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HOW TO SEE COLORADO: THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT, AMERICAN REGIONALISM, AND THE "OLD NEW WESTERN HISTORY"

SUSAN SCHULTEN

One of the four arts projects of the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Writers' Project created travel guides to each of the forty-eight states. Colorado's distance from the national editorial office—both geographically and culturally—highlights the very real differences between local and national visions of Colorado and the West and offers rich material for studying the evolution of regionalism and western history.

Between 1936 and 1941, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP)—one of the four arts projects of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—produced comprehensive guides to each of the forty-eight states, as well as Alaska, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. This guide project was a massive achievement, lauded by contemporaries for painting a fresh social, cultural, and historical portrait of the nation. Part travel guide, part reference work, part history book, the guides defied easy categorization, but they were clearly an attempt to expose Americans to the tremendous regional diversity that might be obscured by an increasingly homogenized mass culture. Alfred Kazin considered the project an "extraordinary contemporary epic" that contributed to the emerging "literature of nationhood." Bernard DeVoto argued it was a work of the greatest importance that could never have been undertaken privately, while Lewis Mumford deemed the guides "the finest contribution to American patriotism that has been made in our generation." Many of the guides remained in print for decades, and early editions continue to command high prices through book dealers and loving attention by collectors who still consider them unrivaled introductions to America's back roads and regional culture.¹

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¹ Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York, 1942), 501, 485; Bernard DeVoto, "The Writers' Project," *Harper's Magazine*, January 1942, 222; Lewis Mumford, "Writers' Project," *New Republic*, 20 October 1937, 306–7.

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Earlier scholars of Depression-era culture treat the guides—usually in passing and collectively—as one of the many products of the 1930s that signaled the resurgence of regionalism, folk culture, and the advent of a more pluralistic national identity. All of these descriptions identify an important shift in the decade, but in treating the guide project collectively they miss the heart of the story, which is the actual production of the individual guides themselves.² More recently, other scholars have delved deeply into the Federal Writers' Project, but still tend to focus on the instructions and stated goals issued by the national office of editors. While these goals illustrate the initial ideals of the project, they are but half the story, for the guides were produced through the *interaction* of the national and state offices. Each guide involved massive research on the part of locals in the states themselves, as well as frequent correspondence from the national editors in Washington, D. C., who were preparing the material for publication. In some cases this interaction is more interesting than the finished guides themselves, for it reflects a negotiation over the representation of each state. This is especially true for Colorado: the state's distance from the national editorial office—both geographically and culturally—as well as the relative inexperience of the state's writers highlights the very real differences between local and national visions of Colorado and the West, and offers rich material for studying the evolution of regionalism and western history.³

Colorado was at the heart of the western tourist industry, and the guides, in part, were aimed at reinvigorating domestic travel. The guides broke from prevailing traditions of travel literature—which invoked sublime and mythic language to portray the West—and substituted lean and unvarnished language to describe western landscapes, featuring not just the majestic peaks of the Rockies, but also the bitter dust of Colorado's eastern plains. This was a self-conscious attempt by the national editors to ground American identity in a more "authentic" view of the landscape, the region, and by extension, the nation. Even more importantly, the creation of the Colorado guide anticipated the intellectual direction of historical scholarship, especially the emergence of the "new" western history of the 1970s and 1980s, when the remnants of the Turnerian framework were openly challenged by professional historians. The FWP

² Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984); Terry A. Cooney, *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930's* (New York, 1995); William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (London, 1973); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991).

³ Petra Schindler-Carter's *Vintage Snapshots: The Fabrication of a Nation in the W. P. A. American Guide Series* (New York, 1999) and Monty Noam Penkower's *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana, IL, 1977) treat the national dimension of the project but not any individual state experiences. Jerrold Hirsch's *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill, 2003) offers a more comprehensive profile of the intellectual and cultural context of the guides, but again omits specific state cases.

editors explicitly directed local writers to feature racial, ethnic, and class difference, and above all to emphasize the exercise of power as a key component in the state's history. Finally, the influence of the Writers' Project in Colorado is not unlike the influence of the New Deal programs in the West more generally. The state's relatively weak historical infrastructure prior to the New Deal meant that the FWP could exert significant influence in Colorado. The project recorded local history, strengthened historical institutions, and most importantly shaped the substance of history through its guide to Colorado. In other words, the state owes much of its history to the work of the Writers' Project.

The WPA was not the first New Deal program to provide resources for cultural and artistic work. In the winter of 1933–1934, the Civil Works Administration (CWA) offered the states money to employ Americans and further the nation's cultural institutions. With those funds, Colorado State Historian LeRoy Hafen initiated the first federal program to fund employment in historical work. With \$10,000, the Colorado Historical Society sent thirty-two people throughout the state to gather data, interview pioneers, and write histories of towns, industries, and institutions. Though it lasted only four months, the project was an early foray into new forms of history, especially oral history, and actually predated the much better known ex-slave interviews undertaken by the WPA in 1935. In fact, Colorado's pathbreaking work of social history was so well received that the Federal Emergency Relief Administration extended funding in October of 1934 for other types of historical research in the state, backing projects that would be continued again under the WPA in 1935.⁴

Colorado's work in oral history through the CWA was unprecedented, but it was quickly overshadowed by the sheer scale of the WPA's substantial research and writing programs. Harry Hopkins, who at various times headed the WPA and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), chose Jacob Baker to head these programs, which included the newly conceived FWP as well as the other white collar work relief—the music, theater, and art projects. In the summer of 1935, Baker in turn chose Henry Alsberg to direct the Federal Writers' Project. Alsberg invited two pivotal editors to work with him, and each had a slightly different vision of the meaning and purpose of the guides. Christine Bold notes that Alsberg's particular bent was literary and cultural, and, as a result, the first third of each state guide was devoted to essays on landscape and geography, economics, history, and the arts. Alsberg's right-hand editor, George Cronyn, argued for a more informational guide, and so all the guides contained a second section devoted to a gazetteer-style profile of the state's major towns

⁴ Hafen had actually begun to interview the earliest living pioneers in the state in the 1920s. The New Deal project was known as CWA Project No. 5. See LeRoy Hafen, "History of the State Historical Society of Colorado: III, 1924–1950," *Colorado Magazine* 31, no. 1 (1954): 45–6 and LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *The Joyous Journey of LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen: An Autobiography* (Glendale, CA, 1973), 184–5. The extensive collection of pioneer interviews from this project is housed in the Colorado Historical Society Library.

and cities. National editor Katherine Kellock argued for extensive driving tours that would incorporate history, economics, and culture. Modeled loosely on the Baedeker guides, these tours became the most enduring legacy of the guides.⁵

Each state created a project office to execute the massive field work necessary for the guides. Project offices reported directly to Alsberg and his staff in Washington, D.C. In the fall of 1935, Alsberg and Cronyn settled on Morris Cleavenger as the state director of the Colorado Writers' Project. Cleavenger was an attractive candidate given his prior work with the Civil Works Administration and his extensive connections with local historical societies—which would prove invaluable when the CWP began to rely on the State Historical Society and the Western History Department of the Denver Public Library. That he came recommended by Paul Shriver, state director of the WPA and part of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party that supported Senator Edward Costigan and Franklin Roosevelt, made it an even easier choice.⁶ Cleavenger and Shriver had a strong working relationship, aided by their similar political orientation, but the WPA generally found itself facing a somewhat schizophrenic state governor in conservative Democrat Edwin Johnson. Though desperate for New Deal aid, which he never refused, Johnson bristled at the federal intervention and regulation that came with these funds. Relations between Shriver and Johnson were perhaps doomed from the beginning when Hopkins federalized the FERA relief to Colorado in 1933 after Johnson had repeatedly obstructed its administration. Yet while Johnson resented the presence of the federal bureaucracy, and complained about the motives and practices of Shriver and the WPA, neither he nor his successors—Teller Ammons and Ralph Carr—ever directly obstructed the work of the Writers' Project.⁷

Because it was designed primarily as a relief program, the FWP has generally been seen as relatively inconsequential in terms of its literary legacy. Indeed, the

⁵ The allocated funds for the Federal Writers' Project from 1935 to 1942 totaled \$21,500,000, or .2 percent of the total WPA appropriations for that period. See DeVoto, "The Writers' Project," 221 and Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Jackson, MS, 1999), 27.

⁶ Digest of Telephone Conversation between Alsberg and Cronyn, 15 October 1935, Records of the FWP Related to Henry Alsberg and George Cronyn, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter, Alsberg-Cronyn Papers). This document available through Washington State University Holland Library, TSD Microfilm 1807. Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 11–2 indicates that newspapermen were employed by CWA to report on the work of one thousand social service bodies. On the positive relationship of Shriver and Cleavenger, see "Miscellaneous" and "Cleavenger" files, Records of the Central Office, Administrative Correspondence, 1935–39, Colorado, entry 1, box 6, RG 69, National Archives (hereafter, FWP Central Records).

⁷ On the hostility between Johnson and Shriver, see box 26901, ff11, and box 26913, ff5-6, Governor Johnson collection, Colorado State Archives, Denver, Colorado. Hopkins took the rare step of federalizing relief in Colorado after the governor and legislature refused to provide FERA matching funds. See James F. Wickens, "Depression and the New Deal in Colorado," in *The State and Local Levels*, vol. 2 of *New Deal*, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody (Columbus, OH, 1975), 274–5.

correspondence between Cleavenger and Alsberg reveals that it was difficult to find and keep qualified writers who were also eligible for New Deal relief. The isolation of life in the Rocky Mountains—particularly on the western slope—made Colorado an inhospitable place to find a critical mass of editors and writers. Still, the state project employed sixty researchers and writers at its peak in October 1936. Thereafter, the number dwindled to about twenty workers in Denver who would organize the massive amount of information collected in the field. Henry Hough, who directed the CWP in its final stages, admitted that though it was initially difficult to find editors and writers, many who were hired learned quickly and became extremely adept at their work. Extensive use was made of locals as researchers, as they became the best and quickest resource for information about who to interview in terms of early Colorado history.⁸

Each of the state guides followed roughly the same format, which itself reflects the project's goal of standardization. First came essays discussing the state's land, people, economics, and arts, followed by sections covering major cities, with the last third of the guide devoted to the extensive driving tours that penetrated all areas of the state. Interspersed throughout were photographs illustrating typical views of the region. In the case of Colorado, this meant soaring mountain vistas alongside views of agricultural work on the eastern plains. The animating spirit of the guides was an enthusiasm for the nation's regional, ethnic, and cultural diversity as well as an appreciation for the fabric of everyday life that—in the view of the project's leaders—had come to be eclipsed by mass culture and travel literature that failed to penetrate the depths of the national landscape.

In her survey of domestic travel and national identity, Marguerite Shaffer argues that as the extension of the railroad facilitated travel, particularly in the American West, tourism began to connote not just leisure and self-cultivation, but also civic identity and national loyalty. When the Great War closed off opportunities to tour Europe, giving impetus to the "See America First" movement, domestic travel became even more important to ideas about national culture. Shaffer places the FWP's guides in this tradition of tourism as a civic and nationalist act. As she puts it, Alsberg, Cronyn, and Kellock hoped Americans might "rediscover" their own country through the guides—by locating unfamiliar towns, communities, histories, and people—and thereby enhance their identification with other Americans. By mapping distinctions

⁸ Memo of Alsberg to Jacob Baker, "Number of Persons Who Will Be at Work before November First on Federal Writers' Projects in the Various States" (n.d., probably 1936), Alsberg-Cronyn Papers. Compare this figure to the three hundred employed in the California Writers' Project. Information on staffing the Colorado Writers' Project found in Henry Hough's Final Report on the Colorado Writers' Project, "Archives of the Works Projects Administration and Predecessors, 1933–1943," Reel 13 of the Harvester Microfilm Collection (Brighton, GB, 1987) (hereafter, Final Report). See also letter of Cleavenger to Alsberg dated 4 August 1939, folder 651-3172 Jan 1939–Jan 1941, box Colorado, FWP State Records, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

onto the landscape, the guides would reveal the panorama and mosaic that was America, and in the process catalog, and thereby legitimize, America as a nation.⁹

Shaffer is right to place the FWP guides alongside earlier travel literature that was written in a spirit of unifying the nation, but this underplays the sharp break from the past that many of these guides represent. Compare the FWP guide to Colorado with that issued through the See America First Series earlier in the century, Mae Lacy Baggs's *Colorado: The Queen Jewel of the Rockies*. Published during the Great War and thus profiting from the domestic turn of American tourism, the See America First guide infused the landscape with a sense of the sublime. The vaunted prose of Baggs's opening paragraph is typical of the guide as a whole:

A tale that holdeth children from play and old men from the chimney corner! It is this that the tale of Colorado has been, is still and will always be. . . . No other place do I know that has the equal of Colorado for arousing this poetic impulse to worship and adore. . . . Colorado became a name to conjure with, a realm peopled with romantic fancies, splendid visions, nurslings of immortality.¹⁰

Baggs's nationalist sentiment was explicit, rendered through descriptions of the landscape that led the reader to conflate place with political identity:

Rounding the globe has but endeared it [Colorado] the more. Mont Blanc, the Russian Caucasus, the Himalayas, Fujiyama, Mauna Loa, pale in my judgment before that glorious Peak of Pike's, the herald of a mighty sisterhood. England's tarns and Norway's fords, the Scotch lochs, Killarney, the Swiss and Italian Lakes are just water compared with Colorado's lakes—Paradises of cloud-hung reveries. The years but confirm that first rapprochement. Love has discovered a reason: it is more than passion—it knows.¹¹

Anne Hyde argues that this style of sublime description was itself a reaction to the unfamiliarity of western landscapes to nineteenth-century Americans, exposed as they were primarily to landscape forms seen in Europe and the eastern half of the United States. Unable to incorporate some of the severe and dramatic views they encountered into prevailing styles of description, Americans adjusted their sights—quite literally—and their language in order to celebrate a region that looked unlike anything they had ever seen.¹²

⁹ Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940* (Washington, DC, 2001), 219.

¹⁰ The title alone reflects the extravagant style of the See America First guides: Mae Lacy Baggs, *Colorado: The Queen Jewel of the Rockies: A Description of its Climate and of its Mountains, Rivers, Forests and Valleys; An Account of its Explorers; A Review of its Indians—Past and Present; A Survey of its Industries, with some reference to what it offers of delight to the Automobilist, Traveller, Sportsman and Health Seeker; together with a brief resume of its Influence upon Writers and Artists, and a short account of its Problems and how met, and of its Inexhaustible Resources and their Development* (Boston, 1918), quote pp. vii–viii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹² Anne Farrar Hyde, *An American Vision: Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820–1920* (New York, 1990).

Throughout the guide, Baggs relied on this sublime and mythic view of the West to ground her airy language, and this was precisely the tradition—a view of the landscape as a source of divine revelation and reverie—that the FWP guides insistently rejected, both explicitly through their instructions and implicitly through their documentary style and approach. The guides embraced the vernacular and everyday environment, and in so doing suggested that unadorned presentations of a wider range of landscapes—urban and rural, human and natural—would speak for themselves. Consider Baggs’s description of the Mount of the Holy Cross:

This is one of the most striking viewpoints in the whole of the Rockies. As if to reward those who have laboriously climbed to the top of the “pass,” there stands out boldly to the northwest the Mount of the Holy Cross, a peak that bears on its bosom the sacred emblem of reward for the faithful, while from every direction there greets the eye a marvelous mass of unbelieving mountain wonders.¹³

Later in the narrative she returns to this view, quoting former Governor Alva Adams’s assessment of its meaning:

The Omnipotent hand has placed the seal upon this land. Yonder upon the wondrous mountain of the Holy Cross—in the clefts of the eternal granite—the Almighty with everlasting snow has painted the symbol of masonry—the cross of Christianity. Like the cross that blazed in the heavens above Constantine, this emblem of faith and purity shines from the pinnacles of the mountains to lead us to a higher and a more holy destiny.¹⁴

This contrasts starkly with the FWP’s descriptions of the same. Embedded within a highway tour, the reader encounters the following passage:

Mount of the Holy Cross (13,978 alt.) is visible directly ahead, 21 m., the only view from US 24 of the northern or cross-face of the noted peak. The outlines of the cross are seen most distinctly in late spring and early summer. The peak, scarcely known before 1869, was not named until several years later. Longfellow’s poem and the widely published sketches of Thomas Moran made the unique formation known to the world. The upright of the cross is 1,500 feet in length, and the arms extend 750 feet on each side. In spring the ravines forming the cross are filled with snow drifts 50 to 80 feet deep. Other drifts form an image of the SUPPLICATING VIRGIN, at the foot of which is a body of water known as the BOWL OF TEARS.¹⁵

And while the FWP guide included a photograph of this and other dramatic vistas, it had many more of the hard working conditions experienced by miners and farm workers, many of which were taken from the Farm Security Administration collection. [See Figure 1.]

¹³ Baggs, *Colorado*, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁵ Workers of the Writers’ Program of the Works Progress Administration in the State of Colorado, comp., *Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State*, American Guide Series (New York, 1941), 236.

Katherine Kellock, like the other national editors, rejected the exuberant style made popular by the See America First guides. In the case of Colorado, the national office made a clear effort to replace this exaggerated language with the documentary style made popular in the 1930s. Consider the descriptions of the area between Paoli and Sterling, in the state's northeastern corner, written by Coloradans and submitted to the national office. "On either hand [of the highway] the brown prairies, interspersed with grain fields which are golden in the late summer, stretches away into il-limitable, purple tinged distances. The monotony, the eternal sameness of this landscape is lightened by that intangible mystery which touches the unbounded level vistas of the west." The national editors lamented the tendency of locals to write in a florid style engendered by years of exposure to romantic travel literature. In response, they stripped down the language to match the prevailing wisdom of contemporary agricultural reforms:

Level broad prairies, interspersed with grain fields, border both sides of the route. This area, unprotected by hills or trees, with an average annual rainfall of 15 inches, embraces three-fourths of the 22 million acres of the potential dry-farming acreage in Colorado. To be a successful dry farmer, one must understand the principles of water movement in the soil and its conservation in order to take advantage of rains when they fall. Plowing must be deep; for fall crops it is performed in spring and early summer. Winter wheat is planted in September in ground plowed, disked, and harrowed in June and July. As high winds prevail, their force is lessened by leaving the ground rough and by planting crops in strips, alternating corn and sorghums with grains.¹⁶



Figure 1. This shot of potato pickers, by Arthur Rothstein, is one of the many FSA photographs used to illustrate everyday life in Colorado. Photo courtesy of FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF33-003365-M4 DLC, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹⁶ For original draft quote by Coloradans, see draft of tour copy found in Denver Public Library, tour 1, p. 2, ff37, box 2, collection 427, US WPA, Western History Department, Denver Public Library (hereafter, DPL WPA Collection). For editors' revision in final copy, see Workers of the Writers' Program, *Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State*, 197–8.

The editors changed not just the prose style, but also wrestled the state's landscape away from romantic stereotypes and instead grounded it in modern understandings of the environment.

This proto-environmentalist consciousness in the FWP guide was shaped in part by the catastrophic lessons of the Dust Bowl. Mae Lacy Baggs's guide to Colorado was published at the height of agricultural optimism on the Great Plains, when productivity soared due to wartime demand. Thus, she lamented the "Great American Desert" idea created by Stephen Long in his western expedition of 1820. Fifteen years later, on the eve of the Dust Bowl, LeRoy Hafen further dismissed Long's characterization as an error that had misled generations of Americans and retarded the development of the West. As Hafen confidently put it, "Who could have foreseen what wonders the railroad, the irrigation ditch and scientific dry-farming would do in blotting forever from the map the 'Great American Desert'?" By contrast, the FWP's guide to Colorado enthusiastically endorsed New Deal practices such as shelterbelts, crop rotation, and artificial price supports and soberly reiterated the hard lessons of the Dust Bowl, primarily regarding cultivation.¹⁷

The See America First guides—printed between 1912 and 1931—coincided with the emergence of automobile travel itself, and many of the guides discussed auto, as well as rail, routes. But because auto travel depended upon reliable and navigable roads, these guides generally focused on parks, the more spectacular aspects of American landscape that were easily accessible. The Federal Aid Road Act (1916) and the Federal Highway Act (1921) established a plan for road development across the country, and by the 1930s, automobile travel had become less of an elite venture and more of a leisure activity available to the middle class.¹⁸ The American Guide Series assumed travel would be undertaken by car rather than train, and the Colorado guide treated railroads as history rather than a viable mode of transportation. Through the tours, Kellock insisted on a style and format that placed information in the order tourists would encounter it, maximizing the chance that the guides would be useful to motorists. Over one half of the guide to Colorado was devoted to auto tours, a result of Kellock's insistence. She modeled this style and format on the popular Baedeker guides of earlier decades, but asked that the FWP guides be authored by locals themselves. Kellock also insisted that as much history, background, and general information as possible be placed in the tours (rather than in the introductory essays) so that travelers would experience history and culture *through* place, and place *through* history. Indeed, for Kellock the driving tours *were* history. Reed Harris agreed, arguing for a format

¹⁷ Baggs, *Colorado*, 188; LeRoy R. Hafen, *Colorado: The Story of A Western Commonwealth* (Denver, CO, 1933), 73; Workers of the Writers' Program, *Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State*, 69.

¹⁸ Shaffer, *See America First*, 160–1.

that would encourage Americans to leave the highways to find local landscapes and communities that were necessarily rich in history and folklore.¹⁹ So while Baggs's *See America First* guide adopted a literary approach that soared above the landscape, the FWP guide hunted down back roads in order to make history manifest, both in the rutted routes that eventually became highways, and in the unpaved roads that led to little known stops, failed towns, dead ends, and unexceptional scenery. In this respect Kellock and the FWP widened the meaning of history by reopening landscapes that had recently been eclipsed through the advent of industrialization, train travel, highways, and mass culture. Ironically, however, the tours relied on the primary symptom of this industrialization—the automobile—to recover these lost landscapes. It is this quality of seeking out and rescuing what seemed to be a more “authentic” America that endeared the guides to so many readers and tourists. It gave Americans a sensation of finding hidden and forgotten parts of their country that lay just around the corner and up the road. In fact, it was Alsberg, in Washington, D.C., who asked Cleavenger, in Colorado, to include more of the back roads that the latter had not considered worthy of inclusion.²⁰

If the prose style and format of the guides broke from traditional tourist literature, there was also much to be said for their unorthodox approach to American history. Just as the guides embraced common landscapes alongside breathtaking vistas, they also featured failures and common people alongside great leaders and monumental events. In this respect, the guides put meat on the bones of the story of America, and, in 1939, *New Republic* critic Robert Cantwell thrilled at this virtual redefinition of history:

It is one kind of experience to read, in Beard or in Turner, of the opening of the West, but it is another kind of experience to read of the rise and fall of Chillicothe in relation to the railroads, or of Galena in relation to the world market for lead. Everybody knows in a general way what happened when the railroads supplanted the canals, but nobody knew until the *Guides* dramatized it how many careers were deflected in the process or how many towns disappeared.

In the guides Cantwell found “a grand, melancholy [sic], formless, democratic anthology of frustration and idiosyncrasy, a majestic roll call of national failure, a terrible and yet engaging corrective to the success stories that dominate our literature.”²¹

Cantwell's claim that the guides “revolutionized” American historical writing—echoed by Mumford and DeVoto—is at odds with more recent scholarship that stresses the intellectual shortcomings of the guides and questions whether they qualify as history at all. Marguerite Shaffer suggests that the guides promoted heritage rather

¹⁹ See Kellock's undated memo to Reed Harris, p. 148, reel 6, Alsberg-Cronyn papers and Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 25.

²⁰ Letter of Alsberg to Cleavenger, 21 April 1936, reel 8, Alsberg-Cronyn Papers.

²¹ Reprinted in Warren Susman, ed., *Culture and Commitment, 1929–1945* (New York, 1973), 194–200, quotes pp. 199, 198.

than history, and Jerrold Hirsch argues that the guides insufficiently distinguished the significant from the trivial, and contained no meaningful explanation of past events.²² Furthermore, Hirsch argues that the history offered by the guides is actually best described as mythic, because it aimed to unify the nation rather than embrace social conflict. And by virtue of their organization around tours rather than chronology, Hirsch argues that the guides connected facts only through place and landscape and avoided larger causal relationships. Ultimately, Hirsch calls the guides “paens to progress,” where issues that had divided Americans were only briefly noted rather than explored in any sustained fashion.²³ While conceding that the FWP guides often had a left-leaning viewpoint, Robert Dorman argued that their “antiquarian,” “encyclopedic” approach “dilute[d] any and all political content.” In a similar vein, Christine Bold sees the real significance of the guides in their attempt to construct a diverse and pluralistic national culture. All of these scholars see the effects of the guides as conservative because they generally reinforced an ideal of national unity, despite their limited gestures at a more inclusive and diverse America.²⁴ The ambition of the project and the nuances in the individual guides makes such sweeping generalizations difficult to support. The intellectual aim of the project was to go *beyond* a national narrative and record idiosyncrasy; thus, attempts to generalize about the guides are limited by their very approach. In fact, the FWP editors—who were not professionally trained historians—even anticipated some of the directions of postwar historical scholarship.²⁵

The interwar years witnessed a revival of interest in American history and a heightened concern for a more “usable past.” The *Dictionary of American Biography* was compiled between 1928 and 1938, the National Archives was completed in 1937, and *The History of American Life*—Dixon Ryan Fox’s and Arthur Schlesinger’s sprawling, ambitious collective effort to tell the story of the nation’s past in some comprehensive new fashion—began in 1928 and ended in 1944.²⁶ Within the historical profession, the changes of the interwar period are more difficult to assess. Peter Novick argues that the discipline began to attract men weaned on the reform movements of the Progressive Era, and who, in turn, stressed “conflict and discontinuity” in historical interpretation and saw scholarship as having ameliorative potential. This trend was extended by the work of Charles Beard and his students, who were now entering the prime of their careers. Similarly, the “new history” of James Harvey Robinson had stressed the

²² Shaffer, *See America First*, 212 and Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 64–8.

²³ Jerrold Hirsch, “Portrait of America, The Federal Writers’ Project in Intellectual and Cultural Context” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 1984), 121–6, quote on p. 121.

²⁴ Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993), 301–2 and Bold, *The WPA Guides*.

²⁵ Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 117–8.

²⁶ Susman, *Culture as History*, 175–8 and Alfred Haworth Jones, “The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era,” *American Quarterly* 23 (December 1971): 710–24.

integration of past and present, while the rise of cultural anthropology introduced new concepts of relativism and difference. As John Higham remarked, younger scholars in the 1920s and 1930s became captivated by the idea of researching particular groups, and “wrote, usually with a close feeling of identification, about such folk as dirt farmers, indentured servants, cowboys, missionaries, Indians, and immigrants.” Ellen Fitzpatrick has also stressed the interwar period as a tremendously creative moment for historical scholarship, and one that anticipated in many ways the augmented attention to race and class in the 1960s.²⁷ On a larger scale in the 1920s and 1930s, the historical profession regularly called for more “social scientific” and “systematic social” history that would give greater attention to new actors. And the American Historical Association (AHA) regularly encouraged historians to incorporate local history, the history of education, and the role of folklore, religion, and technology into their work. Alongside the Beardian trend of placing economic conflict at the heart of American history, these calls make the decade appear ripe for the growth of social history. Yet all this ferment yielded little.²⁸

The areas of new scholarship encouraged by the profession were precisely the areas of historical research that editors of the Federal Writers’ Project found most appealing. The project was run by ethnically diverse and cosmopolitan liberals who had been influenced by their experience in the Progressive Era; marked by an enthusiasm for American ethnic, economic, and regional diversity, they hoped the New Deal cultural programs might advance. In Jerrold Hirsch’s estimation, they were, above all, “romantic nationalists” who hoped to replace a national tradition with a model of pluralism, cosmopolitanism, and cultural variation. The leading lights at the FWP and in related WPA programs—people such as Alsberg, Kellock, and Morton Royse—all brought a reformist sensibility to the project, and notably few came from the academy. Alsberg traveled as a foreign correspondent and a relief worker in the aftermath of the Great War, then brought his sophisticated bohemianism to the work of the Provincetown Players. Kellock’s relief work also took her to Europe, and upon return, she became heavily involved in New York’s settlement house movement before studying journalism at Columbia, contributing to the *Dictionary of American Biography* (DAB) and working for the New Deal Resettlement Administration. Royse continued in the tradition of Horace Kallen by encouraging a rejection of the “melting pot” ideal and promoting a model that treated the American population as a composite of immigrants.²⁹ Another important influence came from the renewed attention given

²⁷ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, GB, 1988), 145, 239; John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore, 1965), 191; Ellen F. Fitzpatrick, *History’s Memory: Writing America’s Past, 1880–1980* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

²⁸ Higham, *History*, 117–9, 191 and for quotes, see Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 178.

²⁹ On Royse, see Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 30–1, quote on p. 4.

to American regional traditions by Paul Taylor, Dorothea Lange, Walter Prescott Webb, Carey McWilliams, and Howard Odum. Others attuned to these differences of region, ethnicity, folklore, and race were directly involved in the FWP. Many of the photographs appearing in the Colorado guide came from Arthur Rothstein's work at the Farm Security Administration, and reflect his interest in the politics of labor and land in the West. D'Arcy McNickle, who assisted John Collier at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1930s, also served as the editor of Indian material at the FWP, while John Lomax evaluated folksongs submitted to the FWP for placement within the Library of Congress.

Despite the orientation of these FWP leaders, both Hirsch and Bold are critical of what they see as the organization's progressive intellectual assumptions. It is not hard to find in these guides endorsements of the New Deal and the Roosevelt Administration, such as the Colorado guide's support for the Resettlement Administration, agricultural reforms, and the recent victories of labor unions. At the same time, the guides were among the first to treat in a sustained historical manner economic conflicts, labor struggles, conflicts between Native Americans and whites, and the presence of minorities. The national editors encouraged states to play up subjects that had been ignored in traditional historical accounts of Colorado and the West, and to frame history in terms of "social forces." The initial draft of the history essay in the Colorado guide was written by State Historian LeRoy Hafen, a recently minted Ph.D. who had studied with Herbert Bolton at the University of California. Ruth Crawford, assigned to edit the state's guide, lamented Hafen's traditional perspective and his emphasis on the territorial period at the expense of the later phase of intense conflict ushered in by industrialization and demonetization. Crawford wanted the history essay to speak to modern conditions by way of explanation, and this echoed the decade's growing concern with "a usable past" that intentionally blurred the line between past and present. For Crawford, history *was* conflict, and she dismissed Hafen's draft essay as promotional rather than critical. For instance, she insisted that the Ludlow Massacre—omitted from earlier drafts—be featured for its historical and contemporary significance. The message could not have been lost on Hafen, who had given only two paragraphs to Ludlow in his own recent history of Colorado, and concluded his assessment with a favorable description of the governor's decision to send troops into the tent colony.³⁰

Similarly, the preliminary copy of the Colorado guide described the Cripple Creek strike as a violent conflagration, but gave no attention to its underlying causes in working conditions of the mining industry. In this early version, the governor's decision to dispatch the militia was treated as the key to preventing the outbreak of civil war in the state, rather than as a strategy to quell the force of the strike. By contrast, the final copy of the Colorado guide included an extended discussion not only

³⁰ Memo of Ruth Crawford to George Cronyn, "Preliminary Report on Colorado Guide," entry 13, box 6 July 1936–June 1937, FWP Central Records and Hafen, *Colorado*, 274–5.

of the strike, but also the roots of the violence.³¹ This sustained attention to the labor problems of the mining industry had been virtually non-existent in tourist guides prior to the 1930s. Baggs's *Colorado: The Queen Jewel of the Rockies* omitted both the Cripple Creek strike and the Ludlow Massacre, even though these events had been recent, national news. Lillian Rice Brigham's popular 1938 motor guide to Colorado—which actually contained even lengthier driving tours of the state than the FWP guide—briefly mentioned the Ludlow Massacre, but made no attempt to integrate it into the larger story of labor history, the West, or industrialization. Ludlow was literally no more than a road marker on one of Brigham's auto tours.³² By contrast, the FWP guide challenged the decision of Governor Ammons in sending troops and declaring martial law, which led to hostilities that killed women and children living in the tent colony. The narrative ends with an approving note that the strike “aroused public opinion, and brought about improvement of working conditions and civil liberties in the coal camps.”³³

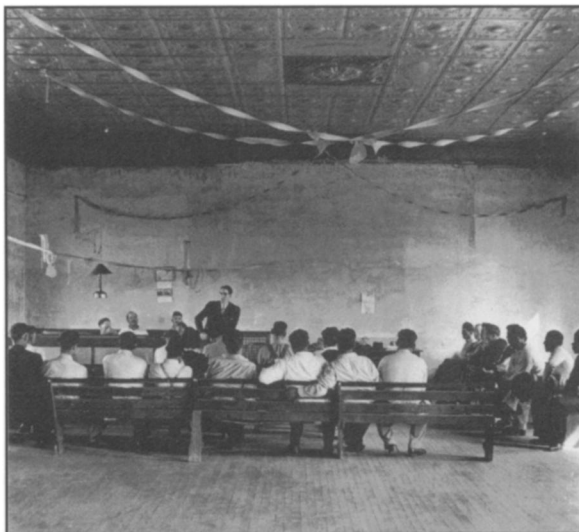


Figure 2. The Federal Writers Project extensively discussed the sugar beet industry as a way of highlighting the problems of labor in the American West. This photograph, Jack Allison's view of a union meeting—taken from the Farm Security Administration collection—was one of many that sympathetically portrayed the plight of migrant laborers in the sugar beet industry. Photo courtesy of FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-015801-E DLC, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

In her editorial reports, Ruth Crawford also stressed the economic forces that had shaped Colorado. She insisted that the guide cover the sugar beet industry of the eastern plains, not just because of its importance to the state's economy, but because “the problems associated with it are among the most difficult facing the country today; for instance, the problem of migratory workers, immigration, child labor, the tariff, unionization, and the relation of relief to low wages.”³⁴ This emphasis is understandable given the industry's contemporary place in the news: indeed the Colorado guide

³¹ Tour 5, ff37, DPL WPA Collection and Workers of the Writers' Program, *Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State*, 248–9.

³² Lillian Rice Brigham, *Colorado Travelore* (Denver, CO, 1938), 55.

³³ Workers of the Writers' Program, *Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State*, 51, 58–9, 375–6.

³⁴ Ruth Crawford to George Cronyn, “Preliminary Report on the Colorado Guide,” 2 June 1936, entry 13, box 6 July 1936–July 1937, FWP Central Records.



Figure 3. This photograph, Arthur Rothstein's portrait of a sugar beet worker, also from the Farm Security Administration collection, illustrated the Colorado guide's discussion of the efforts to organize agricultural workers in the sugar beet industry. Photo courtesy of FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-028721-D DLC, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

applauded the New Deal legislation that reformed the structure of the industry and encouraged the organization of beet workers. It also discussed the sugar beet industry extensively in the essays on economics, in the driving tours, and through multiple Farm Security Administration photographs. [See Figures 2 and 3.] Compare this to LeRoy Hafen's passing mention of the industry in his state histories, which he connected to the rise of irrigation but not to questions of labor and immigration.³⁵ Crawford and the national FWP office stressed the sugar beet industry because it allowed them to move the history of Colorado and the West out of the realm of myth and place it in the larger national story. Thus Crawford also wanted to give more attention to the drought, a "national tragedy" that grew out of "the previous death struggle between the cattle barons and the agriculturalists." It is hard to reconcile this historical perspective—stress-ing power and conflict, and the link between past and present—with the recent characterizations of the guides

as propagating a mythical vision of American history. In fact, Crawford's vision for the Colorado guide presages the themes of the "New Western History" in subsequent decades, when ethnic and racial conflict, economic tension, regional divisions, and the role of the

³⁵ This decision to support the regulation of the sugar beet industry in fact became one of the main sticking points in the published guide. George Willison, who in 1939 was directed to help bring the guide to completion, had been a close friend of Thomas Hornsby Ferril, the Colorado poet who was then working as a spokesman for the Great Western Sugar Company. Ferril objected to the description of the industry Willison sent him, and argued that the copy excessively emphasized the condition of workers and the politics of relief, while slighting what he considered to be fair wages and good conditions relative to other industries. See 24 June 1940 telegram to George Willison (almost certainly from Ferril), Colorado Correspondence 1937–1940, box A38, Records of the U.S. Works Progress Administration, Washington, DC. See also Willison's revised draft of sugar beet industry in same collection, Economic Base, Colorado, box A39. Ferril's dissatisfaction surfaced publicly in his review of the guide published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, 23 March 1941, sec. 9, p. 19.

government would be amplified at the expense of older versions of the western story. Consider her statement of the state's importance to the national story:

In the conditioning process of Colorado, the following must have had their effect: the mingling of races and cultures; the communal enterprises of the early settlement; the clash of adventurer and Puritan; the acquisition of fabulous individual wealth along with the miners' struggles for an eight hour day; the rapid supplanting of one economy by another, in little more than fifty years.³⁶

Crawford's commentary echoes the growing sense among editors in Washington, D. C. that the American guides ought to become, at least in part, documents of social history. In the instructions issued in October of 1936, editors encouraged state writers and researchers to go beyond traditional political narratives when telling the story of their state, for government "is but the echo of the community, for without the community there would be no need of government. The expansion of government merely reflects the expansion of the society it serves. So the real State history is in the community, not in the few of its people it elevates to official place. . . . Wars are but brief interludes . . . in the life of the State."³⁷

The intellectual sensibility of the guides was to narrate American life as a tapestry of difference rather than a single story. Therefore the FWP was enthusiastic—even insistent—about incorporating racial and ethnic minorities into the guides, and frequently reminded states such as Colorado to include more material on blacks, despite their small numbers. This approach to history from the bottom up also influenced the editors' epistemological sensibility of accepting conflicting accounts of the past. In their instructions regarding the essay on Indians and tribal history, the editors instructed locals to first consult Bureau of American Ethnology reports and reservation officials. But if Indians gave different versions of this history, these were to be included in the guide, a position that reflects the appointment of D'Arcy McNickle to the FWP as editor of Indian material. In McNickle's view, the frontier would be best understood as the arena of Indian subjugation through white power.³⁸ Yet the FWP still dealt with

³⁶ Ruth Crawford to George Cronyn, "Preliminary Report on Colorado Guide," and subsequent memo from Crawford to Alsberg (n.d., probably 1936), both in entry 13, box 6 July 1936–June 1937, FWP Central Records. These concerns were echoed by Alsberg in a memo to Cleavenger, 3 May 1939, reel 7, Alsberg-Cronyn Papers, on the latter's treatment of Colorado Springs.

³⁷ WPA, "Supplementary Instructions #16 to American Guide Manual," 21 October 1936, Instructions to Workers, Colorado Writers' Program Collection, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO (hereafter, CHS Collection).

³⁸ The Colorado Writers' Program gathered extensive information on ethnic and African American communities in the state, which are housed at the Denver Public Library and the Colorado Historical Society. See, for example, box 2, ff22, and box 4, ff1-6, DPL WPA Collection. On Native Americans see "Supplementary Instructions #5 to the American Guide Manual: Indians and Indian Life," 3 January 1936, p. 3, entry 11, FWP Central Records. McNickle was assistant to Commissioner John Collier of the BIA during the 1930s. See Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces*, 169–70.

Native Americans as a group that partially existed outside of history by instructing states to begin history essays with the first whites. Indian history prior to the arrival of whites was to be included in the essay on Indians, while Indians would be treated in the history essays as they came into contact with pioneers.³⁹

The FWP's attention to labor conflict, race, and power as manifestations of difference and American pluralism also extended to an interest in folk customs, reflected in the choices made by the project's folklore editor, Benjamin Botkin. A former student of Franz Boas, Botkin treated folklore as a fluid, evolving, and even conflicting collection of stories rather than a fixed body of traditions, and, in a similar spirit, the editors of the American guide project welcomed folk material submitted from the field.⁴⁰ But while the editors acknowledged that locals would be the best resource for collecting customs and stories, they also worried that the latter might not be able to recognize proper folklore material. This fear was confirmed when Coloradans submitted pioneer stories and gunslinger tales. Perhaps the FWP editors considered these inappropriate because they confirmed stereotypical views of the Mountain West rather than revealing what the editors hoped might be a more "authentic"—even unexpected—picture of local life. "Proper" folk material seemed abundant in neighboring New Mexico, with its rich Spanish and Indian history, but Coloradans failed to frame their own culture in a way that fit the FWP's understanding of traditional culture. Ironically, as in other situations, the locals' understanding of their own context and place in history did not always match that of the FWP.⁴¹ Similarly, the editors were disappointed by the absence of "genuine" folk music in Colorado, even acknowledging in the guide itself that the state "has produced no original music reflecting the color, 'feel[,] or characteristic manner of life of the plains and mountain country." The songs that emerged from the mines—precisely the kind of material the editors admired as products of labor struggles—did not qualify because so frequently they had come from outside the state.⁴²

This dynamic around regional distinctiveness is complex. As Christine Bold has pointed out, the national FWP office considered mass culture to be one of the most pernicious influences on modern life because it eroded "authentic" traditions and local identities. In fact, while the national office adamantly documented "regional" or "local" traits and traditions, locals themselves might have been striving to appear

³⁹ WPA, "Supplementary Instructions #16 to American Guide Manual," 9.

⁴⁰ Botkin's influence is clear in "Supplementary Instructions #9 to the American Guide Manual, Folklore and Folk Customs," 12 March 1936, entry 11, FWP Central Records. For an extended treatment of Botkin's influence over modern folklore, see Hirsch, "Portrait of America," chapters 10–1.

⁴¹ On the qualifications of "folklore" in Colorado, see letter of Alsberg to Cleavenger, 2 October 1936, entry 22, box 1, FWP Central Records.

⁴² "Supplementary Instructions #9 to the American Guide Manual, Music," 12 March 1936, Entry 11, FWP Central Records and, for quote, see Workers of the Writers' Program, *Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State*, 89.

less parochial and more national. Furthermore, the editors felt an impulse to salvage what they considered to be a more rooted, historical, and authentic culture from the onslaught of mass culture, and yet this impulse was itself a product of that very national perspective offered by modern life. Westerners such as well-known regional author Vardis Fisher, charged with directing the Idaho guide, bristled at the national editors' preexisting notions of western regionalism and made little attempt to fit his view of Idaho with that of the national editors.⁴³

The problem of local versus national perspectives in part grew from the conflicting ideals of the project as a whole. On the one hand, the editors hoped to create "the complete, standard, authoritative work on the United States." At the same time, they wanted the authenticity of local knowledge—complete with quirks, anecdotes, folklore, and regional distinctiveness—rather than the kind of uniformity that would inevitably come from a set of guides authored by professional travel writers. Furthermore, the editors warned writers against "local bias, commercial interest, and local pride," for this kind of rhetoric was at odds with the lofty ideals they had set for the guide.⁴⁴ This created a tension from the very start: on the one hand Alsberg was obligated to have "federal experts" help sift through the mass of local information generated for the guides, while at the same time, the editors touted the guides as distinctive precisely because material had been collected by "natives" who were uniquely able to catch the spirit of a particular place.⁴⁵

Lawrence Morris, the field supervisor for the Colorado guide, found that, from the beginning, locals had produced thorough but dry copy that took on "the jargon of specialists." While he encouraged locals to write in a plain, readable style that reflected their own voice, he admitted that "finding fresh interesting prose is going to be our biggest hurdle to take." In his estimation, the very thought that they were writing as spokesmen for the government paralyzed Coloradans.⁴⁶ Another report audibly cringed at the "booster" descriptions of Denver's local architecture and the flattering portrayals of packing houses and industrial plants; what the FWP wanted was skyscrapers and slums, but more importantly a sense of what made the city distinctive. Crawford, Morris, and others were unable to understand why locals could not write in a direct, concrete, and familiar voice that they assumed would come naturally, rather than aiming for a professional style that they could not approximate. This tension is the stylistic equivalent of Crawford's substantive critique that Coloradans could not

⁴³ Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 29. There is another irony here. The guides hoped to capture, or recapture, elements of regional tradition that had been erased by industrialization and mass culture. But in a way, the New Deal's restorative and planning measures contributed to the erasure of local culture because they often targeted those areas that were provincial, rural, and—not coincidentally—poor.

⁴⁴ "Supplementary Instructions #16 to American Guide Manual," 12, 17.

⁴⁵ See, for example, form letter from Alsberg to local businesses, introducing field workers, September 1935, reel 7, p. 12, Alsberg-Cronyn Papers.

apprehend the importance of their own history the way that she could. Coloradans submitted copy that presented their state in the best possible light, while the national office grew impatient at the inability of locals to think and write in a way that reflected “true” local color.⁴⁷ Ironically, locals strove to sound more national—or typical—while the national editors sought a more distinct and local voice. Ultimately, the FWP sent professional writers to revise the Colorado guide for publication.⁴⁸

These tensions are evident in the draft and final description of Fort Wicked, the site of an Indian-white conflict in the northeastern part of the state. Initially locals submitted the following description of the incident:

The name was given the place by the Indians after an uprising in 1865, when it was the only ranch in the entire valley to escape destruction by the war-crazed tribesmen. On the morning of Jan. 14 of that year, the Indians launched concerted attacks on every ranch between Fort Sedgwick, near Julesburg (see Tour 1) and Fort Morgan, a distance of almost 100 m. The number of Indians taking place in this winter “drive” was amazing, the bands attacking some ranches being estimated at from 250 to 500 warriors. With the exception of Fort Wicked, every place was either wholly or partially burned, and the occupants massacred [*sic*] or driven away. H. Godfrey who maintained the Overland Station here was a stubborn and courageous man, and he placed little trust in the natives. He had the place well fortified, and when the marauding band swooped down upon it in the early morning hours he was prepared for a bitter fight. As he sighted grimly through the loop-holes, his wife stood calmly at the bullet mold, fashioning leaden pellets for his rifle. No less busy was their daughter, Celia, who carried bullets and powder to [*sic*] for her father. As fast as his wife ran the balls, Mr. Godfrey would call “Hurry up, Celia, more balls, Celia.” As fast as he received them, he would fire away at the encircling braves, sending an oath with every shot, and exclaiming, “Take that, will you?” He was a deadly marksman, and nearly every charge found its target. As he saw his enemies drop, Godfrey would let go another oath and say, “There goes another.” The combination of father, mother and daughter functioned so efficiently and proved so deadly, that the Indians soon gave up and went on to the next ranch, looking for easier prey. Ever afterward they referred to Godfrey as “Old Wicked.” The site where this family made their desperate stand is marked.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ For quotes, see memo of Field Supervisor Lawrence S. Morris to Henry Alsberg, 19 March 1936, “Morris” file, entry 6, box 1 Field Reports 1935–1937, FWP Central Records.

⁴⁷ See, for example, statement of Reed Harris insisting that the American guides will avoid “booster” language typical of previous guides, in reel 7, p. 54, Alsberg-Cronyn Papers.

⁴⁸ “Editorial Report on State Copy,” 23 March 1937, entry 13, box 6 July 1936–June 1937, FWP Central Records. Alsberg and Kellock shared a frustration with the southern and rural states’ inability to represent their history and culture properly. Willison, who revised the Colorado guide, was born and educated in Colorado, but had not lived there since his graduation from the University of Colorado in 1918. He joined the FWP in 1936 to work on the Massachusetts guide, and eventually became the project’s editor in chief. He spent the rest of his life in the East. “George Willison, Historian, 76, Dies,” *New York Times*, 1 August 1972, Late City Edition, p. 38.

Local writers thought this description might reveal the drama of the Great Plains, while the national editors thought the story smacked of exaggerated western legends that needed to be transcended in order to achieve a more critical profile of the region. Thus, the revised form of the tour bore little resemblance to the original:

Where the highway crosses to the southern bank of the Platte, 78.2 m., is the SITE OF FORT WICKED (R), once a ranch and station on the Overland Trail. On January 14, 1865, Indians attacked every ranch between Fort Sedgwick, near Julesburg, and Fort Morgan, a distance of almost 100 miles. Many ranches were burned and their occupants massacred or put to flight. H. Godfrey, station master of the Overland here, had prepared for such an emergency and while his wife and daughter molded bullets and supplied him with powder, Godfrey continued firing at the raiders. The Indians soon rode off, carrying dead and wounded, and thereafter referred to Godfrey as "Old Wicked."⁵⁰

Furthermore, the original description did not at all square with the kind of anthropological and culturally sensitive approach to Indian-white relations that the guide editors expected. Alsberg was blunt about this point when returning tour drafts to Cleavenger in Colorado:

You will . . . note that we have edited material on Indian raids to give a less prejudiced story. The Indians were not particularly dangerous to the whites until the whites began to drive them from their lands and destroy the animals on which they depended for food and clothing. The uprisings that began in 1862 were for the most part a last stand of people who had been repeatedly betrayed and were facing starvation. According to the testimony of Army officers, very little of the payments promised in return for Indian lands ceded by treaties ever reached the Indians, and the lands into which the whites drove them were among the poorest. Please keep in mind these facts when editing material on Indians. Also keep in mind that Colorado had one of the most shocking massacres of frontier history—of Indians by whites [the Sand Creek Massacre].⁵¹

The Colorado guide was among the last in the series to be published, just months before the nation's entry into a war that abruptly shifted the state's urban economy toward defense and service, a smaller scale version of the changes experienced in California. As a result, it was in some ways immediately dated, perched on the cusp of a dramatic change for the state. Yet this also helps to explain the guide's enduring appeal. It has been reprinted eight times, and has been termed "the finest guidebook ever done for Colorado" by one of the state's leading historians. By searching out towns and roads that even in the 1930s had begun to fade in importance and by recalling histories that had disappeared, the guide gave the state a history that felt contingent rather than predetermined.⁵² The creation of *Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State* deserves such an extensive excavation because it evokes ideas about the West itself.

⁴⁹ Tour 1, pp. 3–4, box 2, ff37, DPL WPA Collection.

⁵⁰ Workers of the Writers' Program, *Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State*, 201.

⁵¹ Letter of Henry Alsberg to Morris Cleavenger, 24 May 1939, Jan. 1939–Jan. 1941, Folder 651.3172, FWP State Records.

⁵² See Thomas J. Noel's fine introduction to the Colorado reprint, *The WPA Guide to 1930s Colorado* (Lawrence, 1987), vii. John Gunther regarded the Colorado guide as one of the best in the series. See Gunther, *Inside U.S.A.* (New York, 1951), 1049.

First, it inaugurated a move away from the extravagant descriptions of earlier tourist guides toward a more self-consciously modest style that made room for both exceptional and unexceptional landscapes. The FWP editors were perhaps no less nationalistic than the See America First writers of earlier decades, but they did reflect the prevailing mood of the 1930s, which assumed national unity and sentiment could best be achieved through the documentary style that encouraged Americans to see and describe the landscape for themselves. Furthermore, the auto tours would present motorists not with a static landscape, but with evolving stories that infused place with meaning. Presented with this level of depth and comprehensiveness—with both beautiful and mundane landscapes, stories of past and present—Americans would connect directly and physically to their nation.

Second, in emphasizing place and landscape, economic relationships, ethnic and labor conflict, folklore, and the lives of common people, the FWP anticipated professional historiographical trends. Many of these new themes were implicit challenges to Turnerian interpretations of the American West that continued to resonate with historians and the public well into the twentieth century. Even the driving tours encouraged a focus on the historical development of place rather than reinforcing an emphasis on the frontier and westward movement. The FWP editors were not alone in challenging existing historical interpretations, nor did they emerge in a vacuum. As Robert Dorman acknowledges, the “subregionalists” writing in the interwar period—such as Angie Debo and D’Arcy McNickle—had begun to focus on power as the central issue in understanding the American West. And the prevailing wisdom regarding new Indian policy, agricultural policy, and attention to folk traditions, for instance, seeped into the perspective and priorities of the FWP editors in Washington, D. C., who in turn influenced the work of local researchers and writers. Still, the experimentalism of the FWP relative to the historical professionalism is striking.⁵³

Third, while much has been written about the larger significance of the American guides, little attention has been given to their relationship to the production of knowledge. This is especially important in the context of the American South and West. Prior to the WPA, the Colorado legislature actually considered abolishing the state historical society, but after the New Deal gave new impetus to historical research, the society entered what Hafen, its leader, termed a “golden age of achievement.” The CWA pioneer interviews and town histories, amplified by the work of the FWP researchers, substantially expanded the society’s archives, not just through the research for the guide, but also through countless other cataloguing and data creation projects.⁵⁴

⁵³ Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces*, 169–70 and Kerwin Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination* (Berkeley, 1997), 21–2.

⁵⁴ See Noel, *The WPA Guide to 1930s Colorado*, esp. xv and quote is from Hafen and Hafen, *Joyous Journey*, 201. The Colorado Historical Society again lost a substantial portion of state funding in 2003.

Furthermore, the Historical Records Survey, another WPA program, catalogued the materials found in far-flung local historical societies and libraries across the state. This was yet another facet of the general concern of the WPA: to create an archive on which a deeper understanding of the states—and by extension the nation—could be built. As Alfred Kazin put it, the FWP was part of “the need, born of the depression and the international crisis, to chart America and to possess it.” This emphasis on local historical knowledge—“the raw stuff of history”—effectively created an archive for Colorado, and thereby helped to create the state’s history. Henry Hough, the director of the Colorado Writers’ Project in its final years, considered this the true legacy of the project. But again, it needs to be recognized that while the *kind* of local history that was being created and organized might have been unexceptional—stories of individual Coloradans or the genealogy of towns and industries—the FWP was using it in a fundamentally new way by connecting it to the story of the nation as a whole. While the FWP drew on the early-nineteenth-century tradition of local historical writing, it also anticipated some of the trends of social historians trained after the Second World War.⁵⁵

Finally, the creation of the guide reveals the complex nature of regional identity. The resurgence of interest in regionalism during the interwar years—which both spawned and was a product of the guides—fed a new style of national sentiment; that is, regionalism and nationalism emerged not in competition but reciprocally. As Edward Ayers and Peter Onuf have noted, historians still do not entirely understand how these two sources of identity have shaped one another.⁵⁶ The American guide project is an excellent example of this dynamic, because in the *process* of creating the guides the FWP editors were self-consciously creating—and in some instances recreating—regional identities. This indicates just how tricky the idea of “authentic regionalism” is, for in the case of Colorado the national editors taught locals how to narrate and interpret their state’s history, how to frame ethnic traditions, labor relations, and folk customs, and how to see the landscape, all in ways that would best fit, and thereby extend, the interest in the nation’s cultural heritage. It was in fact the distance afforded to the national editors that allowed them to see Colorado—and western regionalism—in a certain manner. Had locals been left to their own devices, they would have drawn a very different picture of their state.

⁵⁵ Hough, Final Report and, for quote, Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 486. On the roots of local history, see David J. Russo, *Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820s–1930s* (Westport, CT, 1988).

⁵⁶ Peter S. Onuf and Edward Ayers, “Introduction,” in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, by Ayers et al. (Baltimore, 1996).