President Franklin D. Roosevelt offered his support for the Federal Writers’ Project American Guide Series on this poster celebrating American Guide week, November 10–16, 1941. The individual state guides were meant, as he noted, to “illustrate our national way of life, yet at the same time portray variants in local patterns of living and regional development.” Poster courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.
The essays that form the core of the New Deal’s Federal Writers’ Project are a powerful demonstration of why records matter. They are a storehouse of ordinary people’s responses to the Great Depression of the 1930s, a compilation of firsthand interpretations of American history that documents what people valued about their past and their present. Never before had the federal government funded a public history project through which states could record their contributions to the story of America and the people and places within it. The project’s ultimate purpose, beyond providing employment, was to fuse the many voices compiled in research essays produced by the project’s writers into state and local guidebooks written in the voice of a single unidentified narrator. Thus, going back to the records to hear the stories of the original contributors takes us back to the beginning threads of the conversation, adding depth to our readings of the final published summaries that came out of the project.

Both the conception and the implementation of the Federal Writers’ Project elicited strong support and ultimately stronger opposition. When some of the state guides later documented the more shameful aspects of the nation’s past and present, like the treatment of former slaves and racial segregation, the harshest critics, notably those involved in the 1938 congressional investigation headed by Representative Martin Dies, came to see the project as publicly funded subversion. More moderate critics of the project objected to spending public money on something as intangible and materially unproductive as research and guidebooks on state and local history and customs, scenic wonders, and agricultural and industrial achievements. Supporters of the project worked hard to make a case for it and, although they had high hopes for its success, only the fervently committed anticipated that the project would create the most enduring cultural legacy of the New Deal.

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Examining the hundreds of interviews and background essays created for the Federal Writers’ Project by Kansas writers is an essential yet neglected starting point in determining how ordinary citizens in the Sunflower State understood the purpose of this bold cultural experiment. The impetus to search the documentary record is especially overdue for Kansas and other states that have received, at best, a cursory glance in scholarly accounts of the project written during the past four decades. Fortunately for students of Kansas history, there is a rich, yet largely overlooked source of Federal Writers’ Project records in Wichita State University Libraries’ Special Collections and University Archives. Although there are other collections of Federal Writers’ Project materials held at institutions throughout Kansas and at the Library of Congress and National Archives in Washington, D.C., the records at Wichita State University (WSU) comprise the largest collection of Federal Writers’ Project research materials in the state. The interviews and essays by Federal Writers’ Project researchers that make up the collection, which spans from 1935 to 1942 and contains entries on 32 of the state’s 105 counties, form the basis for much of the Kansas state guide in the American Guide Series, originally published in September 1939 as Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State. To accommodate space limitations and satisfy the editorial policies of the national office, which had to approve the final copy, the state guides distilled many thousands of pages of essays based on research and interviews into approximately five hundred pages. Each guide included a narrative section covering the state’s history, geography, and culture. In addition to agriculture and industry, guides addressed such topics as archaeology, art, conservation, education, and folklore. Each volume was also to include sections on cities and towns and automobile tours as well as photographs, maps, and drawings. The narrative section of the Kansas guide contains only 158 pages, making it one of the shortest in the series. In order to achieve the goal of the project—to tell America’s diverse story through the voice of one narrator, a goal as paradoxical as it was ambitious—the guide’s editors attempted to capture the tone, content, and themes of the writers’ interviews and research essays and, primarily through omission, they selectively altered them. History, of course, is as much about what is left out of a narrative as it is about what is included. What do the records omitted from the final product of the Federal Writers’ Project reveal about people, places, and events in Kansas? What do they conceal? And how do the essays and interviews that resulted from the project illuminate what mattered to ordinary Kansans who were retelling their state’s history and forging its future at a time of political, economic, and cultural transition marked by crisis and yet filled with opportunity?

1. See, for example, Jerre Mangione, The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935–1943 (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1972); Christine Bold, The WPA Guides: Mapping America (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); Jerrold Hirsch, Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); David A. Taylor, Soul of a People: The WPA Writers’ Project Uncovers Depression America (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley, 2009). Only Bold and Hirsch mentioned Kansas, and each did so in a cursory way. Bold referred to a celebratory headline from the Wichita Eagle to promote guidebooks (p. 17); and Hirsch noted Governor Alfred M. Landon’s disapproval of the national and state projects in his discussion of style formating instructions sent from the national office to state officials (pp. 51, 57).

2. The online finding aid to this collection, Federal Writers’ Project Records for Kansas of the Work Projects Administration, MS 71-01, Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas (hereafter cited as “FWP for Kansas”), is accessible online at specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/ms/71-01/71-1-a.html. No information is available to explain why this particular collection remained in Kansas instead of being sent to Washington, D.C., after World War II along with other records from the state’s Federal Writers’ Project. Since these records focus on south central Kansas, particularly Sedgwick County, the University of Wichita, as Wichita State University was then known, was a logical place to archive them. Several smaller collections of records documenting the project in Kansas also exist, including the American Guide Research Reports, Federal Writers Project, Collection 59-16-03-14, 6 boxes, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, comprised largely of drafts of historical essays on various topics for towns and counties throughout southwest Kansas, such as Dodge City and Scott City and Ford, Finney, Hodgeman, Clark, and Meade counties; historic photographs of buildings and parks in Dodge City and Larned; and reports on race relations in several of these localities. A collection at the Salina Public Library documents records from eighteen counties in the north central part of the state. Various Kansas records from throughout the state are included in the national collection of the Federal Writers’ Project at the Library of Congress and the National Archives in Washington, D.C. For the finding aid to the collection at the Library of Congress, see United States Work Projects Administration Records: A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C., 2008), available online at hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms009053. For the finding aid to the collection at the National Archives, see Records of the Federal Writers’ Project, in the Records of the Work Progress Administration [WPA], Record Group 69.5.5, compiled by Katherine H. Davidson, Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Federal Writers’ Project, Work Projects Administration, 1935-44, PI 57 (National Archives, Washington, D.C., 1953), available online at archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/069.html#69.5.5.


4. “The American Guide Series,” n.d., available online at senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/WPASTateGuides.pdf. This publication mistakenly states that the narrative section of the Kansas guide runs to only 144 pages (p. 6).
The 1930s were especially hard on Kansas and its neighboring Great Plains states because the economic crisis coincided with drought and dust storms that lasted for much of the decade. These effects were particularly felt in the western part of the state. Exacerbating these problems was the fact that farmers were already going through tough times during the 1920s, despite the general prosperity of the rest of the country. Keeping in mind that agriculture was even more important to the state’s economy in those years than it is today, a few statistics fill out the grim picture. During the 1930s the total value of agricultural production was only 63 percent of what it was during the previous decade.5 Yields of wheat and corn were generally lower as winds blew off loose topsoil, and there was a severe decline in farm prices for much of the decade.6

The 1930s is also the only decade during which the state as a whole lost population. Unemployment between 1930 and 1933, the worst years of the Depression, averaged about 21 percent according to the leading economic historian of Kansas in the Depression, Peter Fearon. Although this percentage was below the national average of 25.8 percent, it meant that more than one in five workers in the state was unemployed. An even more revealing set of statistics is the glaring comparison between the employment and the payroll indices compiled by the Kansas Department of Labor and Industry. Fearon has pointed out that “employment fell by just over thirty percent between 1930 and 1933, while payrolls declined by nearly fifty-two percent.”7 Many of the problems that Kansans suffered during the Depression were not new, but the extreme range of the boom and bust cycle that characterized the onset and worst years of the Depression was one of the worst of its kind in the state’s history.

Public programs for recovery during the 1930s left an indelible legacy on Kansas agriculture and political life and redefined the relationship between government and citizens and between the federal government and the states. Farmers frequently railed about the extent of governmental intrusion into their lives. They resisted legislation that regulated crops and livestock and attempted to stem soil erosion, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act, but took advantage of allotment checks, debt relief, rehabilitation services, mortgage refinancing, and other New Deal subsidies that enabled many people to hold onto their farms, earn a subsistence livelihood, and survive the worst of the Depression. Between 1933 and 1940, Fearon noted, Congress allocated $226 million to the state of Kansas to provide farmers with cash payments through the wheat allotment and corn-hog programs.8 People both needed and wanted the help, yet at the same time they resented their dependence on public funds.

6. The 1931 wheat crop was a notable exception and the 251 million bushels it produced was the largest grown to date. But as Hope and others came to realize, that year’s harvest had disastrous consequences since it increased supply when there was already a surplus and drove the price below the cost of production. Of even greater import was the false encouragement the crop gave to farmers who thought they could continue the haphazard farming methods that helped to bring about the Dust Bowl. For a probing interpretation of the long-term causes of the Dust Bowl, see Donald Worster, Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979; reprint, 2004).
Kansas was particularly adept at navigating the politics of federal funding for recovery and work relief during the New Deal and maximized its share of federal assistance to enhance state and local measures. Statistics cited by Fearon show, for example, that between 1933 and 1935 the federal government contributed 72 percent of funding for emergency relief in Kansas; the counties contributed 26 percent and the state only 2 percent.9 Both Democratic and Republican state governments in the 1930s were ideologically committed to pursuing programs of recovery and work relief before and during the New Deal. However, Republican governor Alfred M. “Alf” Landon disapproved of the value of specific federal programs funded through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), including the Federal Writers’ Project, which he dismissed as unnecessary: “This [Democratic] administration has found time to make guide books.”10 Cultural programs received slightly less funding in Kansas than they did nationally and only 5 percent of WPA funds in Kansas were spent on public activities such as the Writers’ Project and other arts and music programs. During Landon’s administration, from 1933 to 1937, support for relief programs was tied to a strong commitment to balance the state budget. Landon was dedicated, as historian Craig Miner noted, to “working for limited government living within its means and opposing the deficit-spending trends that were prominent nationally.”11

This principle prompted Landon to devise strategies that enabled Kansas to get substantially more federal relief funds per capita than most other states. One of his critics, historian R. Alton Lee, has argued that Landon and his administration successfully perpetuated the idea that relief was the responsibility of the counties and not the state, and this enabled Kansas to get “millions of dollars of federal funds that it would not have received if it had accepted the responsibility for relief, an obligation that almost every other state assumed during the Depression.” Whereas other states met the legal requirement of providing 25 percent for relief programs, in Kansas the state government contributed “only 3/10 of one percent of all relief expenditures from public funds.”12 Landon’s strategy showed that even when the federal government made the rules, a resourceful and persistent state executive could navigate them to the ultimate benefit of the state’s citizens. The fact remains, however, that Landon could not have been successful in balancing the state’s budget without the very substantial contributions of the federal government to Kansas’s general and special emergency relief programs.

A number of essays in the Writers’ Project records confirm that politics was of interest to ordinary Kansans during the tumultuous Depression decade. They reveal people’s willingness to share their political views whether or not the topic at hand had a political dimension. This tendency is found in such essays as “A Tramp Speaks,” “A Socialist Talks,” “History of Transportation,” and “The Wichita Board of Trade.” In “A Tramp Speaks,” Arthur Foster interviewed an itinerant laborer, Lester Adams, who remarked in passing when he was discussing how he and others like him got by, “Some of these men are communists. Of course, I have heard them talk. . . . I am a Republican myself.” In “A Socialist Talks,” Foster interviewed Thomas Jefferson Lane, who shared the story of his struggles as a farmer. He told Foster that he and his family “were good Republicans to begin with,” but when he learned of the socialist platform, it “seemed so reasonable that we at once agreed to it.” Later they told their friends, “and they soon fell in with us.”13

Another Writers’ Project author, Royse Aldrich, interrupted his essay on the “History of Transportation” with a note to the editorial supervisor, warning, “here comes a pretty bad slip in the continuity.” His aside highlighted the political underpinnings of the smooth relations between government and private enterprise and capital and labor in Kansas:

Kansas has always been noted for its sane and considerate legislators. In the matter of taxes and legislation directed at factories and other commercial organizations, the Kansas

10. Cited in Hirsch, Portrait of America, 51. The WPA originally stood for the Works Progress Administration and was renamed the Work Projects Administration on July 1, 1939, when it was made part of the Federal Works Agency.
solons have never been the type who feel an uncontrollable urge to throttle a gold-egg producing goose. . . . To the large manufacturer or the entrepreneur of any large scale industrial operation, the state’s consistent lack of labor agitation and strikes is an important asset. The labor supply for the mills, plants and factories of Kansas is drawn from farms and small towns. This type of young people, a valuable commodity on the labor mart, is alert, intelligent, well-educated, self-reliant, ambitious and loyal. This type is not readily amenable to labor agitation. . . . Contented, intelligent workers, unperturbed by labor agitation, help to build prosperous business institutions.¹⁴

It is important to remember that these comments, which could have been written by a conservative businessman, were penned by an unemployed man on relief interjecting his own political views. In his essay on “The Wichita Board of Trade” Aldrich excoriated the board as an example of what could result from a lack of cooperation between the public and private sectors: “Here are a set of parasites who are as entrenched as so much fungi upon the economic body, who coil and quiver at the ‘menace’ of being ousted but who are clever enough to conceal their motive for self-interest behind a pose of martyrdom for the contented farmer and the happy consumer.” They were “rats and snakes,” and he was content to “let them devour each other.”¹⁵ It is evident from these examples that some participants in the project were passionate about politics and not at all reluctant to express their views on the political and economic issues of the day.

Despite the severity of the Dust Bowl and the economic crisis in Kansas during the Depression, the oral testimonies and written accounts of this period, paradoxically, do not document despair or abject poverty but steely

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determination and strong communal ties. This is true both of the records from the Writers’ Project as well as those from other contemporary sources. The traits that stand out are people’s willingness to pull together even during the hardest times and their reluctance to leave Kansas. Many, demonstrating a quiet strength captured in accounts of the era, felt they had no choice but to persevere. A homemaker in western Kansas, as one example, commented on the rhythms of social life in the mid-1930s that brought people together:

Strange as it may seem we had fun. I can remember the days when the wind and dirt would blow all day until about sunset when the wind would go down and the air would clear. One of the neighbors would drive into the yard . . . and say “come over for supper.” We would hurriedly fix a dish of something to take and the whole family would go; after supper we would play cards and have a really good time. We also had party dances in our homes; there would be two or three men available who played a violin and a guitar; we would move enough furniture out of the front room so we would have enough room to dance. . . . Most of us managed to buy a radio, which was something new, and spent many a night listening to the programs and music.17

To another resident of western Kansas, the bonds created by shared hardships mattered more than who people were or how much or little they had:

All were equal with no money. In sickness or problem times all helped—a people-to-people relationship, what the government says we need to do now to solve some of our social problems. We had it then. . . . All were accepted, even if you could not pay your bills or if you were a sly businessman, you all belonged.18

16. See the digital exhibit by Lorraine Madway, “Soul of a People/Writing America’s Story: Kansas as a Work in Progress during the Great Depression,” Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University Libraries, Wichita, Kansas, specialcollections.wichita.edu/exhibits/soulofapeople.html.
18. Ibid., 252.

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Such responses echo the perseverance that drew settlers to Kansas in the first place, suggesting those who lived through the Depression Era shared earlier residents’ resilience and courage to transform adversity into opportunity.19

The project undertaken to record Kansans’ Depression-era experiences showed signs of success soon after it was launched. The records of the Federal Writers’ Project housed at WSU show that by October 27, 1935, three months after the project’s national launch, administrators in different localities in Kansas had already begun to hire their first group of writers. This group produced their first essays as early as December 1935. Overall supervision of the project came from the state director, A. Q. Miller, and the state supervisor, Harold C. Evans, in Topeka. Day-to-day management of the project was done initially from local and area offices and, as of June 1936, from district offices. Wichita was at first the local and area office and then the district headquarters for most of the counties heavily documented in the WSU collection. Other area offices included those in El Dorado, Harper, and Hutchinson. The WSU records include a series of responses to questions about the project, dated between October 27 and November 1, 1935, submitted by applicants hired on a trial basis to show that they possessed the requisite research and writing skills.20 These evaluations and the brief biographies written by or about twenty of the applicants hint at some of the individual voices that emerge from the essays produced by the nearly one hundred writers who eventually contributed to the collection.

The brief biographies contained in the collection are divided between twelve biographical narratives written by the applicants themselves and eight notes containing biographical information on other individual researchers. This first group of researchers was almost equally divided by gender, consisting of nine men and eleven women, who ranged in age from twenty-five to sixty-two years old. Of those men who stated their ages, two were twenty-five, one was thirty-four, three were in their mid-forties, and one was sixty-two. The women who stated their age or provided information that can be used to determine it

19. For other stories of personal survival, see, for example, Paul Bonifield, The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979); Craig Miner, Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890–1940 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).
tended to be younger: two were twenty-five, two were twenty-nine, one was thirty-one, three were in their mid-thirties, and two were in their fifties.

Their professions also covered a wide range, and included not only those expected of participants in a writers’ project, such as newspaper reporting, teaching, and administrative and accounting jobs, but also a variety of seemingly unrelated occupations. Royse Aldrich, for one, was a veteran reporter who had “held fifteen newspaper jobs, [been] fired seven times,” and also “once tried [his] luck at railroading, working half-day in freight office, and at undertaking business, working six months.” Other researchers included George Pottorf, a carpenter who had done clerical and accounting work; Reginald Frizzelle, a former policeman and architectural designer; Karl Parkhurst, a railroad freight specialist and telegrapher; Ernest Smith, a musician and dance composer and instructor who had also worked as a shoe salesman, fry cook, painter, and paper hanger; and Jessie Cramer, a club woman and Republican precinct committeewoman who evidently managed to meet the requirements necessary to receive relief through the WPA. Only two of the researchers hired in this first group described themselves as authors: Avis Wilson said she was a freelance writer of poetry whose day jobs were secretary and court clerk, and Ernest Smith stated he was the author of publications on folk dances of the Midwest, a musical history of Wichita, and a “graphic music history” for schoolrooms.21

It is not surprising that the project experienced a good bit of turnover in its early stages. Seven of the original researchers were transferred to WPA positions elsewhere, including Adult Education, City Recreation, City Planning, Historical Archives, and the Department of Commerce, but three—Maude Taylor, Lela Hoover, and Lillian Dwyer—managed to write more than a dozen essays each prior to their transfers. Nine of the remaining researchers wrote more than a dozen essays each prior to their transfers. None of the remaining researchers wrote more than a dozen essays each: Royse Aldrich, George Pottorf, Bessie Walters, Harry Denny, Hugh Amick, Jessie Cramer, Ernest Smith, Emma Truax, and June Ann Mabel Spurgeon. Among those who contributed substantially to the Writers’ Project were Aldrich, who completed over seventy long essays; Truax, who wrote more than seventy-five short essays; Cramer, who wrote more than fifty-five essays of varying length; Walters, who wrote more than forty-five; Smith, who wrote more than thirty-five; Pottorf and Spurgeon, who each wrote more than thirty; and Maude Taylor, who wrote more than twenty-five essays.

21. Biographies, [1935], folder 5, box 19, FWP for Kansas; no published work by either Wilson or Smith has been found.

Researcher Evaluations in the Federal Writers’ Project Records for Kansas

To date no scholarship on the Federal Writers’ Project has discussed the evaluations that were part of the researcher hiring process. Sixteen examples of such evaluations for Kansas researchers are part of the collection now held at Wichita State University Libraries. They pose nine questions; it is not clear, however, under what conditions applicants answered them. There is insufficient evidence to know, for instance, if evaluations were open or closed book or whether applicants had to work independently. Still, the questions offer a look at the project’s goals, and the answers, summarized below, demonstrate the qualifications of those who applied as researchers.

1. What is the purpose of the American Guide series?

Although some applicants left some of the evaluation’s nine questions blank, this is the one question all sixteen applicants answered. About a third of the applicants focused on the project’s long-term cultural goals and its short-term practical goal of providing jobs for unemployed skilled workers. Most applicants suggested specific topics for the project and outlined an organizational process under which the Kansas guide might be researched and written. Generally they succeeded in showing they had some idea of the structure and content of the work they would be expected to produce.

Several applicants offered more in the way of quantity than clarity, writing more than a page on the question. Jessie Cramer, the former club woman and current Republican precinct committeewoman, demonstrated this bombastic tendency when she wrote: “We, who are to help make the ‘American Guide’ are thrilled with Patriotism and inspired with Civic Pride, where we thirst of the great purpose of this undertaking, for surely, we feel the need of such a project.” Harry Denny showed a real estate agent’s penchant for bold phrasing when he declared that the project was “worthy of any man’s steel. If it can be brought to a successful conclusion . . . it will take its place alongside the Panama Canal, and Boulder Dam in American achievement.”1

2. What duties are required of a field worker?

Most of the applicants gave accurate responses to this question, as far as they went. Unlike the previous question, many erred on the side of brevity and glossed over their responsibilities and the details of production. For example, Reginald Frizzelle, the former policeman and architectural designer, wrote: “The field workers will by research, interviews, etc, gather facts about the subject to which they are assigned. They will then take the notes about their subject and write a field continuity [report]. This will be correct [sic] and condensed and turned in for material for the state guide.” The most thorough yet concise answer was provided by Royse Aldrich, the experienced reporter: “The duties of a field worker are to obtain a list of sources or places where enquiries [sic] may be made, and persons from whom valuable data may be obtained; to follow out these sources by making notes, interviewing persons, and by observing; then to transcribe his material in proper form to submit each week to the Local Office, where all such information will be compiled systematically for submission to the State Office and for any use it may have locally.”

3. If you were assigned to prepare a detailed report of the municipal airport in Wichita, how would you go about doing your work?

This question and the following one separated the well-intentioned novices from those whose training, experience, or common sense and good judgment prepared them to get the whole story as quickly and accurately as possible. Several of the former, such as Frizzelle and teachers Lillian Dwyer, Lela Hoover, and Maude Taylor, placed great faith in the public library as a font of expert information. Avis Wilson concluded her vague response with the glib observation: “Without more forethought, I cannot state exactly what sources of information I would approach first, but I do not believe that it would be a difficult matter.”

In contrast, the responses of Aldrich and several others showed their sharply honed research skills or at least good instincts and sound judgment. Aldrich said he would go directly to the office of Alfred MacDonald, head of the Parks Department, which had jurisdiction over the airport. He would search the records there and then make firsthand observations at the airport. Teachers Mona Brown and Bessie Walters would have reversed the process and visited the airport first and then sought out aviation experts. Afterwards they would have gone to the library to search for additional information. To a greater or lesser extent, these applicants seemed to understand that the best way to do research was to get expert knowledge from interviews and records and combine this information with their personal observations.

4. Identify five key points and the order in which you would discuss them for the final report on the municipal airport.

Aldrich offered the most coherent outline for the report and ended up eventually writing the essay on the airport for the project. His points were: (1) location and facilities; (2) method of direction under municipal ownership and management; (3) names of all airlines which served it; (4) relation of Wichita as a transcontinental and commercial air center; and (5) personnel, conveniences, and accommodations of the airport. Many of the other writers identified some of the same points but they lacked Aldrich’s clarity of organization and their schemes were generally more haphazard. Some applicants, such as George Pottorf and Taylor, placed almost as much emphasis on architecture and history as on operational details, and others, like Brown and Hoover, also wanted to editorialize about the future outlook for the airport. Their approaches show they did not fully understand the focus of the assignment.

5. Edit five sentences to demonstrate grammatically correct English.

The list of corrections that applicants were asked to make are not included with the question, but from the final responses it is evident they were to choose between “may” or “can” in (1): “You may/can take your vacation now”; correctly identify subject and verb agreement in (2): “Either a saw or an ax is necessary” correctly place words to avoid split infinitives in (3): “I expect to be poor always” (or, alternatively, “I expect always to be poor”) and (4): “Mr. Harris moved to postpone the question indefinitely” and distinguish between the verbs “sit” and “set” in (5): “While the man sits on the porch, the sun sets in the west.” The only question that caused difficulty for
a few of the applicants was the third question; otherwise the applicants showed a facility for English usage too often lacking among today’s college graduates.

6. Write a description of the overpass on Highway 81 north of Wichita.

This question was essentially an editing exercise, and background information must have been provided since the applicants presented the same data but with different arrangements and emphases. Almost all of the applicants wrote coherent descriptions and the variations were those of style and tone rather than substance.

7. Would you give more space in the guide to libraries or to hotels in Wichita, and why?

Of the fourteen applicants who answered this question, the responses were equally divided. This issue was generally split on gender lines: six of the seven applicants who wanted more space allotted to libraries were women, and five of the seven applicants who wanted more space for hotels were men. In the end both the essays in the collection and the published Kansas guide allotted considerably more space to libraries than hotels. Researchers included some references to early hotels and racially restrictive accommodations, but provided double the coverage for libraries. The guide went even further in privileging culture over commerce and did not even mention hotels by name whereas it identified libraries by name or location, particularly those affiliated with universities or a large city like Wichita. Instead of duplicating the work of commercial guide books, the Writers’ Project guide wanted to concentrate on more enduring parts of the cultural and natural landscape.

8. Discuss a topic for Wichita that you think should be included in the guide.

Applicants showed discernment in the topics they identified in response to this question, and most of their choices eventually became the focus of Writers’ Project essays and were later included in the published state guide. They suggested topics having to do with Wichita’s industry and commerce, history, culture, education, recreation, and social welfare. Related to industry and commerce were Hoover’s interest in the stock, grain, and broom corn markets and Denny’s discussion of the importance of the oil industry to the city. Pottorf discussed the important confluence of the Big and Little Arkansas rivers, and Louis Honnbrick focused on pioneering and Indian legend and lore. Two of the applicants advocated for cultural topics: June Spurgeon, who discussed art in Wichita, and Dwyer, who wrote about music. Taylor discussed public schools and Walters made a strong case for the city’s parks. Brown looked at social relief in the city, a topic that Pottorf later wrote about for the project. Frizzelle’s suggestion to write about the Wichita units of the National Guard was modified and later developed into an essay on Kansas regimental histories. Three of the applicants failed to identify a topic in their answers, but instead spoke more generally about various aspects of the project.

9. Identify ten additional topics in Wichita that should be included in the guide.

Of the fourteen applicants who responded to this question, twelve identified the Wichita Municipal Airport; ten mentioned the milling industry; eight identified the city’s two high schools, North and East (mentioned separately or together), seven recommended the city’s two universities, Wichita University and Friends University (mentioned separately or together), and five suggested schools and universities in general; seven identified the stockyards, Union Station, and the post office and federal building (mentioned separately or together); six highlighted the Carrie Nation fountain and monument; five mentioned the city’s parks and the Allis Hotel; four noted the art museum; and three recommended the airplane industry, the public library, the county courthouse, the Masonic home, and the York Rite Temple building. The popularity of the airport shows its importance to the life of the city at a time when Wichita could legitimately claim to be the “Air Capital of the World.” The strong emphasis on educational institutions attests to their importance to the community. The range of other topics among industry, culture, and architecture confirms the applicants’ extensive knowledge of the economic, social, and cultural institutions that contributed to Wichita’s influence in the 1930s, both regionally and nationally.

6. Aldrich, Brown, Cramer, Denny, Dwyer, and Frizzelle evaluations; Archie Hager Evaluation, October 27–November 1, 1935, folder 12, box 19; Lewis Honnbrick Evaluation, October 27–November 1, 1935, folder 14, box 19, FWP for Kansas; Hoover and Pottorf evaluations; June Ann Mabel Spurgeon Evaluation, October 27–November 1, 1935, folder 18, box 19, FWP for Kansas; Taylor, Walters, and Wilson evaluations. Frizzelle was the only man who wanted more space for libraries and Hoover and Spurgeon were the only women who wanted more space for hotels.

7. Hoover, Denny, Pottorf, Honnbrick, Spurgeon, Dwyer, Taylor, Walters, and Brown evaluations; George Pottorf, Sedgwick County, “Relief in Wichita and Sedgwick County,” n.d., folder 11, box 13; and Adjutant General of Kansas, Special Topics: Kansas Regimental Histories, “History of the 137th Infantry” and “History of the 161st Field Artillery,” 1942, folder 2, box 19, FWP for Kansas. Hager wrote of the importance of towns and sightseeing (Hager Evaluation). Wilson made the case for valuing cultural development and achievement over convenience and comfort (Wilson Evaluation). Aldrich, who otherwise wrote some of the best responses, disregarded the question entirely and discussed the importance of the project and his interest in working for it (Aldrich Evaluation).

Although Amick wrote only fifteen essays, records show he was the local supervisor of the project beginning in December 1935 and was promoted to district supervisor from June 1936 through October 1937, when most of the essays were written that were later incorporated into the state guide. He was the only one of the first group of applicants who wrote on subjects outside of Sedgwick County. Most importantly Amick was the only one of the writers to be listed in the "Writers’ Directory of the City of Wichita," a distinction commensurate with his sixteen years of experience in newspaper work and public relations. His previous positions included working as a magazine writer for the U.S. Air Services in Washington, D.C.; as a publicity director for the Kansas Chamber of Commerce; and as a reporter for the Wichita Eagle. Amick’s work was even cited in the Kansas Historical Quarterly.22

There are no biographies or evaluations for the writers hired after this initial group, but their input was substantial. Those who contributed the largest number of essays to the Kansas project were Arthur Foster, who wrote more than one hundred and fifty essays and served as area supervisor for Barber, Harper, Kingman, and Sumner counties;23 Philip Aherne, who wrote only thirty-five essays but verified most of the work of twelve other researchers whose combined output came to almost four hundred and fifty essays; Rees (also spelled Reece) Thomas and John Parker, who crafted more than a hundred essays each; and Jean Foote, who wrote almost a hundred essays and became an assistant field supervisor and area supervisor for Reno County.24 With the exception of Foote, who wrote only on Reno County, all of the other researchers wrote on topics in two or more counties.

The evaluations used to select the initial researchers are significant because they show that the Federal Writers’ Project in Kansas carefully vetted at least its early applicants.25 These evaluations have thus far gone unnoticed by scholars who have written on the Federal Writers’ Project. Administrators of the state and local

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23. Among Foster’s essays is the most polished piece of prose in the collection, “Kansas Wheat Field” (Harper County, September 29, 1936, folder 13, box 4, FWP for Kansas), which is imbued with imagery and rhythm that transform it into narrative poetry. Foster also wrote the most insightful interview in the collection, “A Tramp Speaks,” in which he narrates the circumstances and choices of his subject’s life with quiet dignity and documents the “tramp’s” downward spiral with compassion devoid of pity. Both essays are accessible through the Wichita State University Libraries’ digital exhibit “Soul of a People/ Writing America’s Story.”

24. Other writers who produced a significant amount of work included Will Van Benthuyesen, Keith Allen, Roy Caldwell, Mildred Hall, and Gladys Woods White, who wrote more than fifty essays each.

25. The absence of evaluations for four applicants who submitted biographies, Hugh Amick, Helen McGill, Ernest Smith, and Elizabeth Truax, indicates that they were hired shortly after the original group of sixteen.
projects took their work seriously and went about hiring the best researchers they could find who possessed local knowledge and also fit the employment requirements, namely, that they were on relief. The applicants’ responses reveal valuable information not discussed elsewhere in documents produced by the Writers’ Project. They show how the writers understood the goals of the project and their own responsibilities, or at least the goals and responsibilities they thought they should identify in order to get hired. They also demonstrate how the writers, if they were hired on the project, would use their local knowledge to decide which research topics were most important; prioritize their research in the production of the Kansas guide; employ various methods to research particular topics; edit documents to reflect the project’s priorities; and handle questions on the finer points of English grammar. Five of the nine questions that comprised the evaluation required applicants to demonstrate their knowledge of Wichita.26

Applicants were also asked to discuss the basics of English composition and present a list of books they consulted on the subject, although only about half of them provided this information. Most of them just copied notes from various sources. Walters, who taught shorthand and typing, was one of the few applicants to synthesize what she had learned, perceptively stating “the earnest writer believes he has something to say. It is said, we are not so interested in the man who has to tell a story—we are interested in the man who has a story to tell.” Walters went on to tell more than forty-five stories about Kansas for the project.

Since Wichita was the second largest city in the state during the 1930s and 1940s, it is understandable that it was home to Kansas’s second largest district office for the Federal Writers’ Project. The materials produced out of this office focused mostly on south central Kansas, in particular on Sedgwick County, the second most populous county in the state during the project.28 Research essays on Sedgwick County comprise almost one third of the collection of Writers’ Project materials now housed at Wichita State University. Records for adjacent Reno County represent more than a tenth of the collection, and records for fourteen counties next or relatively close to Sedgwick that receive substantial attention account for more than a third of the collection. The remaining quarter of the collection provides brief treatments of thirty-six other counties, mostly in the north central and south central parts of the state, as well as more extensive treatments of various thematic subjects. These include histories on grazing, art, authors, cultivation of the salt forks, the period from 1854 to 1889, music, nursing schools, and military regiments.29

The research essays that formed the basis for the published state guide were finished with a speed that negates the charges of inefficiency and boondoggling leveled by the project’s national critics. Most essays were written between December 1935 and October 1937, within two years of the project’s start in Kansas. The research for Sedgwick County was done first and was mostly complete by October 1936. Twenty-four researchers are identified as authors of this material; about two dozen essays out of several hundred do not indicate an author or date. Philip Ahern, a researcher who joined the project by the autumn of 1936, was responsible for verifying other writers’ essays and he completed his work by December 1937. The research for counties contiguous or relatively close to Sedgwick, including Barber, Butler, Chautauqua, Cowley, Harper, Harvey, Kingman, Pratt, Reno, Stafford, and Sumner, was completed by October 1937. Most of the essays born of this work are identified by author and date, but very few contain dates noting when their content was verified. About sixty essays from these counties lack identification of the author and date. A substantial part of the research for most of the remaining counties is undated and unidentified by author. Most of the essays that are dated were written between October 1936 and March in an undated document found in a folder of materials related to the collection titled “Works Progress Administration Papers W.P.A. Federal Project No. 1 ‘The American Guide.’” The author concurs with these page number compilations, but notes that four counties are missing from the list of counties included in the collection: Comanche, Kiowa, Russell, and Sherman. In addition, the author maintains that the number of essays listed for each county requires revision since the statistics for some counties are greater than the number counted by the author and some are lower.

26. For detailed discussion of the evaluations see above on pages 97–99. The fact that the actual wording of the questions is not repeated in the evaluations does not diminish their value since it is possible to infer the questions from the responses.
28. For county populations during this period see Kansas Institute for Policy and Social Research, Kansas Statistical Abstract Enhanced Online Edition, Section 15: Population, County Level Data: Population in Kansas, by County. 1860–1970. www.ipsr.ku.edu/kdata/ksah/population/2pop16.pdf. The Writers’ Project collection is large, taking up more than seven and a half linear feet and totaling more than eleven thousand pages. The page estimate comes from compilations of books that were born of this work.
1937, including the essays that formed the basis for much of the Larned city guide, published in 1938, and some of the Hillsboro city guide, published in 1940.30

The Kansas guide was published in September 1939, and despite the fact that Congress stopped funding the Federal Writers' Project that same month, scaling down the national office to a skeletal staff, the state continued to fund the project for an additional three years. Much of the work produced during this period consists of handwritten notes copied from books, magazines, and newspapers and is clearly “busywork.” There were, however, some original research materials produced after the publication of the state guide that added substantively to the collection. Some of these materials focus on Sedgwick County, including an interview by A. C. Helhake of J. D. Kuhl, mayor of Clearwater, and two essays written by Celia Schooley, one on the Wichita Library Association and another on Hereford cattle.31 Other materials from this period are more thematic and focus on counties throughout Kansas, such as essays on the archaeology and early settlement of Chase County written in October 1939; interviews with pioneers conducted in Clark County in 1940; notes on salt fork-cultivation dated November 1940; and a booklet for an open house exhibit on the Kansas WPA, including the Writers’ Project, held in different counties from May 20 through 25, 1940.32 The open house materials show a belated attempt at public advocacy for the work of the WPA and the Writers’ Project. State and local administrators of the Writers’ Project had previously


32. Harley Jackson, Chase County, “Topics: Early Settlement”; “Noted Personalities”; “Archaeology”; “History”; and “Points of Interest”, October 16–24, 1939, folder 18, box 2; Ella W. Mendenhall, Clark County, “Early Clark County Ranchman,” Clark County Clipper, January, February, 1940; “Southwest Kansas History Recorded in Quilt,” Dodge City Globe, May 18, 1940; “Letter of Mrs. J. R. Painter,” August 8, 1940; and “Dr. Workman’s Pioneer Residence,” August 13, 1940, folder 7, box 3; and “May 20–25, 1940: Visit the Kansas WPA Professional and Service Projects,” folder 22, box 19, FWP for Kansas. Additional essays written after publication of the state guide include essays on Montgomery County (John Parker, Montgomery County, “Maple Street Baptist Church [Colored],” May 14, 1940, folder 11, box 7; and “Mercy Hospital School of Nurses’ Training,” October 8, 1940, folder 13, box 7); a calendar of events and related correspondence for Ottawa County (Harry Neil, Ottawa County, Calendar of Events and Related Correspondence, February 14 and March 4, 1940, folder 18, box 7); and a Seward County free fair program (“1940 Premium List Seward County Free Fair and Race Meet, Liberal, Kansas, Sept. 25–26–27–28,” folder 6, box 16, FWP for Kansas).
lost a good public relations opportunity when they did not make more concerted efforts to better explain its purpose to the public and showcase some of its results in 1936 and 1937, when the project was most active.

The essays, interviews, and other research materials in the Kansas Writers’ Project collection present the efforts (which often had mixed results) of the state’s researchers to implement the vision of the national Federal Writers’ Project. Key administrators in the national office wanted to document the transformation of American nationhood at a pivotal time in U.S. history, when the federal government was becoming more actively involved in people’s daily lives and a national culture promoted by the mass media was supplanting regional and local culture. Most of the essays produced during the project were based on a combination of interviews, research of primary and secondary sources, and firsthand observations by the writers themselves; many were based entirely on interviews, which documented with vivid clarity the voices of ordinary Kansans. The presence of identified voices in the collection, both of the writers and those they interviewed, stands in stark contrast to the Kansas guide. The latter, in accord with instructions from the national office to state guide editors, adopted the device of an impersonal bureaucratic narrator so as to convey a tone of omniscient objectivity in the published guides.

Even after the state guide was produced and federal funding for the project ended, the national Writers’ Project offices continued to influence the state project. A series of essays on the history of grazing in Kansas, some undated and others produced between January 1940 and March 1941, uniquely illustrate the ongoing involvement of the national office in the state’s implementation of the project. These are the only records in the Kansas collection that feature detailed materials from the national and state offices, including specific objectives, a tentative outline, recommended sources and a specialized focus for each state, and editorial suggestions on specific text, maps, and chronologies to be included in the essays. An “Outline of Procedure” dated January 13, 1940, issued by Harold C. Evans, the state supervisor in Kansas, asserts that “the purpose of this survey is to determine to what extent the grazing industry aided in the development of the State.” The outline concludes with the stylistic recommendation: “Colorful accounts of the early days are desirable [sic] but you should be careful not to let your narrative become a Wild West Story.” A memo from the national office, evidently written in early 1940 and prepared by George F. Willison, mentions that study of the topic was “undertaken at the suggestion and with the cooperation of the Grazing Service, U.S. Department of the Interior” and encompassed seventeen states. It also notes that the materials were due in the national office by November 1, 1940, a deadline that the Kansas project clearly did not make since at least one of the essays in the collection is dated March 1941. The grazing materials provide firm evidence that the national office was still trying to shape the direction of the project, but with limited success since it was operating with a reduced staff and most states had already published their respective guides.

Other essays written near the end of the Writers’ Project in Kansas demonstrate a shift in focus from documenting the pioneer past and America’s recovery during the Depression to new national concerns. The three final thematic essays in the collection, dated to 1942, relate regimental histories of the 137th Infantry and the 161st Field Artillery and an account of Kansas schools of nursing that was published as *Lamps on the Prairie*. Written in the wake of U.S. entrance into World War II, these topics reveal that issues of national defense and women’s contributions to the war effort became paramount to the Writers’ Project as it sought to reshape its focus on contemporary concerns. Three themes best illuminate the project’s efforts to contrast the nation’s collective memory of its pioneer past with a depiction of its modern, progressive, and pluralistic present. These

In helping to interpret the tumultuous 1930s, the Writers’ Project sought to contrast the nation’s collective memory of its pioneer past with a depiction of its modern, progressive, and pluralistic present. Project writers in Kansas interviewed almost 120 pioneers, revealing the dynamics of individualism and community that shaped the state’s early settlements. Among the social activities that engendered community in these places in the 1890s were spelling bees and “literaries.” Similar gatherings continued into the 1930s, such as the farm women’s literary meeting pictured here, which recalled the poetry and prose recitations of the past. Photograph from the U.S. Department of Agriculture as published in Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State.

The project’s treatment of early pioneer days in Kansas; New Deal initiatives in the state to promote economic and social recovery; and the national office’s interest in and efforts at documenting racial, ethnic, and gender diversity.

The Writers’ Project collection for Kansas contains interviews with almost 120 pioneers, a group including sixty-six men and fifty-two women. Their voices are but a faint echo in the published state guide, which discusses pioneers as a group and provides relatively few details about their daily life and struggles in the section labeled “The State and Its People: History” and describes farmers’ and cowboys’ folk beliefs and sayings in “The State and Its People: Folklore.” The pioneer accounts in the collection reveal the dynamics of individualism and community that shaped the lives of early Kansas communities at least as much as the more easily transmitted and dramatic details of droughts, blizzards, prairie fires, grasshoppers, snakes, and Indian attacks.

The importance of such trying events, however, should not be discounted. Their repetition in most of the accounts serves as a secular mantra, an invocation that binds the pioneer generation to common remembrance and elevates individual experiences into a collective drama of both conquest and redemption: the pioneers tamed the land and most of its creatures against great odds and brought civilization, insofar as they understood what that term meant.

The story of Mrs. Sol Van Lein from St. John and her struggles as a pioneer is representative of the oral histories in the collection. Her life was not without difficulties, including her mother’s death from a prairie fire and her own brush with a dangerous blaze; the devastation wrought in 1874 by a plague of grasshoppers that decimated her family’s corn crop and even ate their laundry and the handle of a corn knife; the need to walk eight miles each way to town to get the food her family could not grow on its own; and the reality of going without indoor light until her father came up with a substitute for the matches that had run out. At its end, however, she was still able to include the project’s treatment of early pioneer days in Kansas; New Deal initiatives in the state to promote economic and social recovery; and the national office’s interest in and efforts at documenting racial, ethnic, and gender diversity.

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to say: “I have had hard times all along, but you know I have enjoyed it and think the time well spent.”

For some settlers, the hardships and risks of carving out a new life in Kansas were calculated in a more pragmatic fashion. Floyd Davidson told his interviewer that what mattered most was the opportunity to be his own boss:

I can remember hard times when father settled here and I can’t remember that we have had it much different but after a fellow has fared all his life, there isn’t much of anything else that he can do and there is really no one that wants him unless it is for old hard common labor and if I have to [sic] common labor, I would much prefer to do it here where I am my own boss.

Bert Cornwell, another early settler and former newspaper editor in Stafford County, explained to his interviewer, Eunice McClenahan, that three things enabled the pioneer to survive: cash, food, and fuel. Union veterans’ military pensions put much needed cash into the community; local jackrabbits and sand plums provided food; and cow chips provided the fuel of the 1870s. Reliance on military training and reenactments of past glories, in Cornwell’s view, served as an outlet for a pioneer’s “pent-up sentimentalism.” Interweaving her own description of the interview with Cornwell’s comments, McClenahan described one such “sham battle”:

[The pioneer] had been trained in war ways. In celebration of his economic independence he turned to his musket and banged away like a rainmaker. Turning to the files of his newspaper career to freshen memory, Mr. Cornwell finds that, in 1890, [the] community let go with a big bang climaxing [in] smaller area celebrations. The pioneer found community outlet in sham battle. . . .

The objective of the battle was Dalker Knoll. This was located where the northeast section of the city of St. John now peacefully extends. More than 300 settlers participated. Most of these were veterans of the civil war. . . . The volleys from old muskets were deafening. The tired “soldier” had let off steam. . . . The sham battle of the pioneer was the color parade of the American Legion of 1936.

McLenahan came to the Writers’ Project from the National Youth Administration, and her impressive ability to convey Cornwell’s words without the benefit of recording equipment enables the reader to hear the succinct yet vivid directness that informed his recollections.

Most settlers disclosed that the best opportunities to develop strong ties with their neighbors came through schooling, entertainment, and religious activities. These contacts often resulted in marriage and created a sense of community and local identity that lessened the isolation of farm life at a time when communication and transportation were often difficult to arrange. There were purely social activities such as sleigh rides and box and pie socials where samples of each girl’s cooking were auctioned off to the highest male bidder. Several of the collection’s accounts mention two of the most popular forms of entertainment for young people: spelling bees and “literaries,” the latter of which involved prose or poetry recitations, singing, playing music, reading the neighborhood newspaper aloud or staging debates, and other activities that relied on the participants’ literacy. Clara B. Hite, a pioneer woman from Augusta in Butler County, remarked, “After the schoolhouse was built we had literary, and singing, writing and spelling matches. There wasn’t much entertainment until after the schoolhouse was built. People didn’t have to have as much as they do now.”

Most of the pioneer accounts in the Writers’ Project collection reveal lives set within precise social boundaries. The people who gave these testimonies were the ones who stayed and put down roots, not those whose behavior or unfortunate circumstances forced them to leave their communities. As life in Kansas stabilized in the late nineteenth century, the tight cohesion of small town life demanded social conformity within a narrow range of social expression.


Researchers on the Federal Writers’ Project also documented the seamier side of pioneer life, particularly in larger towns such as Wichita, where many residents tolerated and, in some cases, encouraged raucous behavior. The most pointed example in the collection of life on the wild side is found in one of the early drafts of the Wichita city guide. Philip Aherne described the city as a place of drinking, gambling, and murder: “The cowboys got drunk in Wichita, shot their money away, then shot each other.” In another draft he said that the city was “built on ashes of alternating privation and hilarity,” and Wichita and a number of other Kansas cities on the long Chisholm Trail were “watering places—and liquoring-up, dancing, gambling, shooting, entertainment spots.”

It is not hard to see why the published state guide that aspired to provide an enduring portrait of America to Americans omitted these comments.

Generally speaking, the pioneers interviewed in the Writers’ Project research reports remembered their struggle in individual terms. Although settlers shared a sense of community with their neighbors, the reports do not offer evidence that they saw their situation in terms of class or collective struggle against railroads, oil men, and other absentee owners or local farmers and ranchers who got and stayed rich. The pioneer testimonies do not mention the Populist sentiments that were a powerful force in 1890s Kansas. Nor do they show affinity for a Marxist analysis of pioneer life that researcher Charles Leroy Edson emphasized in his essays written for the Topeka office, which resulted in his dismissal from the project.

There is only one pioneer observation in the collection that contains a glimmer of class consciousness. In her description of the conflicts between small farmers and wealthy ranchmen, Jennie Osborn of Medicine Lodge in Barber County stated:

At first there was free range for the cattle, but this was gradually fenced up. Many great ranchmen tried to discourage the small farmers and drive them away, as the small farms were often located in the big pastures. But after the severe winter of 1885–86, when most of the cattle on the range froze or starved to death, the ranchmen were glad to have the small farmers in the country to raise feed. This made a much


Osborn’s story of community strengthened through hardship exemplifies the nation-affirming vision of the creators of the Federal Writers’ Project.

The pioneers’ accounts are not limited to recollections of events, social norms, and politics of the past. Some also show pioneers’ reluctance to find common cause with the contemporary struggles of the 1930s, although the project editors made sure that no trace of this sentiment found its way into the published state guide. The lack of empathy for those caught up in the hard times of the Depression comes through in the comments of Mrs. Will Becker of Wellington in Sumner County: “I’ve seen my small community build up in my years—become prosperous and then fall into decay again all because of a few hard years and the depression. It does seem as though people haven’t got the get up to ‘em they used to have.” Another pioneer and former teacher from Augusta, Will H. Cady, echoed a similar refrain in his comparison of the high quality of the students in pioneer times with those of the 1930s: “I think, in fact I know that my pupils were more intelligent than the present day classes. And—they were well dressed.”

Criticisms such as these show that for some early settlers the notions of community and collective memory were, like a circle of Conestoga wagons, tightly drawn to include only those who had lived through the pioneer experience.

The research essays in the Writers’ Project collection also document the importance of federal and local New Deal programs and initiatives to promote economic and social recovery during the Depression. They outline specific projects such as a sewing room in Harper County, construction of a municipal swimming pool in Wellington in Sumner County, and public works projects administered by the Wichita Park Board and other relief projects in that city, as well as more general surveys of WPA projects in Pratt and Stafford counties. The Kansas state guide likewise devotes substantial space to the government’s role in the nation’s recovery. The state guide draws heavily on the research materials in the collection, particularly in its treatment of agriculture and, to a lesser extent, its coverage of industry and its profile of Wichita. In its discussion of labor, the state guide actually includes coverage of labor unrest that is rarely treated in Writers’ Project essays, but the guide uses them as evidence of the New Deal’s success in balancing the competing interests of labor and management. The limited discussion of labor strikes in the guide, which will be explored more fully below, is due in part to their having occurred in Crawford and Cherokee counties in southeastern Kansas, which are generally not well covered in the collection. Even more importantly, the scant mention of strikes suggests that project editors sought to remove them from the collective and historical memory of the state.

The treatment of New Deal economic and social recovery is, of course, expected in a guidebook and research collection that document and celebrate America’s transformation during the Depression, when the federal government played a key role in shaping the cultural policies and production of the nation. Yet the positive emphasis the Kansas state guide and Writers’ Project collection place on the government’s role in the recovery contradicts the overall assessment of the Federal Writers’ Project by Jerrold Hirsch, a scholar who has written extensively on the cultural history of the endeavor. After broadly surveying many of the state guides, he argued:

The guidebook essays offer a view of American history and art that deals with the past as a source of reassurance about the future, but significantly only to a very limited extent with the present. The present, the Great Depression and its impact on Americans, is hardly dealt with in these essays. . . . An account of the past tied to a vision of the future in which present problems are hardly discussed indicates the mythic nature of the guidebook portrait of America.

49. The FWP for Kansas has no records for Cherokee County and only some notes for Crawford County; see Crawford County, “Handwritten Notes on the Cities of Crawford County,” n.d., folder 21, box 3.
50. Hirsch, Portrait of America, 65. Hirsch did not document this statement in his chapter on “A New Deal View of American History and Art: The Federal Writers’ Project Guidebook Essays” (pp. 63–80), nor did he discuss whether research essays in any state collections address the New Deal. He did refer in the notes (pp. 253–57) to nineteen state guides and fifteen state Writers’ Project collections; in the case of eight states
To strengthen his argument, Hirsch cited the work of another scholar, Ronald Warren Taber, who focused only on the project in the Pacific Northwest. Further research is needed on the many other state guides and Writers’ Project collections that have so far received only scant coverage in order to evaluate the treatment of the Depression in the Writers’ Project as a whole.\footnote{51. Ronald Warren Taber, “The Federal Writers’ Project in the Pacific Northwest: A Case Study” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1969), 171, cited in Hirsch, Portrait of America, 253–54n2.}

The tone and content of the Kansas project’s essays convey the approval and even the admiration of the project’s researchers for New Deal initiatives and accomplishments. In his essay on the sewing room project in Harper County, which employed women on relief to sew basic items for distribution to other relief clients, researcher Arthur Foster concluded: “Such a project is surely worthy of the respect and cooperation of all the citizens of the community.” Other entries express comparable sentiments, through similar phrases that can hardly be a coincidence. The anonymous essay on WPA projects in Pratt County states that “many projects of remarkable value have been completed.” Eunice McClenahan’s essay on the WPA in Stafford County, dated May 5, 1937, varies the wording and describes the works “inaugurated” by the WPA as resulting in “projects of unusual value.”\footnote{52. Arthur Foster, Harper County, “The Sewing Room Display,” June 19, 1937, folder 15, box 4; Pratt County, “WPA in Pratt County,” May 4, 1937, folder 7, box 8; and Eunice McClenahan, Stafford County, “WPA in Stafford County,” May 5, 1937, folder 9, box 16, FWP for Kansas.}

The aviation industry, in general, received significant attention in materials produced by the Federal Writers’ Project in Kansas. The development of aviation as a primary industry and the operations at airplane factories, including those of the Beech, Cessna, Stearman, Swallow, and Travel Air companies, are the subject of multiple project essays. A boxed-up aircraft, built by Beech and captured here by commercial photographer Edgar B. Smith, begins its journey from Wichita to the Philippines in 1935. Photograph courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas.

While road improvement work and bridge building is naturally considered as a unit of the WPA program, it is well at times to think of each bridge, culvert, or mile of road as an individual improvement that benefits some person or persons living in the immediate vicinity. Such improvements mean that persons living on such a road can haul to market heavy loads such as are hauled on main highways and that spring freshets will no longer wash out fills, culverts or bridges and isolate persons for the time required to effect results.

Both essays also conclude with identical language: “Citizens of [named] County are invited to visit one or all...
of the projects in operation in the county."53 Olive Brown’s essay on the construction of a municipal swimming pool in Wellington is more subtle in its promotion of New Deal programs and relies on a remarkably detailed description of every feature of the pool to convey her admiration for a publicly funded project employing “every device of modern engineering.”54

The essays on Wichita seek to frame the success of relief labor projects in a larger historical context. Philip Aherne discussed the role of the Wichita Park Board under the direction of Alfred MacDonald in planning and implementing a range of public works projects using federally administered labor. These included the construction of the administration building at the municipal airport, the new art museum, and the administration building at Wichita University; flood control measures to protect the banks of the Arkansas River; irrigation and other improvements to public parks; construction of bath houses, swimming pools, and tennis courts; lighting and other improvements at the municipal beach; and forestry work and tree planting. Elsewhere Aherne discussed the nationally recognized work of the Wichita Police Department in pioneering an advanced method of training cadet officers and other measures to professionalize the police force under the leadership of a police chief and a city manager who were both appointed on merit. He cited an editorial by Edward J. Meeman in the Memphis Press-Scimitar singling out the record of Wichita’s police chief, O. W. Wilson, as an example of the work of “the G-men” that “has won the admiration of the country.”55

A key question that emerges from an analysis of the essays documenting the achievements of federal and local government during the 1930s is whether the researchers were instructed to endorse New Deal programs. The records do not disclose that any such directives were given either orally or in writing. Moreover, many essays produced throughout the Writers’ Project stand as evidence that researchers became emotionally involved in their work and expressed personal views on their subject matter in their writing.56

But the presence of a similar format and wording in the essays on WPA projects in Pratt and Stafford counties indicates that there was encouragement from editors to treat the New Deal favorably.57 The lack of an enthusiastic endorsement of the government’s performance in other decades covered in the project offers additional support for the presence of an editorial hand shaping the New Deal essays to emphasize the federal government’s key role in the political and cultural transformation of nationhood during the 1930s.

The omission, in both the research essays and the published guide, of the 1934 riot in Wichita by relief workers is even more compelling evidence of editorial control over the presentation of political activities during the 1930s. Peter Fearon has made a solid case for the importance of this often overlooked event in his work on the confrontations between unemployed relief workers and the police. The workers were angry about the imposition of a new relief schedule that they considered inadequate. The bitter demonstrations came to an end when workers and city and state officials all made concessions. Police chief O. W. Wilson was praised for his calm and his decision to use night sticks and water power to quell the demonstrations, rather than resorting to fire power. Relief officials in Sedgwick County, particularly B. E. George and some of his staff, came in for severe criticism during subsequent state and federal investigations for their unprofessional conduct, incompetence, drunkenness, and sexual harassment of female workers. Fearon pointed to the intense interest of federal officials in the dispute and showed that “this local dispute was not left to local people to resolve.”58

Despite the favorable outcome of federal intervention, the Federal Writers’ Project tried to erase the Wichita riot from public consciousness. The fact that today most Kansans know little about the unrest attests to the censorship’s success. As this singular yet significant

53. “WPA in Pratt County”; McClenahan, “WPA in Stafford County.”
55. Philip Aherne, Sedgwick County, “Public Works Problems, Questionnaire VIII,” n.d., folder 15, box 10, FWP for Kansas. Other Writers’ Project records on Wichita, including questionnaires on fire prevention and taxicab regulation, also attest to the city’s high degree of professionalism during the 1930s despite the financial effects of the Depression.
56. See, for example, Hugh Amick, Harper County, “The Average Family,” August 8, 1936, folder 11, box 4, FWP for Kansas; Foster,

57. Both the anonymous Pratt County essay and the Stafford County essay by Eunice McClenahan provide almost identical evidence of editorial encouragement to portray New Deal relief projects in a favorable light. Both essays include a sheet of paper marked with the heading “Wichita, Kansas.” The sheet in the Pratt essay is dated “May 4, 1937,” and the sheet in the Stafford essay is dated the following day. Similar opening and closing paragraphs appear on both sheets, as do similar paragraphs on road improvement and bridge building and on the sewing room project. In addition, the author of the Stafford County essay notes that it was written in response to a questionnaire circulated by the National Youth Administration, a WPA agency that supplied a number of writers for the Writers’ Project after it was underway.
example shows, editors of both the research project and the guide understood that manipulating collective memory by deciding what gets left out of the historical record is arguably even more important than selecting what gets included. Taking their lead from those in charge, project editors were determined that nothing would deter them from presenting the guide’s readers with a usable version of the recent past that framed the nation’s story in terms of steady and certain progress.

The collection’s focus on racial, ethnic, and gender diversity is further evidence that the Federal Writers’ Project was shaped by its editors to reinvent American nationhood. The essays generally rely on an approach to the study of cultural groups emphasized in anthropological studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These methods simply listed the behaviors and artifacts characteristic of a particular group, rather than engaging the patterns and processes of how people learn, exhibit cultural values, and interact with people from other groups. The more dynamic approach to cultural study found in modern research was only beginning to reach a broader audience in the 1930s, so it is hardly surprising to find that the earlier emphasis on description predominates in most of the research essays. What distinguishes the Writers’ Project from other historical narratives of the time is its attempt to describe American life more inclusively than had ever been done previously and to celebrate the nation’s diversity as a source of vitality. The project’s goal of re-presenting national identity through a celebration of America’s ethnic and gender diversity, however, was far grander in intent than in actual performance. The Kansas collection’s treatment of African Americans, Indians, and various ethnic minorities culturally constructed as white,

59. For further discussion of this topic see Hirsch, Portrait of America, 20.
Blacks lived on the margins of many Kansas communities, as is shown in essays documenting their segregation in public life. Researchers surveyed black communities totaling fewer than seven thousand people in eight cities: Medicine Lodge in Barber County; Arkansas City in Cowley County; Anthony in Harper County; Kingman in Kingman County; Pratt in Pratt County; Hutchinson in Reno County; Wichita in Sedgwick County; and St. John in Stafford County. Various essays contain responses to a “Negro Questionnaire” conducted by Writers’ Project researchers that document access not only to guest lodgings, restaurants, and hair care, but also to churches, social organizations, and medical care, in addition to recording the black population and the number and types of businesses owned by blacks. Often, in business and socially, African Americans were permitted access only at the fringes of daily interaction with whites. Segregated eating practices in dining establishments provide particular insight into the marginal status of African Americans in 1930s Kansas. Only in Medicine Lodge were the “very few” blacks in the community permitted to eat meals alongside whites. In Anthony blacks were allowed to eat publically only outside the town’s eateries, rather than inside with white patrons. In Kingman, Pratt, and Hutchinson, they were permitted to eat only in black-owned establishments. In Wichita, the most extensively documented of all the sites surveyed, Bessie Walters tellingly ignores this question.

The Walters essay is problematic on several other counts. Missing is any discussion of black-owned businesses (except for a passing reference to two mortuaries); the city’s black newspaper, the Negro Star; and black entertainment, including the segregated baseball team, the Monrovians, all of which enriched life within the community. Despite these omissions and with undue optimism, she concludes that blacks had made “marked progress in the last decade, in the field of educational, industrial, social and religious endeavor[s]. . . . They are putting forth noticeable effort to keep pace with the rapid growth of the city.” An anonymous essay on “Racial Group Influences” also acknowledges the progress of blacks but discounts the overall significance of the African American contribution: “The advancement of the Negro in Wichita is a study in racial development, but is of no importance as an influence on the community.”

The collection provides its own partial refutation of these disparaging comments in its limited coverage of the black community’s cohesion and philanthropic spirit in essays on the “Colored Children’s Orphan Home” and Wichita’s St. Peter Claver Parish. Walters’s essay on the Phyllis Wheatley Home for Colored Children describes in rich detail the struggles that arose during the founding of the home for orphans, “but these difficulties did not daunt the courage of the persevering socially-minded group of colored women” who started and sustained the project. Not deterred by the Depression, the Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs held tag sales, provided entertainment, and solicited friends and philanthropists in the city. When a new home needed to be built to replace the previous facility in 1933, the women’s efforts captured the attention of Mentholatum founder A. A. Hyde. Their work was also recognized by the city, which made the home a partner in the Community Chest and the recipient of additional public funds. Philip Aherne’s essay on St. Peter Claver Parish is far more general and concentrates mostly on the work of white Catholic missionaries who started the church in 1930. Only in the penultimate sentence does he identify the dedication of black parishioners that was essential to the church’s growth, where he points out that among the contributions for a new building “a great proportion of the funds raised represent the penny contributions of Negro children.”

The project’s ambivalence toward Indians is evident in essays that present a variety of conflicting images.

60. John D. Seeger, Barber County, “Negroes,” June 13, 1936, folder 2, box 2; Tanner Dickinson, Cowley County, “Negro Questionnaire,” September 5, 1936, folder 14, box 3; Ada Drake, Harper County, “Accommodations for Negroes, Anthony,” May 30, 1936, folder 12, box 4; Virginia Barngrover, Kingman County, “Negroes,” June 13, 1936, folder 12, box 6; Eileen Hoff, Pratt County, “Negroes,” June 13, 1936, folder 1, box 8; Glen A. Rabun, Reno County, “Negroes,” June 6, 1936, folder 9, box 9; Bessie Walters, Sedgwick County, “Racial Groups: Negroes,” March 28, 1936, folder 9, box 15; and Eunice McClanehan, Stafford County, “Negroes,” June 13, 1936, folder 10, box 16, FWP for Kansas. There is no discussion of the survey results in Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State. Brief references to African Americans in the state guide can be found in discussions on the settlement of Nicodemus and other black towns in the late 1870s (pp. 57–58, 329–31); discarding black heritage of Southern superstitions (p. 104); help given to newly emancipated blacks by Protestant ministers (p. 112); black churches (pp. 112, 115); black community newspapers (p. 128); muralist Aaron Douglass (p. 144); Western University in Kansas City (p. 217); and George Washington Carver’s homestead in Jetmore (pp. 386–87).


Native Americans are portrayed as primitive, rapacious, and violent; other essays, albeit fewer in number, depict them as reverent, communally and scholastically minded, and technically and artistically accomplished. The essays record accounts of Indians on drunken sprees terrorizing townspeople, demanding food from settlers and throwing sticks at them when refused, eating dogs, and instructing their “squaws” to use tomahawks “in the infliction of torture of prisoners.” Yet they are also presented as honoring their dead with “reverence and solemnity”; actively cultivating the land; constructing lodges for religious as well as agricultural purposes; making intricate implements and clothing; devising elaborate pictures, dances, and music for ceremonies and festivals; and improving their educational and vocational opportunities at the American Indian Institute in Wichita. The overall impression is, however, one of objectification: Indians were formidable adversaries worthy of conquest. Their artifacts were collected and displayed as tokens of victory, and they were “chosen” to take their assigned parts in reenactments “of wild, barbaric grandeur.”


occasion their gravesites were officially sanctioned for excavation by the state historical society in the interests of advancing archaeological knowledge. In an exceptional comment on a story about the last “Indian raid” in Kansas, Arthur Foster acknowledged the responsibility of cowboys in provoking Indian raids “to induce the settlers to get out of the country and leave the range to them.”

The essays on several other ethnic minorities reveal as much about the writers’ values and biases as they do of their subjects’ behavior. The essays provide extensive coverage, primarily in Wichita, of Greeks and Syrians and only minimal coverage of Jews and Mexicans. The superficiality of the essays is disappointing since they were written by Bessie Walters, a teacher who showed in other essays that she possessed good research skills and an awareness of the importance of listening to people who had worthwhile stories to tell.

Walters’s essay on Greek settlers contrasts the early arrivals, who often eventually returned to their homeland, with those who came between 1912 and 1920 and put down permanent roots in the community by establishing churches, social organizations, and businesses and becoming citizens. She concluded that Wichita’s estimated 395 Greeks, representing about sixty-five families, were generally “recognized by both city and county officials as a peaceful, aggressive and public spirited people, an agreeable addition to public welfare interests of Community.” Her use of “aggressive,” jarring to contemporary readers, indicates in this context “enterprising and ambitious.” Syrian immigrants, who would now be described as Lebanese, followed a similar pattern and were likewise praised as “aggressive, enterprising and peaceful in business relations.” Walters reported that in 1936 the Wichita community was comprised of an estimated 450 people, representing about eighty families, with most working in dry goods, tobacco, or grocery businesses. Like the Greeks, the Syrians impressed Walters with their civic engagement and willingness to “adapt themselves to American ways and methods and also share with their fellow citizens interest and enthusiasm in building a better city of homes, churches, schools and business enterprises.”

It is curious that no essay was written on the Jewish community in Wichita, which at the time was larger than the Greek and Syrian communities combined and, like them, was comprised of members who were mostly self-employed in retail businesses. The community had begun more than fifty years earlier, with newer members arriving at the same time as Greeks and Syrians. It was represented in two religious congregations, several fraternal and charitable organizations, and a newly established community-wide organization, the Mid-Kansas Jewish Federation. Instead of a community profile, the collection includes only two essays on Jewish residents of the city: one by Walters on the dedication of a Jewish cemetery under the supervision of the traditional congregation, Ahavath Achim; and another by Elizabeth Truax providing a general description of the Reform congregation, Temple Emanu-El, and a detailed description of its sanctuary. The former article is indexed under “Historic Remains” and the latter under “Architecture.”

Comments in two of the collection’s essays on Mexican communities in the state show the limits of the project’s aim to re-present American nationhood. The unknown author in the essay on “Racial Group Influences” in Sedgwick County emphasized the “otherness” of Mexicans: “The old men and women of Mexico retain ethnic identity. They were laborers when they came, and laborers they remain. . . . [I]f modern Wichita catches a Mexican and makes him a voting citizen it has to catch a youth from amongst his kind.” Pearl Burkett’s essay on the small and impoverished Mexican population in Chase County, “Mrs. John Craig Reminisces about Indian Scare and Pioneer Incidents,” n.d., folder 7, box 3, FWP for Kansas.

Kansas. This attitude is also evident in many sections of Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State; see, for example the discussions on excavations of Indian burial grounds (pp. 23–24); the effects of oil money on Indians in Arkansas City (p. 163); Haskell Institute (pp. 228–30); the Peace Treaty pageant in Medicine Lodge (pp. 255–56); the reenacted killings in a Wild Bill Hickok performance (p. 356); the aggressive behavior of Cheyennes toward settlers (p. 357); Picuries and Comanches at El Quartelejo (p. 450); nineteenth-century descriptions of the Kickapoo (p. 471); Potawatomi dress (pp. 472–73); and eighteenth-century descriptions of the Sak tribe (p. 493). A more nuanced treatment is found in the chapter devoted entirely to Indians (pp. 25–38). 68. Arthur Foster, Barber County, “The Last Indian Raid,” May 25, 1937, folder 13, box 1; Mildred Hall, Chase County, “Indian Lore of Chase County,” n.d.; and Hall, “The Haunted Indian Graveyard,” November 30, 1936, folder 1, box 3, FWP for Kansas. One other account of a raid provoked by cowboys is told in Ella W. Mendenhall, Clark County, “Mrs. John Craig Reminisces about Indian Scare and Pioneer Incidents,” n.d., folder 7, box 3, FWP for Kansas.

69. The published state guide contains no discussion of these ethnic communities in its coverage of Wichita.


Wellington in Sumner County presents even more searing allegations of the community’s negative behaviors. Their houses, she claimed, were in bad repair “because they do not know how to care for houses properly.” The difficulty of enforcing the school attendance law among the town’s Mexican population, she noted, “lies in the fact that they are so wily.” She redeemed them with faint praise for their talents at embroidery and their promptness in paying all their bills.\(^72\)

The collection is most successful in its integration of white women’s participation in and contributions to Kansas settlement and social and cultural life. The essays document the struggles and determination of numerous pioneer women, as discussed above; a few notable women of the nineteenth century, including Carrie Nation and Susanna Salter, the first female mayor in the state; and a dozen accomplished women from Wichita in the first four decades of the twentieth century.\(^73\) The latter

\(^72\). Sedgwick County, “Racial Group Influences,” n.d., folder 4, box 16; and Pearl Burkett, Sumner County, “Mexicans at Wellington,” March 18, 1937, folder 6, box 17, FWP for Kansas.

\(^73\). See, for example, Arthur Foster, Barber County, “A Barber County Homesteader,” n.d., folder 13, box 1; Foster, Harper County, “Story of a Pioneer Woman (Mrs. Nellie Dorsen Cornwall),” April 30, 1937, folder 2, box 5; Ella W. Mendenhall, Clark County, “Southwest Kansas History Recorded in Quilt,” May 18, 1940, folder 7, box 3; Mendenhall, “Mrs. John Craig Reminisces about Indian Scare and Pioneer Incidents,” n.d.,
had distinguished themselves as a professor of piano instruction, a public school music teacher, a zoology professor, a Democratic political strategist, a police officer, a librarian, an interior designer, a reporter and poet, an opera singer, a dance teacher, a child psychologist, and a social worker. The essay on opera singer Kathleen Kersting, who grew up in Kansas but chose to develop her operatic career in Germany, is one of only two in the collection that refers, even indirectly, to international developments during the 1930s. Philip Aherne, who interviewed Kersting when she was briefly visiting Wichita, expressed wry amusement over her zealous determination to prove her Christian ancestry to comply with Nazi racial laws. As one of its special topics, the project also focused on the state’s progress in training women for careers in nursing and profiled seventy schools of nursing in Kansas.

As these essays reveal, the portrayal of ethnic and gender diversity in the Kansas records of the Writers’ Project was uneven and incomplete, falling far short of the national editors’ aim to celebrate diversity as a source of national strength. Nevertheless, the coverage did represent the first effort in the state to include many formerly ignored racial and ethnic groups in an official historical narrative. The treatment of diversity in the Federal Writers’ Project as a whole expanded the definition of American nationhood and irretrievably weakened the position of those who insisted that American national identity embraced only those who could lay claim to a pioneer heritage or white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ancestry.

The essays in the Federal Writers’ Project records for Kansas housed at the Wichita State University Libraries are significant because they preserve the individual voices of the project researchers and those they interviewed, which were later edited together or entirely removed during the publication of the state guide. Without these records, the individuals who inhabit the collection would remain forever unknown and unheard. The essays reveal a state that was pulsating with people of varied racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds who countered the stereotype of a homogeneous society. The Kansas researchers and their subjects did not shy away from acknowledging both the romance and the reality of their frontier past, and their acceptance of the severity of the Great Depression did not diminish their determination to cope with it. An insistence on seeing value in the hard-fought struggles of the past and present permeates the voices and observations of the people who live in these records. The collection shows us a moment in our national history when those who believed the nation’s recovery depended on active partnership between citizens and government outnumbered those who did not, even when government officials and citizens disagreed among themselves over what direction that partnership should take. This was a time when ordinary people willed themselves to overcome the daily struggle against fear and uncertainty with quiet courage and resilience. They drew strength from the conviction that their struggles would somehow reclaim the nation’s soul and renew it for the next generation.

474. The other essay is a summary of a newspaper article: Ella W. Mendenhall, Clark County, “Hitler Owns Ranch,” folder 6, box 3, FWP for Kansas, taken from the Clark County Clipper, June 27, 1940.

75. Special Topics: Kansas Schools of Nursing, 1942, folder 3, box 19, FWP for Kansas.