical Society, in August, 1978, launched a four-year project to prepare a guidebook to the state of Indiana. In so doing, the society has sought to revive the spirit of the Federal Writers' Project volume, *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State*, published in 1941. The guide, which has since become a classic in the eyes of many Hoosiers, was one volume in a larger work known as the American Guide Series. The series included a guide to each state as well as guides to a number of individual cities. The Indiana volume was divided into three sections which, taken together, constitute a general introduction to the state's history and culture. The first section consists of a series of essays on the natural setting, archaeology, agriculture, education, newspapers, arts and crafts, and so on. The second section includes short histories and descriptions of fourteen Indiana cities and towns. The final section—nearly half of the book—consists of twenty automobile tours which crisscross the entire state.

The Federal Writers' Project was under the general administrative direction of the Works Projects Administration. Its purpose was to create jobs for writers thrown out of work by the Depression of the 1930s. One of the four federal arts projects—there were also programs in art, music, and theater—the Writers' Project attempted to put writers to work doing what they presumably did best—writing. The headquarters of the Indiana project, which operated in the state from 1936 to 1942, was in Indianapolis. There were ten to twenty workers assigned to this office. In addition, there was an average of about eighty field workers in various locations around the state. At one point, the number of people employed by the

---

\* Errol Wayne Stevens is director of the Indiana Guide Project, Indiana Historical Society.

project reached 150. These workers compiled information on local history and then sent it to the state office where editors and writers transformed the material into publishable copy. Most of the field workers were recruited from the relief rolls, but the key personnel in the central office were not on relief.<sup>1</sup>

Although the guide was its most outstanding accomplishment, the Indiana Writers' Project produced other publications. One was "It Happened in Indiana," a series of releases on Indiana history distributed to newspapers around the state. Another was *Hoosier Tall Stories*, a mimeographed booklet of tales from the "liars bench." The project also produced a 240 page historical guide to the Calumet region. In addition to these works, the project prepared a large number of manuscripts that never saw publication, including an unfinished series of county histories for use in public schools, histories of various Indiana cities, monographs on Indiana history, and written works on a wide range of other subjects.<sup>2</sup>

The Indiana guide was well-received when it was first published. The New York *Herald Tribune* thought that it ranked among the best of the volumes in the American Guide Series, and the Indianapolis *Times* called it an "impressive piece of work."<sup>3</sup> The book has stood up well over the years. Despite the fact that the volume is nearly forty-years old and has never been revised, it is still widely used. The reasons for this book's lasting popularity are its readable style and its frequent use of interesting anecdotal material.

Although the Indiana guide avoided the controversy that greeted the publication of some of the other state guides, it did not completely escape criticism. Some have considered it superficial in its treatment of the state's history. A more immediate criticism came from the pen of a reviewer for the South Bend *Tribune* who thought that the book had been a waste of government money because of the numerous errors in the section on South Bend. Although the newspaper was correct in pointing out these mistakes, they were too minor to detract seriously from the value of the guide. More than anything else, the tone

---

<sup>1</sup> "Final State Reports, Writers' Project: Indiana," Records of the Works Projects Administration, RG 69 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; Indiana Writers' Project, *The Calumet Region Historical Guide* (Gary, 1939). As the preceding article by Robert K. O'Neill makes clear, most of the unpublished material prepared by Indiana Writers' Project workers is available for use by qualified researchers at the Cunningham Memorial Library, Indiana State University, Terre Haute.

<sup>3</sup> New York *Herald Tribune*, April 12, 1942; Indianapolis *Times*, September 30, 1941.

of the article reflects the bruised pride of a civic booster who felt that South Bend deserved more careful attention. One of the most frequently cited mistakes was the guide's carelessness in calling a number of streets boulevards when they actually should have been designated as streets, or vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

Given the problems that had to be overcome, it is remarkable that the Indiana guide (or most of the volumes in the American Guide Series for that matter) is of such high quality. The Federal Writers' Project was a relief program designed to create work for unemployed writers. At the same time, the project was charged with the responsibility of putting together a creditable product which would assure the taxpayers that their money was well spent. These goals were difficult to reconcile because few Americans on the relief rolls had actually earned their livings as writers. "Many of the field workers were not writers at all," indicated the final report of the Writers' Project, "but merely persons who wanted to become writers or who fancied themselves authors." The abilities of these workers varied considerably. Members of the Indianapolis office felt that the work could have been done with a smaller, more capable staff, an impossibility, of course, in view of the project's purpose to employ as many people as the law permitted.<sup>5</sup>

Some observers doubted that any government-sponsored project could produce a guidebook that would be worth reading. One skeptic, speaking of a proposed national guidebook, phrased it this way: "If the Squeedunks and Linoleumvilles of the United States are omitted from the Guidebook, or truthfully described as being of small interest, they will raise hell enough to ripple all the way to Washington. . . ." <sup>6</sup> Fortunately, the Indiana guide avoided the pitfall of becoming a provincial or booster-like document. The book does not attempt to raise the ordinary to the level of the extraordinary and, to its credit, leaves the obscure where it belongs—in obscurity.

The Indiana project suffered from additional problems that did not grow out of the nature of the project itself, but, at times, threatened publication of the guide. The project's first state supervisor, Ross F. Lockridge, allowed the project to slip into the doldrums. According to one member of his staff, Lock-

---

<sup>4</sup> Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana, Ill., 1977), 101-107; South Bend *Tribune*, October 16, 1941. The Elkhart *Truth* was also critical of the guide. Elkhart *Truth*, September 30, 1941.

<sup>5</sup> "Final State Reports, Writers' Project: Indiana."

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 33-34.

ridge believed that the project's primary goal was to keep people on the relief rolls. He was not much concerned that the project did not move very swiftly toward its goal of producing a state guidebook. This situation created no small amount of frustration among staff members who despaired of ever seeing their work appear in print. Lockridge also spent a great deal of time out of the office, involved in extracurricular activities that had nothing to do with the guide. He resigned, under pressure, in July, 1937, and the work was completed under the more capable guidance of his successor, Gordon F. Briggs.<sup>7</sup>

Commercial presses published all manuscripts prepared by the Federal Writers' Project, and publication had to be sponsored by an individual or organization that could subsidize some of the costs of publication. The Indiana office experienced some difficulty in finding a sponsor. After lengthy negotiations, Briggs first convinced state Governor M. Clifford Townsend to sponsor the book. "As you know," Briggs reported to Washington, "Indiana is a labyrinth of political influences, and getting this sponsorship contract signed was more difficult than it might appear on the surface." A few months later, the governor, on the advice of the attorney general, reversed himself and declined to serve as sponsor on the grounds that a state subsidy to a private publishing house was illegal. A subsequent attempt to push a bill through the legislature authorizing such sponsorship also failed. Briggs ultimately persuaded Indiana State Teachers College, Terre Haute, now Indiana State University, to serve as sponsor.<sup>8</sup>

The Indiana Historical Society's current project has been spared many of the problems that accompanied the writing and publication of the federal volume. Progress and the passing of time have made the need for a new state guide manifest. The 1941 guide, especially the tour section, is badly out-of-date. Additionally, in recent years there has been a revival of interest in local history and folklore that parallels a similar concern of the 1930s. The growing interest in genealogy, the fascination with restoring old buildings and even entire neighborhoods, the founding of local historical societies, museums, and other his-

---

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Rebecca E. Pitts, July 30, 1979; Henry G. Alsberg to Wayne Coy, September 2, 9, 1936, Administrative Correspondence, Records of the Federal Writers' Project Concerning Indiana, Records of the Works Projects Administration, RG 69 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.); Penkower, *Federal Writers' Project*, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon F. Briggs to Alsberg, February 3, 1938, September 16, 1938, John T. Frederick to Briggs, March 8, 1939, Editorial Correspondence, Records of the Federal Writers' Project Concerning Indiana.

torical organizations provide graphic illustration of the new interest. A new guide to the state is an appropriate response to this popular movement. Economic factors also will make a new guide attractive to Hoosiers. The dramatic increase in the price of gasoline will have an important impact on the patterns of travel. Most families, even if gasoline is available, will be unable to afford the long-distance vacations that they have been accustomed to taking in the past. Hoosiers are likely to look with renewed interest at the possibilities of touring nearer home. The Indiana Historical Society hopes to prepare a guide which will serve their needs.

The new Indiana guide will be more than a revision or an imitation of the 1941 volume. The project's staff will research and write an entirely new book designed to meet the needs of Hoosiers during the 1980s. Changes have taken place in the state since the early 1940s that require corresponding changes in the format of the guide. The first such change will be that the topical essays at the beginning of the old guide will be replaced by a narrative history. Only one of the chapters in the original *Indiana* was entitled "History," but the authors construed "history" very narrowly to mean political and military history. In fact, most of the material in the first section was actually historical in character, and it is therefore feasible to rearrange it into a general narrative.

Another important change is that the principal-city section of the old guide will be extensively modified. This section contained fourteen important Indiana cities and towns. The new guide will expand this list to twenty-two communities. Rather than including them in a separate part of the book, the society's volume will incorporate the principal cities into the tour section. Each city or town (with the exception of Indianapolis and the Calumet area, which comprise tours unto themselves) will be the focal point of a tour.

The most important innovation in the new guide will be the restructuring of the tours. In the original volume, the tours simply crossed the state in a north-south, east-west pattern. This may have been an appropriate approach in 1941. In the 1940s, most highways were two-lane, and travel could easily be combined with touring. A trip could always be enlivened by bringing the guide and seeing the sights along the way. The interstate system has altered this pattern of travel. A trip of any distance today is likely to be over a four-lane limited access highway on which touring in the old sense is a virtual impossibility. In the latter part of the twentieth century tour-

ing and getting places have come to mean two different things, and the new guide will not try to serve both purposes.

The interests of the tourist will be best served by abandoning the north-south, east-west plan of the 1941 guide. Instead, there will be nineteen circular tours, beginning and ending at a principal city. The metropolitan areas of Indianapolis and the Calumet will comprise additional tours, thus making a total of twenty-one tours.

Several considerations have been taken into account in designing these tours. First, the interstate system will be ignored as much as is practically possible. Second, since the book is to be a comprehensive guide to the state and not just a directory of the most interesting attractions, every Indiana county must be crossed by at least one tour. Third, each tour will have a theme to give it regional or historical unity. Fourth, tours in urban areas will not follow a specific route. Attractions in such places are so numerous that tourists will want to see them in whatever order is convenient. Sights will simply be listed with a brief description and an address. One exception to this rule will be walking tours. Walking tours were not included in the original guide, but since many communities have planned such tours it seems desirable to include them in the new publication.

Both the history and tour sections of the book will be illustrated with photographs, drawings, and maps. The length of the new guide will be less than 700 pages. This is slightly longer than the Writers' Project guide, but still a manageable volume. It will be issued both in hardcover and paperback. In hardback, the volume will be suitable as a reference tool in the library. In paperback, it should be light enough to be conveniently carried and referred to while traveling. The Indiana Historical Society hopes that when it appears in the fall of 1982 *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State* will help awaken Hoosiers to the heritage and attractions of their home state.