

WPA IN VIRGINIA

By William Dana Hoyt

Presented before the Fortnightly Club, November 15, 1940

LIKE SOME OTHERS, I had something of a prejudice against this organization, regarding it as a rather wasteful method of getting rid of federal funds, with a great deal of idleness receiving the reward of labor and with considerable graft and corruption in the management. . . . During several talks with Mr. G. Watson James,¹ however, I learned that my attitude was due to ignorance, as is so often the case with prejudices. So many interesting facts were presented to me that I have thought some of them would be interesting to the other members of the club. . . .

All of us will recall the hectic days of 1932. At least I, however, must admit that I did not realize the true situation at that time. . . .

To meet this, the various governments had to act and act quickly, so that there were formed the various

Emergency Relief Agencies. Here this was called the Virginia Emergency Relief Agency and was directed by a committee composed of the Highways Commissioner [Henry G. Shirley], the Comptroller [Everett R. Combs], and the Commissioner of Public Welfare [Arthur W. James] as chairman. . . .

On June 14, 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration was organized and commenced to function on July 1. Thus the relief activities of the various states (including Virginia) were coordinated and expanded. This continued to function until April 1936, but, in the meantime, emphasis was laid on employment instead of straight relief, and the Civil Works Administration came into being, continuing from November 20, 1933, through March 1934. This seemed to offer favorable prospects and, on July 1, 1935, the Works Progress Administration, which had been organized, commenced to function. On July 1, 1939, its name was changed to

¹ Director of public information for the Works Progress Administration and, in 1939, father of a W&L pre-med student.

the Works Projects Administration. [The name change coincided with an increasing recognition] of employment as the most desirable form of relief. Under the present organization, federal funds are used entirely for this purpose—the support of the dependent unemployables being left to the communities. That this is a wise policy is evidenced by the testimony of most of those who have appraised the results. . . .

When work is to be done by the WPA the project must be proposed and sponsored by some public body and this must be judged as being of permanent value to the community. One-fourth of the cost must be borne by this sponsor. Then the local board of public welfare is called on to certify those who are in need of relief work. Applicants for relief apply to this board and are investigated by their corps of social workers to determine their status. If their need is evident, they are certified to the WPA which then assigns them to work in the county or city in which they live. Only one member of a family may be employed, and this may be done only if they are all unable to obtain work. So far as they are employable, they are given preference in the following order: father, son over eighteen years of age, mother, daughter over eighteen. Except a veteran, no worker may be employed continuously for more than eighteen months.

. . . What has been accomplished for Virginia during the five years of the WPA from July 1, 1935, to July 1, 1940? . . . I would call attention to a few outstanding facts. Nearly 6,000 miles of highways, roads, and streets, 350 bridges and viaducts and more than 7,700 culverts have been built or improved. More than 4,000 miles of roads have been drained, 469 miles have been landscaped,



and more than 13,000 traffic signs have been erected. Among buildings newly constructed, improved or furnished with additions are more than 2,000 educational and recreational buildings (including libraries, schools, auditoriums, and gymnasiums), 93 office and administration buildings, 32 hospitals, 19 penal institutions, 8 armories, and 965 other public

buildings. Among the outdoor recreational facilities we find 33 stadia, grandstands and bleachers, 34 parks, 137 playgrounds, 71 athletic fields, and (a thing that will interest some of this club) 2 golf courses newly provided or improved. Under public utilities and sanitation are listed 15 plants for electric power, pumping stations, or the treatment of water or sewage, 34 reservoirs, 15 storage dams, and the construction of more than 130,000 sanitary privies, along with more than 321,000 acres drained and nearly 1,500 miles of ditch and pipe provided for mosquito control. Under conservation we find a fish hatchery improved, firebreaks established, rodents killed, oysters planted, and embankments, jetties, bulkheads, retaining walls, and flood and erosion control dams erected. Eleven airports have been built or improved, including 1 government, 1 commercial, 2 combined, and several emergency and other landing areas. These have been provided with hangars and other needed buildings, as well as runways, drainage, and other necessary facilities. Many other desirable and valuable pieces of work have been accomplished but we can not consider them in more detail. Surely, however, this is an impressive list of work having real and permanent value for the state. If some of us are inclined to criticize certain projects, such as horseshoe courts, tennis courts, swim-

ming pools, wading pools, and, perhaps, golf courses, we must remember two facts. First, the work is undertaken primarily as a means of furnishing employment to those capable of working and often anxious for work but unable to find jobs. Second, recreation is being recognized more and more as a necessary part of life. The experience of so many has shown that, especially among the young, as healthful recreation increases, crime decreases, that we cannot question the value of its promotion.

TURNING TO THE LOCAL REGION, [there have been substantial] physical achievements in Amherst, Augusta, Campbell, Roanoke, and Rockbridge counties, and in the cities of Buena Vista, Lynchburg, Roanoke, and Staunton. We note that the maximum number employed in any month during 1939 in the counties ranged from 98 in Amherst county to 530 in Roanoke county. In the cities, these ranged from 69 in Buena Vista to 681 in Roanoke. The average monthly earnings of the employees ranged from \$32.69 in Rockbridge county and Buena Vista to \$48.20 in Campbell and Roanoke counties.

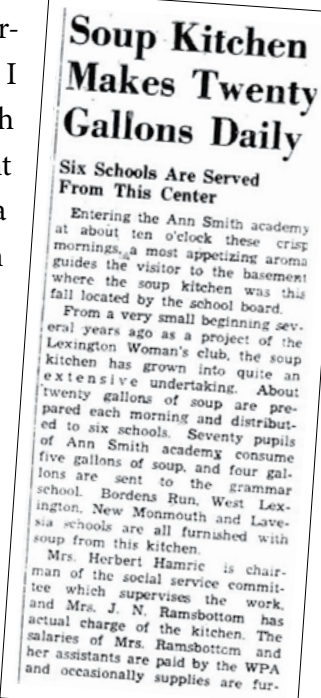
In our own county we find roads and streets built and repaired, 2 bridges built and 14 repaired, 17 culverts built, roadside drainage, sidewalks, curbs and gutters, and roadside landscaping, besides one recreational building repaired. In Roanoke county and the cities of Lynchburg and Roanoke, the lists of additions and improvements are much more impressive, with water mains, sewers, walls, and buildings furnished or repaired. All of us who have ridden over our roads before and after the work was done will realize the improvement that has been brought about by these laborers. We note that the total cost ranged from \$249,000—plus in Amherst county to \$1,300,000—plus in Roanoke county. In Rockbridge, the cost was almost \$406,000, of which \$265,000—plus was furnished by WPA, and \$142,000 by the sponsors. Of the total, \$271,000 went for labor and nearly \$137,000 for other costs. In the cities, a little over \$100,000 has been

spent in Buena Vista, a little over a million in Lynchburg, and a little over two million in Roanoke.

Of more interest, however, and, I think, of more value to the community are two local projects not included in the list. These are the hot lunches furnished to the school children, and the sewing room for the making of clothing, sheets, etc.

The lunches are prepared in the basement of the Ann Smith Academy and are served there and to the children in the grammar school.² All pupils who are under-nourished and are unable to pay for the food are given this without charge. Any other child may get the lunch on the payment of five cents a day plus three cents for milk if desired. For this there is furnished an adequate meal that is wholesome and appetizing. I visited the place one day shortly before one o'clock and my mouth watered at the sight of the inviting food. I wanted to sit down and eat the lunch that was prepared for the children. The menu is changed each day, but usually consists of a half-pint of milk, a soup with toasted bread, and a dessert. The soup is a meal in itself, consisting of a meat base (the particular meat varying from day to day—when I was there it was turkey), with the addition of an assortment of vegetables. About twice a week a plate lunch is served in the primary school. Two recent menus for this consisted of boiled cabbage with bacon, creamed potatoes, and hot rolls for one, and beans with bacon, graham muffins with butter, cole slaw, and an apple or orange as desired for the other.

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William Dana Hoyt—historian, archivist, sailor, editor and photographer as well as scientist—taught botany at Washington and Lee University from 1920 to 1945. He grew up in Lexington and earned degrees from W&L and Johns Hopkins University (Ph.D.).

The Special Collections staff in W&L's Leyburn Library has always been instrumental to "Rockbridge Epilogues," in particular Seth Goodhart-McCormick and Lisa McCown. Seldom, however, have their energy, intelligence, judgment and unlimited command of their material been more evident than they are in this article.

2 Lexington schools during this era (and others) are described in the Epilogue "Education First: Lexington's Public Schools."

In the primary and grammar schools, about 160 children are served daily. Of these, about one-third pay for the food and two-thirds are supplied without charge. From 14 to 20 gallons of soup are made daily. This is calculated closely so that very little is left — when I visited the room, there were only about three bowls remaining. The meat stock and the trimmings of bread for toast are bought from McCrum's [Drug Store] for \$1.00 per day, while the government furnishes a varied assortment from its surplus commodities: cabbage, meal, flour (both graham and white), raisins, prunes, apples, oranges, and canned milk. The remainder of the supplies must be purchased from the allowance of \$20 per month made by the Lexington Woman's Club. This club also supplies all equipment: stoves, utensils, china, etc. During the summer about 600 quarts of apples and soup mixtures are canned, the Woman's Club supplying the materials.

The Red Cross furnishes the milk for the under-nourished children who cannot pay for it. The part which the WPA plays in this is the payment of the salaries of the director, Mrs. Edna Ransbottom, and her three helpers. This also procures the important contribution of the surplus commodities that were mentioned. Without this aid, it is doubtful if this work, important for the welfare of many of our children, could be carried on.

One interesting fact was noticed: The WPA requires that all dishes shall be sterilized by boiling for at least three minutes. If this were done in all our restaurants, they would be much more sanitary than they now are.

The sewing room, located on the third floor of the First National Bank building, does work whose value cannot be overstated, not just in furnishing needed garments, but in its training of the women who work there. To this place women are sent by the Welfare Department, by Mayor Gilbert A. Rhodes, by Chief H. B. King, and by Judge [county trial justice] D. W. McNeill — in short, not only those who need employment, but also all those who cannot be handled by other agencies. Mrs. Frances Reed, the director, says that her superiors do not endorse her attitude, but that she regards the garments as a by-product, and her chief work the training and rehabilitation of the women. In this she has been remarkably successful. Women whose lives had been spent in slovenliness

and fighting, sometimes with the addition of drunkenness and prostitution, have been taught self-respect, how to manage a home and to live in it with others in peace. One striking case is that of a woman who has been a constant worry to our officers and an expense to the county. For more than two years she was under almost constant arrest, spending most of her time at the state farm, returning to it almost as soon as she was released. Finally she was tried at the sewing room. She has been there nearly eighteen months and, during the entire time, has lived a respectable life and has not taken a single drink. Her home life is remade, and her rooms are neat and furnished with ar-



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ticles that she has learned to make. She has acquired self-respect and now, instead of being only a burden and expense, contributes her services for her wages.

Mrs. Sarah Lantz Hottinger, the director of public welfare for our county, tells me that the aid of the sewing room to her work is almost immeasurable. She offers loud praise to the results that this office has accomplished.

In addition to this rehabilitation, however, the work here furnishes aid to oases of real need. One woman has an invalid husband and five children to support, and does this entirely from her earnings here and what she makes by working at Moore's grocery store on Saturday when the sewing room is not open. Until she came to this task she had been only a scrub-woman, knowing nothing of any other occupation and absolutely nothing about sewing. I was shown a child's coat that she had made and found it as good as any that one will see in a

store. When she leaves here she will have an occupation with which to support her family.

The cost of this project is borne partly by the WPA and partly by the county. During the five years to last July 1, the expenditures had been over \$41,000, the WPA supplying over \$36,000 and the county over \$4,000. Of this amount, \$30,000 went for labor and over \$10,000 for materials and other expenses. All salaries and about half of the materials are supplied by the WPA and about half of the materials and the rental of the rooms by the county, the expense to the county being about \$80 a month. Surely we could hardly find another case where so little cost results in so much benefit to the community. At present, the payroll amounts to about \$200 a month, the sewing women receiving \$31.40 each for their labor.

No clothing is made until it is ordered. When the superintendent of public welfare requires articles for needy

REPORT OF WORK ACCOMPLISHED IN CHRISTIAN SOCIAL SERVICE – FROM APRIL 20TH – JULY 15TH

[An undated report signed by Mrs. Reid White Jr., clearly written at a time when the WPA was most active, describes efforts of the women of the Lexington Presbyterian Church, working in coordination with local government agencies, to address the most dire suffering, often starting with the smallest steps.]

... The children's clinic asked me to take charge of a cooking class to be held four weeks in May for clinic mothers. All these mothers had to be called for and taken back home each time, their children who could not be left at home were taken care of in a playground managed by the girl-scouts.

The first class was on baby cookery. ... The second class was a demonstration on the making of laundry soap. So many of these poor people insist that they do not have enough money to buy soap — we tried to show them that if they saved their grease and fats each day, they would soon have enough to make soap and also that it would be much healthier for them to use the fat in this way instead of cooking it with

their vegetables. . . . The next class was a demonstration of a cheap and well-balanced every day meal for any family. . . . Also the cheap cuts of meat and how to buy and save money was shown. . . . The last lesson was one on preserving and canning — such a necessary thing for the poor people who can not eat up everything in their gardens when it is ripe and who so badly need the food later on in the winter.

One of our aims as Christians should be, that each member of a church should be interested in some other person less fortunate than themselves — not only to help them materially and physically but spiritually.

... I also tried very hard to help J— to buy a cow for his children who are undernourished and need plenty of milk. J— said he was more than anxious to raise the money but that he could not get work. It was difficult to find work for him but one [church women's subcommittee] helped me out considerably — he was willing to work for twenty cents an hour and we

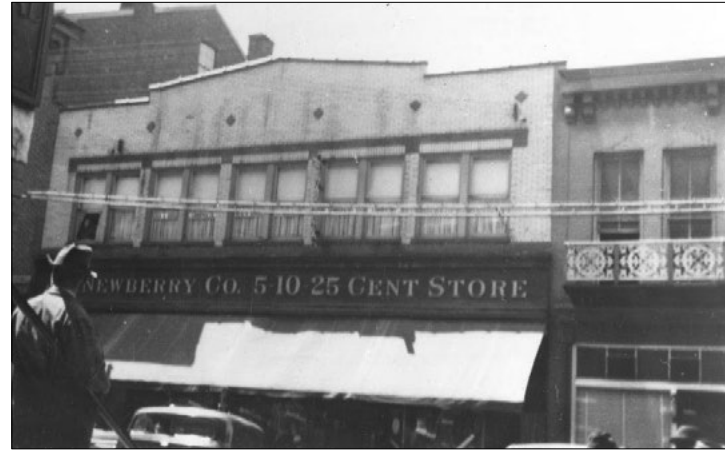
thought that if some of the members of that [subcommittee] would give him 5 hours of work, he soon would have enough dollars to pay for the cow. However, it was soon found that J— was spending the money meant for the cow and seemed to expect that the cow would drop out of heaven into his arms. But whether J— is no-count or not has nothing to do with the initial fact — [his] children need milk. So Dr. Murray¹ and I are making a new proposition to J—. If he will work until he has earned half the money for the cow (and I will try to get him work), bringing the money to me each day, we will make up the other half of the money for the cow.

I have not asked [the young girls of the congregation] to take on any poor families as of course they are not mature enough to do this — but they have collected magazines and puzzles for the hospital and for the jail.

¹ The Rev. J. J. Murray, legendary minister of the Lexington Presbyterian Church (1924-57) and, for even longer than that, a looming civic presence.



During the Great Depression, burials may not have been a luxury, but headstones were. Hence a bargain-basement sale at C. L. Hamric Memorials in Lexington.



LEXINGTON DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Documented by the WPA's
Federal Art Project

*Clockwise from top left: Alexander
Withrow House; Walz Mercantile
Building; Franklin Society Library;
Rockbridge National Bank;
Lexington Motor Co.*

individuals, she sends an order to the superintendent of the sewing room and a copy to the clerk in charge of the commodity warehouse (which is located adjoining the ice factory).³ The clothing is then made and, when ready, is sent to the commodity warehouse. The clerk notifies the clients and they call for the articles to be furnished them. No single garment is ever given, the idea being that anyone who needs only one piece of clothing can get it in some other way. They are regularly supplied in threes, this number being regarded as a season's supply.

If the sewing room is an example of the efficiency and care generally present in the WPA, nothing more of this kind could be desired. Every article must be signed for by the recipient. Every piece of goods bears a tag on which is marked the exact amount cut off at any time and the amount remaining. Daily inventories are made showing the amount of all goods on hand, the amount received during the day, the amount cut off, the amount in process of being made into garments, and the number of each garment finished during that day. The value of the garments produced is calculated on the basis of a man's shirt, size 16 as a unit. This is valued at \$1.00 and all other articles are listed as multiples or fractions of this. Only four cents per garment is allowed for the finishings—the thread, buttons, tape, etc. To keep within this sum, the women are taught to finish many garments with hand work, thus not only saving the cost of finishings, but learning to make things for themselves with the least purchase of materials.⁴

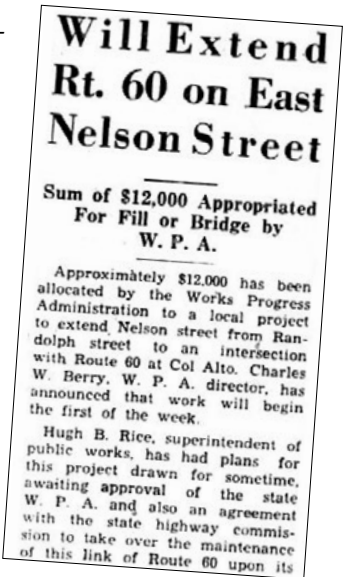
All clothing made is furnished to the needy of this county, or to other welfare agencies, e.g., the health department. At the nutrition camp, held during the summer, all the needy children were supplied with sun-suits and sheets. Complete sets of garments are also given to the children who are taken from broken or undesirable homes by the welfare department and boarded by the county commissioners in selected homes under the supervision of the social workers.

³ Facing North Randolph Street, roughly behind the Jacob Ruff House

⁴ Four cents in 1939 would be about 76 cents in 2020.

Mrs. Reed makes a constant effort to place her workers in private employment, and any woman capable of taking a job that is available must take this or lose her place under WPA. For example, one worker is now employed as a nurse for Mrs. Stevens, and another is filling in temporarily at the county clerk's office. When their employment ceases, these will automatically return to the sewing room if they are still in need. Also, if a job comes along that her husband is able to do, a woman loses her employment. The husband must take the work, for the family is no longer helped by WPA. Throughout all the work there is a splendid cooperation among the WPA agencies, the public welfare department, and the health department. My studies have given me a greater realization of the splendid activities being carried on in the county for social welfare, and a new pride in them.

TURNING TO APPRAISALS of the accomplishments in specific fields, we find noteworthy improvements in the facilities for education [statewide]. Here we may mention the construction of 95 new school buildings, the reconstruction or improvement of 821 already in existence, and additions made to 42 others. From July 1, 1935, to July 1, 1939, \$2,628,859 were spent for educational buildings in this state, \$1,680,881 of this being received from the WPA and \$947,978 being furnished by the local sponsors. An article in the February 1940 number of the *Virginia Journal of Education*⁵



*Rockbridge
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February 6, 1936*

⁵ By the author's confidant and apparent source for much of this article, G. Watson James Jr.

FORTUNE SURVEY

In his Fortnightly talk, Professor Hoyt asked rhetorically: "Altogether, what, now, may we say regarding the WPA, the value of its aims, the effectiveness of its methods, the efficiency of its work, and the value of its accomplishments?" He answered

his own question by approvingly quoting *Fortune* magazine in October 1937 when it published a survey that showed widespread satisfaction with the WPA: "One conclusion of the research will perhaps startle you [the Fortune article stated]: this im-

partial and wholly unbiased survey gave strongest support to the feeling that the *machinery* (as opposed to the laborer cared for) of the damned and despised WPA functions with an efficiency of which any industrialist would be proud."

quotes statements made by the school superintendents of several of our counties. [The lengthy journal excerpt notes that many of the school projects benefited mainly black students, previously widely neglected. It also points to improvements made possible in curriculum and pupil nourishment.]

. . . If we are inclined to criticize some of this work as that which should be done by the community, we must face the fact that it was not being done, that it was needed, and that men capable of doing the work were unemployed and dependent on the public for support.

. . . I have had first-hand reports of various evils in other states [regarding the WPA's effectiveness] and have asked all of those telling of them if they knew of any sim-

ilar conditions here. Every one answered that he had not heard of a single case of corruption in our state. The success of our work and the excellence of its administration seem to be due largely to the character and ability of our first administrator, William A. Smith, and of those who worked under him. Fortunately the high standards set seem to be maintained by his successor, Mr. Hummell.

. . . It seems very probable that we shall keep the WPA as a permanent means of caring for the needy unemployed. If that is true, it behooves us to recognize the fact and to give it our support, constantly endeavoring to increase its ability to meet the needs more effectively. With this support, its value will continue long after even Roosevelt has retired from office. ■

