

THE FEDERAL THEATRE IN DALLAS:

A NEW DEAL FOR THEATRE

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A THESIS

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BY

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To the Associate Vice President for Research and Dean of the  
Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Marion Rhett Walters  
entitled "The Federal Theatre In Dallas: A New Deal for Theatre." I  
have examined this thesis for form and content and recommend that  
it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Masters of Arts, with a major in history.

Martha H. Swain  
Dr. Martha H. Swain, Major Professor

We have read this thesis  
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## DEDICATION

To Dr. Martha H. Swain, my mentor, whose exemplary career as an historian and inspiring role as a teacher encouraged me to pursue this path in research and writing.

and

To Dave Walters, my husband, whose support and confidence enabled me to spend the time and effort necessary to explore new horizons.

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ABSTRACT

THE FEDERAL THEATRE IN DALLAS:  
A NEW DEAL FOR THEATRE

Marion Rhett Walters

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The Dallas Federal Theatre Project was part of the Works Progress Administration effort to put 3.5 million unemployed people to work starting in 1935. Initial work to create the Dallas Federal Theatre Project began in August 1935. After fifteen months, the Dallas Theatre Project closed on 30 November 1936. This thesis examined the questions generated by the creation, activities, and short life span of the Dallas Federal Theatre Project.

This thesis was based upon original documents from the Federal Theatre Project Records, located in the National Archives in Washington, D. C. Because of the passage of sixty years since the events examined, none of the principals were available for interviews. Evidence showed that lax organization, failure of federal agencies to coordinate their efforts, the opposition of the WPA State Administrator, and unclear authority combined with too many goals led to the early demise of the Dallas Federal Theatre Project.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Great Depression entered its sixth year in 1935. In September 1934, the the American Federation of Labor (AFL) estimated that almost 11 million workers were unemployed, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) reported that 18.4 million persons were receiving emergency relief from public funds. Despite the many New Deal programs to address the problems of unemployment and poverty, 20.3 percent of the labor force over 14 years was unemployed; when non-farm laborers were counted that figure reached 30.2 percent. In his annual message to Congress on 3 January 1935 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt proposed the creation of a single federal agency to coordinate efforts to find work for five million unemployed people on relief rolls. Roosevelt asserted that dole relief and programs that provided a "few hours of weekly work cutting grass, raking leaves or picking up paper in public parks" robbed recipients of their self-respect and self-reliance. "Work must be found for the able-bodied but destitute workers. The Federal Government must and shall quit the business of relief."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>American Federation of Labor, American Federationist (April and December 1934), quoted in Arthur D. Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and



In response to President Roosevelt's proposal, the Congress passed the Emergency Relief Act of 1935. On 6 May 1935 the President issued Executive Order No. 7034 to create the Works Progress Administration. The WPA would supersede other relief efforts, making employment the primary method of the federal government to relieve unemployment and deprivation.<sup>2</sup>

In Texas over twenty percent of the Texas population, 1.25 million out of about six million, was receiving some form of relief by 1935. Since the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 private charity and public welfare had used a variety of methods to help out-of-work people and their families. As church funds and community chests were drained by the enormous problem of hungry and frequently homeless citizens, city, county and state governments found that they, too, were unable to meet the rudimentary needs of the millions of unemployed workers and their families. Traditional attitudes that the jobless were themselves to blame for their predicament, combined with policies that favored balanced public

Depression (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1935), 408; Department of Commerce, Bicentennial Edition: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970: Part I (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), 126; House Committee on Appropriations, Emergency Relief Appropriations: Appropriation for Public Works and Relief, 74th Cong., 1st sess., 1935, 45.

<sup>2</sup>House Committee on Appropriations, Emergency Relief Appropriations: 74th Cong., 1st sess., 1935, 45; Frank Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1990), 153; Arthur W. Macmahon, John D. Millett, and Gladys Ogden, The Administration of Federal Work Relief (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1941), 72-75.

budgets, stigmatized the jobless and their families while at the same time preventing them from getting their barest needs met. The unemployed were treated as burdens by local and state governments that were totally unprepared to deal with their suffering.<sup>3</sup>

The length of the Depression and its seriousness forced governments at all levels to develop ways to deal with the hardships of the millions of unemployed. Even though approximately 15 percent of the total population was unemployed and of that figure 100,000 “were entirely destitute” reluctance to incur a greater deficit meant Texas had no statewide relief in 1932. When funds from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) became available in November 1932, Governor Ross Sterling administered the funds to counties and local chambers of commerce that distributed the money. In March 1933 newly-elected Governor Miriam A. Ferguson established the Texas Relief Commission to handle the RFC funds. The legislature acted in May 1933 to create the Texas Rehabilitation and Relief Commission, so that the state could coordinate relief efforts with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In addition, Governor Ferguson worked hard to have “bread bonds” passed. Voters amended the Texas constitution to authorize the state legislature to issue general relief bonds up to \$20 million. As soon as he took office in 1935 Governor James V. Allred advocated the

<sup>3</sup>Michael Barr, “A Comparative Examination of Federal Work Relief in Fredericksburg and Gillespie County,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 97 (January 1993): 365.

substitution of “useful employment for relief.” By 1 April 1935 FERA reported that Texas had spent \$14,066,000 for emergency relief during 1934, that the state had \$4 million in funds available for 1935 and 1936, and it anticipated zero funds from local sources.<sup>4</sup>

Characterized by a pattern of aggressive, cohesive business leadership, Dallas’s economic life centered on five broad areas: agribusiness, commercial banking and insurance, petroleum, transportation, and manufacturing. Dallas bankers capitalized upon the discovery of oil in Mexia in the 1910’s and had solidified their financial leadership with innovative loans to exploit the East Texas oil field discovered near Kilgore in 1930. In addition, the naming of Dallas as the regional seat of the Federal Reserve in 1913 helped the city build its reputation as a regional financial center. Banking along with the processing of cotton and wheat and the needs of the oil fields spurred the development of the insurance industry. The Dallas Cotton Exchange was the largest inland spot cotton market in the world, while Dallas factories led the world in the manufacture of cotton gins and gin machinery. In addition, manufacturers produced oil field equipment, automobiles, textiles, and apparel. With eight

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<sup>4</sup> A. B. Cox, Studies of Employment Problems in Texas, Preliminary Report. Part I: Causes of Unemployment in Texas (Austin: University of Texas Bureau of Business Research, 1935), 1; Debbie Mauldin Cottrell, “The County Poor Farm System in Texas,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 94 (October 1989): 181; New York Times, 6 January 1935, IV: 6; Expenditure of Funds: Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Senate Document No. 56, 74th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 636.

trunk-line railroads and hard surface highways Dallas grew into a regional distribution center in the Twenties.<sup>5</sup>

Dallas fought the effects of the Depression with every tool it had the imagination and will to employ. Political reform brought the council-city manager form of government to Dallas in 1930, and business interests dominated the newly chartered city government. Boosters and bottom liners pushed for economic growth and balanced city budgets. For example, beginning in 1931 the city of Dallas paid off the deficits incurred by earlier administrations and after 1933 never ran a deficit during the rest of the Depression. Efforts to attract new businesses to Dallas reported success in 1929 and 1930. While the national unemployment figures had grown from 3.2 percent in 1929 to 8.7 percent in 1930, the numbers for Dallas showed unemployment at 4.7 percent. The discovery of the East Texas oil field appeared to soften the Depression for the people of Dallas. The council brooked no discouragement in its efforts to boost the city's fortunes. It passed a statute requiring advance approval for any broadcast comments that might reflect negatively on the city.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Oppenheimer and Bill Porterfield, eds., The Book of Dallas (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), 107; Walter L. Buenger, "This Wonder Age': The Economic Transformation of Northeast Texas, 1900-1930," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 98 (April 1995): 544-545; Maxine Holmes and Gerald D. Saxon, eds., The WPA Dallas Guide and History, with an Introduction by Gerald D. Saxon (Dallas, TX: Dallas Public Library and University of North Texas Press, 1992), 7, 8, 139, 141.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Biles, "The New Deal in Dallas," Southwestern Historical

Slowly the toll of the Depression began to take effect in Dallas. In 1931 jobless numbers grew to 18,500 persons and the Chamber of Commerce emergency relief committee urged contributions of \$100,000 to "relieve hunger and destitution." In 1932 the Community Chest made a special request to its large donors because small donors had nothing else to give. The city had a special bond issue to raise money for work relief projects. In September city and county officials applied jointly to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation for \$450,000 for relief purposes, and by November 9,000 "family heads" were on relief. The RFC funds arrived in January 1933 and the city opened a meat cannery in February. "The Breadline Follies," a city-wide charity benefit, started that month. The "relief depot" issued clothing to 1,379 families, while co-operative garden plots sprang up.<sup>7</sup>

After Roosevelt's inauguration in March 1933 relief appeared to be more systematic. Three more outlets opened to distribute clothing and food, while the county operated a camp for 1,500 jobless men who worked on the Trinity River and other reclamation projects. On 15 July 1933 the Homeowners Loan Corporation opened offices in Dallas. In August, Dallas matched Public Works Administration funds of \$572,000. On 1 September 1934 the city of Dallas pledged the

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Quarterly 95 (July 1991): 3, 4, 8, 6; Department of Commerce, Historical Statistics, 135.

<sup>7</sup>Holmes and Saxon, WPA Dallas Guide, 96-97.

State Fair of Texas, valued at \$4 million, and \$5.5 million in cash to win the bid for the Texas Centennial Exposition in 1936. By 1 October, 10,796 persons were counted as re-employed as a result of the National Industrial Recovery Act. NRA director, Hugh Johnson, singled out the Chamber of Commerce for its speed and energetic actions.<sup>8</sup>

Dallas citizens thought themselves a little better off in 1935 than they had been in 1934. In January bank deposits showed a \$3.5 million increase from 1933 and the value of building permits passed \$6.1 million, more than double the 1932 total. Despite optimism the persistence of the Great Depression meant that 64 percent of babies in Dallas were born to parents on relief rolls. The year 1935 marked both the lowest per capita donations and the smallest total amount raised by the Community Chest from 1928 through 1938. Only 70.9 percent of the \$408,716 goal was met, while donations equalled 80 cents per capita.<sup>9</sup>

In 1935, a group of experienced politicians, known as the "Catfish Club," won election to the city council. The Catfish Council was interested in Dallas's civic success and sought state and federal aid within the confines of their vision of civic ambition, responsibility,

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 97-98; Roger Biles, The South and the New Deal (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 60.

<sup>9</sup>Holmes and Saxon, WPA Dallas Guide, 98; Dorothy Dell DeMoss, "Dallas, Texas, During the Early Depression: The Hoover Years, 1929-1933" (Master's thesis, University of Texas, 1966), 182-183; New York Times, 14 February 1935, 17.

and constraint. The new Park Board took office on 21 May 1935 and one week later cut salaries of Parks Department employees by ten percent. Jim Dan Sullivan, new President of the Park Board, reflected the prevalent attitude when he said the Park Board "did not construe its responsibilities to include social welfare outreach."<sup>10</sup>

New Deal programs experimented with a number of ways to help the poor, relieve unemployment, and provide work before the creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935. Days after his inauguration, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt proposed legislation to address the problems of unemployment and poverty. With 12 to 15 million people out of work and even more seeking relief, the average relief stipend amounted to fifty cents per day per family. In May 1932 Congress funded the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) with \$500 million. Harry Hopkins, who headed FERA, encouraged state administrators to try a variety of methods of relief for the poor, but his power to direct the way relief was handled by state administrators was restrained by the structure of the program. FERA made grants to state and local agencies that, in turn, planned and executed relief measures. Half the appropriation was marked to match funds the states had already expended and the other half targeted areas where need was greatest and did not

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<sup>10</sup>Biles, "The New Deal in Dallas," 4; City of Dallas Park Board Minutes, vol. 8, Dallas City Hall, Dallas, TX, 357, 359; Harry Jebson, Jr., Robert M. Newton and Patricia R. Hogan, Centennial History of the Dallas, Texas Park System, 1876-1976 (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University, 1976), 472.



require matching.<sup>11</sup>

State and local relief personnel used remnants of traditional poor laws, means tests and certification, to make sure those receiving aid were qualified. This had the added effect of making the money go further. FERA dole took many forms: some agencies distributed groceries to the certified poor; some set up kitchens where those meeting the means test could get meals; some set up work projects in exchange for wages; and some simply made direct cash payments to the qualified needy.<sup>12</sup>

By autumn 1933 Harry Hopkins realized that as winter approached millions of Americans remained unemployed and desperately poor. He met with the President to convince him of the need for a jobs program. In November President Roosevelt authorized the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and placed Hopkins in charge. Hopkins promised to put four million people to work by December 15. CWA differed from FERA because it was a federal program that could sponsor work projects directly. Further, it was not limited to the relief rolls for its workers. Characterized by its speedy implementation, CWA put more than two and a half million people to work by mid December and passed the four million mark by mid January.

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<sup>11</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958; reprint, American Heritage Library Edition, 1988), 264.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



CWA jobs consisted mostly of construction work for unskilled labor. Workers built and improved roads, schools, parks, airports, and sewer systems. The CWA established one hundred different job classifications and employed professionals. For example, fifty thousand teachers worked in adult education and rural schools, while three thousand actors, artists, musicians, and writers were employed. Popular with workers who had begun to lose hope that they would ever bring a paycheck home again, CWA found support with retailers because of the purchasing power of the newly employed and re-employed. But it was plagued by charges of political interference, graft, and incompetence and CWA ended almost as abruptly as it began. President Roosevelt, worried about the enormous costs, ordered demobilization. During its four month existence CWA had spent more than \$1 billion to put four million jobless to work. FERA absorbed some of the people and projects left in the lurch by the sudden end of CWA.<sup>13</sup>

The passage of the Emergency Relief Act of 1935 changed the basic premise of relief for millions of unemployed Americans. The new program combined Roosevelt's political savvy, his fiscal conservatism, and his humanitarian feelings. "Emergency Relief" implied, once again, that desperate need and unusual circumstances demanded unprecedented action by the federal government. The

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 269-270, 277; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963; reprint, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1992), 122.

work relief program would be useful, offering permanent improvements for the nation. Roosevelt cut the number of people addressed by the new federal program to 3.5 million, by dividing those on relief into employable and unemployable categories. This reduced the costs of the federal government because it returned to state responsibility 1.5 million of those on relief who were unemployable. The humanitarian goal was to employ large numbers of workers at wages above the amount they would receive if they were on the dole in areas where the greatest need existed. Work projects would pay a security wage, high enough to ensure a decent minimum living standard, but low enough not to draw workers away from private enterprise. To finance the new program, President Roosevelt recommended a single lump sum appropriation of \$4 billion.<sup>14</sup>

Congress passed the \$4.8 billion Emergency Relief Act of 1935 on 6 April 1935. It set few restrictions upon President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's leeway to design a program to put the unemployed to work, but it retained the power of Senate confirmation for upper echelon personnel who would be paid more than \$5,000. This enabled senators to exert some influence upon appointees to the new program, although current employees were exempt, and at the same time allowed them more control of work projects within their states.

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<sup>14</sup>Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 291; House Reports, 74th Cong., 1st sess., 1935, H.R. 15, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 2-3.

Still, the largest appropriation in domestic history to that time went to the President largely based on his pledge that he solely would make the decisions on the projects that would employ 3.5 million people.<sup>15</sup>

Roosevelt reiterated points from his annual message to Congress, during his first fireside chat of 28 April 1935: projects would be designed to employ those on relief rolls and a sizeable proportion of the money spent would go into wages. He wanted the funds to be “actually and promptly spent and not held over until later years.” Roosevelt realized that the quick expenditure would have favorable impact on the economy and that a long-term program was politically dangerous, because it could generate criticism that the New Deal had failed. President Roosevelt’s Executive Order No. 7034 established:

A Works Progress Administration, which shall be responsible to the President for the honest, speedy, and coordinated execution of the work relief program as a whole, and for the execution of that program in such manner as to move from the relief rolls to work on such projects or in private employment the maximum number of persons in the shortest time possible.<sup>16</sup>

The President’s mandate laid out in broad terms the

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<sup>15</sup>Leuchtenburg, Roosevelt and the New Deal, 125; Robert E. Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 68; Congressional Record, 74th Cong., 1st sess., 1935, vol. 79, pt. 5, 5142; New York Times, 25 March 1935, 2.

<sup>16</sup>Freidel, 158; New York Times, 28 April 1935, 2; Macmahon, Millett, and Ogden, 72-76.

responsibilities of the WPA and empowered it to “recommend and carry on small useful projects designed to assure a maximum of employment in all localities.” The idea that “honest work at useful tasks” could meet the twin needs of the unemployed and the nation underlay what Corrington Gill, an economist and statistician who worked for the WPA, described as a “public investment program.” By allocating funds for wages rather than large outlays for materials the WPA moved from “priming the pump” to employment as the solution to the Great Depression. By making the opportunity to work a priority, the WPA acted to change the premise of relief. It broadened the scope of federal government activities to include socially useful work.<sup>17</sup>

Roosevelt liked the speed, flexibility, and creativity that Harry Hopkins brought to his job as head of the FERA. Besides, the President valued Hopkins’s loyalty when he cancelled the CWA. He told Donald Richberg, who headed the National Recovery Administration, “Harry gets thing done. I am going to give this job to Harry.” The need to create mass purchasing power quickly led him to appoint Hopkins to head the WPA.<sup>18</sup>

What emerged was a reflection of Hopkins's experience and

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<sup>17</sup>New York Times, 7 May 1935, 13; Corrington Gill, Wasted Manpower: The Challenge of Unemployment (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1939), 11, 178.

<sup>18</sup>Schlesinger, The Coming of the New Deal, 277; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Politics of Upheaval (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), 344; Sherwood, 72.

vision. Harry Hopkins was born and grew up in Iowa where he attended Grinnell College. Upon graduation he moved to New York City and began a career in social work. Hopkins headed various health agencies and administered Red Cross programs, all the while immensely enjoying the cosmopolitan life that New York had to offer. He headed the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration that Roosevelt set up in New York when he was governor. In 1933 Roosevelt appointed Hopkins head of the FERA and Hopkins moved to Washington. Kenneth Crawford, Washington journalist, remembered Hopkins as bright and funny with a palpable vitality that made him appealing to women and to everyone. Arthur Goldschmidt, who worked under Hopkins in the FERA and WPA, recalled that he was a great no nonsense guy who was an enormously good experimenter. His impatience with delays combined with his political astuteness made him a superb administrator.<sup>19</sup>

Harry Hopkins acted immediately to implement the President's order to get 3.5 million people off dole relief and to work. President Roosevelt initially designated \$1.4 billion for the WPA. FERA administrators such as Aubrey Williams, Ellen Woodward, and Jacob Baker transferred to the new agency. Incorporating successful ideas from FERA and CWA projects and discarding others, Hopkins began to

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<sup>19</sup>Roger Biles, *A New Deal for the American People* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991), 98; Katie Loucheim, ed., *The Making of the New Deal: The Insiders Speak* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 17, 191-192.

organize the WPA. The country was divided into regions that had field representatives who were directly responsible to Washington. Every state had its own WPA administrator, in addition to administrators for other projects that fell under the WPA, such as the Women's and Professional Projects and the National Youth Administration. States were further divided into districts with district supervisors. Texas had the most districts with twenty.<sup>20</sup>

Standardized practices for the approval of a wide range of programs had to be established, since the WPA intended to provide work to suit the skills of the unemployed. Projects could be initiated by cities, counties, towns, or other public agencies, but they then had to be endorsed by district, state, and national offices. Funds and funding decisions ultimately came from Washington. In Wasted Manpower Corrington Gill wrote that state administrators selected projects based upon relief labor available, the need for project employment, and the preference of local officials. Washington officials approved projects on the adequacy of its plan, its economic usefulness and social desirability, the availability of labor, and estimated costs. Employment took precedence over efficiency. Once the project got approval the responsibility for its direction reverted to the local sponsor. With the FERA scheduled to closed December 1935, there was no time to lose in getting 3.5 million workers

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<sup>20</sup>William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts (Athens, OH. Ohio State University Press, 1969), 106-107.

certified for WPA projects. Local officials had to determine who qualified for placement on WPA rolls. If workers had been on FERA rolls they automatically qualified. Nevertheless, their names had to be added to WPA rolls.<sup>21</sup>

The WPA instituted many rules in addition to the mandated means test. Ninety percent of workers on each project must come from the relief rolls. Only one member of a family could be employed on WPA projects. The occupational classifications index for professional and technical workers alone ranged from "X001 to X999." While security wages were to be paid, pay varied according to geographic region, size of community, and the skill of the worker. Initially, projects were limited to \$25,000 or less, but this was one of many guidelines that changed almost as soon as it was formulated. WPA funds could not be spent to enhance the value of private property nor could work be done on private property.<sup>22</sup>

The Depression hit the theatre industry and its employees like a second great blast. Already staggering from the losses to the movies and radio, the Depression further crippled the theatre placing more than half of theatre professionals out of work and closing legitimate theatres across the country. Two thirds of the legitimate theatres in New York City were closed for most of the year. Actors, stagehands,

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<sup>21</sup>Gill, 183-184.

<sup>22</sup>Executive Order No. 7046, 20 May 1935; Donald S. Howard, The WPA and Federal Relief Policy (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943), 341, 142; McDonald, Federal Relief, 90.



musicians, and vaudevillians were displaced by technological changes and economic depression. The Loew's chain was only one example of the changes that occurred since 1930. At the time of the crash, Loew's ran thirty-six theatres that staged shows providing forty to fifty weeks work for vaudevillians. By 1932 only twelve theatres presented stage shows, and by 1934 only three theatres had stage shows, one each in New York, Baltimore and Washington. When legitimate theatres converted to movie houses exclusively, out of work actors and performers went to Hollywood. In 1932 more than 32,000 actors registered with casting bureaus, but employment for them averaged only seventy days a year. In September 1935 RKO Corporation announced it was abandoning vaudeville in forty-four theatres in New York City.<sup>23</sup>

Theatre people who had always spent their lives on the periphery of American society found that when they ran out of money while on tour they had little recourse to find work. Local governments preferred to offer what little relief they had to their own citizens. One man wrote James Farley, United States Postmaster General, begging for help in Texas. He recounted his life in show business, starting in New York. At the beginning of the Depression

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<sup>23</sup>E. Quita Craig, Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 1; Hallie Flanagan, Arena: The Story of the Federal Theatre, with a Foreword by John Houseman (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940; reprint, New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 13-14; New York Times, 6 September 1935, 12



he and his wife went to Hollywood where he struggled for work and ended up producing shows for night clubs. On his way back to New York he ran out of money in Fort Worth. He registered with the Texas Transient Bureau and then moved to Houston, where he continued on the Transient Bureau and met "many New York Actors, actresses and musicians stranded here." He knew that FERA had theatre projects in New York and California and proposed that there were enough theatre people both transient and local to warrant a theatre project in Texas.<sup>24</sup>

As the Great Depression persisted, the fear that undeserving people might be assisted or that the dole would undermine the work ethic led governments to link relief to proven need of the recipients. The humiliation of being certified as needy inhibited many potential applicants, causing some not to list themselves despite their need. Many, however, listed themselves as unskilled workers in order to receive any job, because they believed they might never get work in their old professions. This was certainly true of theatre workers. In autumn 1935 when the Federal Theatre Project began in Texas, only twenty professional theatre workers were found on the FERA Intake and Certification lists, and half of them were registered as motion picture operators.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Cris Traynor to James Farley, 9 July 1935, WPA, Federal Theatre Project(FTP): Texas, Record Group(RG) 69, National Archives.

<sup>25</sup>Charles H. Meredith to Hallie Flanagan, 21 October 1935, WPA, FTP: National Office General Correspondence with the Regional Offices(NOGR-Reg),

Both Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt expressed concern for unemployed theatrical workers. The educational and recreational aspects of drama added to their support of relief for professional theatre people. As governor of New York, Roosevelt had included them in his relief program. Theatre representatives sought federal relief in 1933 when they testified before the National Recovery Administration. Under the CWA and FERA Hopkins asked Jacob Baker to take on drama projects. Baker's favor of co-operative ventures that emphasized group participation led to a focus upon "the arts as an agency of community service."<sup>26</sup>

Jacob Baker and his staff studied ideas submitted by producers, managers, little theatres, and almost anyone for that matter. Repeatedly theatre people in need of help proposed schemes for their own enterprises. Eleanor Roosevelt lunched with actress and producer Eva Le Gallienne who wanted a subsidy for her Civic Repertory Company in New York. Mrs. Roosevelt told her to draft a plan that she would present to the President. Later, she put Le Gallienne in touch with Harry Hopkins. But even the most imaginative and far-reaching proposals failed to qualify because neither the CWA nor the FERA could lend or grant money to private organizations. The Actors' Equity plan for twelve companies in New York City was the first to receive federal funds. Actors' Equity was

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1935-1939, RG 69.

<sup>26</sup>Elmer Rice, The Living Theatre (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 149; McDonald, Federal Relief, 38, 60, 496-498.

founded in 1913, joined the AFL in 1919, and by the early Thirties represented ninety-eight percent of all professional actors. Actors' Equity joined a cooperative venture with the New York State Civil Works Administration, waiving salary and other union requirements to put unemployed actors to work.<sup>27</sup>

From April 1934 through June 1935 CWA and FERA spent about a million dollars in New York to employ 1,000 actors, actresses, stagehands, stage mechanics, scene painters, electricians, carpenters, seamstresses, and others to produce between 160 and 180 shows a week. The New York troupes performed at 500 sites in the city and toured 250 CCC camps in seven states using portable theatres. They produced plays, vaudeville, marionette, and puppet shows. The New York Unit also tried to develop drama for therapeutic uses in children's hospitals. Col. Earle Boothe, who managed the unit, said that the purposes of the theatre unit were employment and educational and the goal was to build an audience for legitimate theatre. In August 1935 the New York Times proclaimed it "the largest theatrical producing organization in the world."<sup>28</sup>

By the time of the creation of the WPA the federal government had gained experience with drama projects in New York City, Boston,

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<sup>27</sup>Joseph P. Lash, Love, Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends, with a Foreword by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), 173, 175; Flanagan, Arena, 15; McDonald, Federal Relief, 484, 489, 498; Morton Eustis, "Collective Bargaining: Theatre with a Union Label," Theatre Arts Monthly 17: 11 (November 1933), 863-865.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid; New York Times, 18 August 1935, II: 1.

and Southern California. Although Jacob Baker spoke and wrote about a national theatre project, he lacked a viable plan. After an interview with Elmer Rice, Pulitzer prize winning playwright who sought support for a new non-profit theatre venture, Baker arranged for Rice to talk to Harry Hopkins. The two men agreed on several points: that the project needed to be national in vision and regional in focus, that the director should come from outside the commercial theatre, and that Hallie Flanagan would make a good candidate for the job of national director. As head of the Experimental Theatre at Vassar College, Hallie Flanagan had an international reputation for the quality and creativity of her productions. Hopkins remembered Flanagan from their undergraduate days together at Grinnell.<sup>29</sup>

Harry Hopkins invited Hallie Flanagan to Washington to discuss a theatre project in mid-May 1935. She agreed to see Hopkins and look over proposals. Once in Washington, Hopkins swept her into his activities and conveyed a sense of historic opportunity to do something for American theatre workers and American theatre. Hopkins took her to a reception at the White House where she met privately with Eleanor Roosevelt.

Mrs. Roosevelt, who was familiar with Flanagan's experiments in drama at Vassar College, told Flanagan she hoped similar productions could be mounted in a federal program that would spread live

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<sup>29</sup>Rice, 149-153; Joanne Bentley, Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 188; Mathews, 11.

theatre across the nation. While the drama program under the FERA and CWA met a portion of the need of theatre workers, it suffered from criticism. Hallie Flanagan learned from surveys Jacob Baker had commissioned that participants, critics, and audiences considered the theatre projects to be amateurish both in production and in performance. After she had reviewed the reports, she told Harry Hopkins that what he needed for a theatre program was a social worker.<sup>30</sup>

Hopkins refused to accept Flanagan's suggestion. He took her to Henry Alsberg's house where the directors of the programs for artists, writers and musicians had gathered to talk. Flanagan wrote, "It was one of those evenings in which everything seemed possible." The directors agreed that talent existed on relief rolls, that apprentice-master relationships could create a synergy that would benefit all the artists, and that potential audiences lived in communities across the country. Still Flanagan demurred. She told Hopkins that the commercial theatre would object. Hopkins met her point for point. Flanagan recalled that he said:

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<sup>30</sup>Flanagan, Arena, 7-11,15-16; Bentley, 188.

This is a non-commercial theatre. It's got to be run by a person who sees right from the start that the profits won't be money profits. It's got to be run by a person who isn't interested just in the commercial type of show. I know something about the plays you've been doing for ten years, plays about American life. This an American job, not just a New York job. I want someone who knows and cares about other parts of the country. It's a job just down your alley.<sup>31</sup>

Flanagan accepted and began to work on ideas for the Federal Theatre Project in tandem with her summer theatre season at Vassar. She wrote friends asking for plans to implement a national federation of regional theatres. She told Jacob Baker that the project would create a national theatre and build a national culture while employing artists on relief. In July 1935 Flanagan and Hopkins travelled to the National Theatre Conference Iowa City together. During the trip, Hopkins began to initiate Flanagan to the vicissitudes of heading public programs. "Don't forget that whatever happens you'll be wrong."<sup>32</sup>

Hopkins demonstrated his solid understanding of ballyhoo in his speech to the National Theatre Conference, a rather loosely organized group that included college and university theaters, little theatres, and community theatres from across the country. He announced the new federal program for the theatre and Flanagan's appointment as director in a setting central to his ideas about what American theatre should be, geographically and financially distant from Broadway. He

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<sup>31</sup> Flanagan, Arena, 18-20.

<sup>32</sup> Bentley, 190, 192.

talked about a “new kind of theatre” he thought would grow from federal funding. Warming to the task, he said, “What we want is free, adult, uncensored theatre.” Hopkins’s appearance and speech generated tremendous enthusiasm and reinforced the conference members’ beliefs that the future of American theatre would emerge from regional rather than commercial Broadway theatres.<sup>33</sup>

Jacob Baker announced Federal Project Number One, that embodied the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers’ Project, the Federal Artists’ Project, and the Federal Music Project, on 2 August 1935. Hallie Flanagan was sworn in as head of the Federal Theatre Project on 27 August 1935, her forty-sixth birthday. Roosevelt made allocations to Federal One on 29 August 1935 and issued final authorization on 12 September 1935.<sup>34</sup>

Now the real work began. The ideals of the WPA and its top administrators that jobs could and should be found to suit the talents of the unemployed challenged Theatre Project personnel. Flanagan and two assistants from Vassar, Lester Lang and Esther Porter, moved to Washington and began the endless stream of memoranda, telephone calls, and crisis intervention that was part and parcel of the FTP. Flanagan contacted candidates for regional and state administrator jobs and set up the first national meeting to be held in Washington on 8-9 October 1935. Not only did Flanagan have to

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<sup>33</sup> Flanagan, Arena, 28; Bentley, 193.

<sup>34</sup> McDonald, Federal Relief, 129-130; Mathews, 32.

learn the bureaucratic, financial, and hierarchal ropes, but she had to communicate all she learned to her new administrators. The Federal Theatre Project evolved as it developed, constantly changing, constantly inventing, constantly trying to elude the copious regulations that applied more closely to small construction jobs than to theatre jobs.<sup>35</sup>

Much has been made of the experimental nature of the government programs created and administered during the New Deal years. The WPA served as an excellent example of the policy shift to create programs that would help the unemployed and at the same time benefit the country. In Spending to Save, Hopkins offered three reasons to support artists: first, artists must maintain their professional skills; second, artists serve the entire public; and third, artists as a "minority" could benefit the majority. The efforts by the artists combined with the support of the government would result in a "democratization of culture." Flanagan acted on her belief that the FTP "is a pioneer theatre. . . re-thinking, rebuilding and re-dreaming of America. . . . not merely a decoration but a vital force in our democracy."<sup>36</sup>

The attempt to democratize culture met with enthusiasm, apathy,

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, 41.

<sup>36</sup>Harry Hopkins, Spending to Save (New York: W.W. Norton, 1936), 174-176; John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, eds., The Federal Theatre Project: 'Free, Adult, Uncensored', with a Foreword by John Houseman (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), 26.



and outright opposition in the state of Texas. Texas had a Writers' Project, a Music Project, and a Theatre Project, but no Federal Art Project. Jacob Baker decided to forgo an art project because WPA State Administrator, Harry P. Drought, was adamant that there were so few artists in Texas and they were too widely dispersed. In addition to using delaying tactics, Drought wrote that it would not be economical to appoint a state director for so few people in need. The attempt to meet the goals of employing needy professionals and at the same time enhance the cultural life of the state through a federally financed program led to a New Deal for Theatre in Texas.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>McDonald, Federal Relief, 151; Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., "The WPA Arts Projects in Texas," East Texas Historical Journal 26: 2 (1988): 10.

## CHAPTER 2

### DALLAS AMUSES ITSELF

Entertainment in Dallas was lively and full of variety in the Thirties. The Sunday Dallas Morning News published lengthy six month calendars of events that included concerts, lectures, plays, and dance programs. In addition to a symphony orchestra, the city had the Museum of Fine Arts, supported by an active art association, and a municipal auditorium large enough to accommodate performances by local and traveling performers. Club women promoted and sponsored many of the activities integral to the cultural life of Dallas. With forty theaters, movies played a prominent role in the leisure life of Dallas citizens. Interstate Circuit, one of the largest theater chains in the country, had headquarters in Dallas. Interstate booked vaudeville acts along with movies well into the decade, unlike its biggest competitor, which had eliminated variety performances from its theatres in 1931. While Main Street had "Theater Row," Deep Ellum offered round the clock excitement for African-Americans with movies, blues musicians, and vaudevillians vying for audiences with jazz clubs, such as the Golden Arrow where nationally renowned musician Louis Armstrong played one night stands.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Dallas Morning News, 1 September 1935, IV: 6; Kenneth G. Ragsdale, The Year America Discovered Texas: Centennial '36 (College Station, TX.: Texas A & M

Typical of the Thirties, people young and old entered talent contests sponsored by movie houses, radio stations, and even car dealerships, hoping to win recognition that would bring fame and fortune. The annual State Fair embodied the diverse entertainment that citizens supported both as audiences and as participants. Offering road shows from across the country, sideshows on the midway, talent shows, and art exhibitions, the State Fair drew thousands of people from across the state.<sup>2</sup>

The primary function of the Dallas State Fair had always been to promote the city of Dallas. Local business benefited and at the same time the fair was a catalyst for new ideas and products. The entire community saw the value in attracting people to settle and to trade. R. L. Thornton led the drive to use the Dallas State Fairgrounds as the site for principal celebration of the Texas Centennial in 1936. He made the city's presentation to the Centennial Commission. The Commission's job was to award "the central exposition and principal celebration" to the city that made the largest financial commitment. From that standpoint, Dallas was the best prepared city, because its voters had passed a \$3 million bond issue to fund the Centennial celebration. In addition, the city promised to expand the State

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Press, 1987), 82; Dallas Times Herald, 1 December 1935, III: 19; John Rosenfield, Jr., "The Southwest Amuses Itself," Southwest Review 16: 3 (April 1931): 278; J. H. Owens, "Deep Ellum," Dallas Gazette, 3 July 1937, in Alan Govenar, Living Texas Blues (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 1985), 18; Dallas Times Herald, 20 August 1936, II: 9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

Fairgrounds to 180 acres for the Centennial.<sup>3</sup>

Pride, patriotism, and boosterism all played a part in the Dallas effort to receive the main Centennial designation. For Dallas, a sales oriented, self-promoting distribution center, the economic benefits of the Centennial celebration were obvious. With the Centennial designation came \$3 million from the state of Texas, \$3 million in federal funds, and \$500,000 from the 1927 Museum of Fine Arts bonds. In addition, private funding came from Central Exposition Bonds sold at four percent interest. Corporate spending for the Centennial in Dallas reached \$100,000 from General Electric, Gulf Refining, and American Telephone and Telegraph, \$75,000 from Continental Oil, \$16,000 from DuPont, and \$2,250,000 from Ford Motor Company. Public spiritedness and a sense of civic pride united Dallas citizens to support the State Fair, and they were ecstatic about the prospects for the Centennial celebration, which would last six months.<sup>4</sup>

Participation by amateurs in recreational entertainment, such as pageants, puppeteering and marionettes, children's theatre, and adult drama productions demonstrated the popularity of community

<sup>3</sup>William L. McDonald, Dallas Rediscovered: A Photographic Chronicle of Urban Expansion, 1870-1925, with an Introductory Essay by A. C. Greene (Dallas, TX: Dallas Historical Society, 1978), 231, 243; Ragsdale, 32, 54, 55, 69.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 7, 30, 37, 83; Harry Jebson, Jr., Robert M. Newton, and Patricia R. Hogan, Centennial History of the Dallas, Texas Park System, 1876-1976 (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University, 1976), 490; Wayne Gray letter to Lillian Bradshaw, 2 February 1983, "Texas Centennial Dallas Exposition: Planning," in Texas Centennial Collection, Dallas Public Library.

oriented events. Stimulated by increased emphasis upon the need to spend leisure time in healthy recreation, clubs, churches, and civic groups organized activities that involved all aspects of theatrical production. The Dallas Parks Department offered dance, dramatics, puppeteering and marionette making at its fifty-two community centers. The Dallas Pen Women presented plays. The Dallas Woman's Club not only sponsored a play writing contest, but also promised that the winning entry would be performed at the Dallas Little Theatre with Charles Meredith directing. The Dallas Junior League sponsored the Experimental Children's Theatre. The Jewish Art Theatre presented Awake and Sing at Highland Park High School auditorium. The Arden Club at Southern Methodist University presented Noel Coward's Oliver Oliver. The Little Dramatic Club planned productions at a meeting held at the Baker Hotel. The Footlight Players announced its plans for a production in January 1936. The Oak Cliff Children's Little Theatre and the Junior Little Theatre at the Stoneleigh Court had activities that local newspapers reported. The Oak Cliff Little Theatre had an active membership, in addition to a school for aspiring thespians. No better example of talented amateurs bringing quality entertainment to the city of Dallas could be found than in the Dallas Little Theatre.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dallas Morning News, 9 November 1935, I: 9; Dallas Times Herald, 8 December 1935, III: 8; Texas Outlook 19: 10 (October 1935): 60; Little Theatre of Dallas 9: 5 (11 April 1936): 3; Dallas Morning News, 9 November 1935, I: 10, 10 November 1935, I: 14, 1 September 1935, IV: 6; Dallas Times Herald, 15 December 1935, III: 23; Dallas Morning News, 9 September 1935, IV: 9.

Founded in 1920, the Dallas Little Theatre exemplified the idea that talented amateurs working with professional direction could present excellent theatre. During the Twenties the Dallas Little Theatre gained national prominence by winning the Belasco Cup for the best one act play at the National Little Theatre Tournament three consecutive years. This "urge toward community expression in drama" characterized the Dallas Little Theatre as it embraced ideas that made it a leader nationally and within the region: it sponsored its own play tournament; it ran play writing contests to stimulate local and regional talents; and, it created its own workshop that included lectures and a profitable laboratory school for nascent actors and technicians. Moving into its own building in 1928, the Dallas Little Theatre had an auditorium that seated 350 and accommodated 50 in the mezzanine loges. Its stage was 30' by 60', with a proscenium width of 30' to 32'. The Dallas Little Theatre enjoyed the support of prominent Dallasites such as Eli Sanger, vice-president of Sanger Bros., Edgar Flippen, president of Gulf Insurance, and Arthur Kramer, president of A. Harris. In 1931, the Dallas Little Theatre chose Charles Meredith to succeed Oliver Hinsdell, its popular producer director, who had resigned to go to Hollywood.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Lura Temple, "The Dallas Little Theatre: A History (1920-1927)" (Master's thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1927), 11, 48, 49, 58; Lon Tinkle, "Texas Theater from the Imported to the Indigenous," in Dallas Theater Center, ed. Leonard E. B. Andrews (no place: no publisher's name, no date), unpagged, in author's possession. This book was issued by the Dallas Theatre Center at its opening in 1959. Robert Crawford Eason, Jr., "The Dallas Little Theatre: The

Charles Meredith was thirty-six when he arrived in Dallas. His theatrical career spanned acting, stage design, and directing. As a student at Carnegie Institute of Technology, Meredith acted in plays directed by Thomas Wood Stevens, B. Iden Payne, and Padraic Colum, while he earned a Master of Arts degree from the School of Applied Design. Meredith moved to New York where he studied at the J. Woodman Thompson School of Design and became a member of the acting company of the Washington Square Players at the Comedy Theatre. He joined the Morosco Stock Company in Los Angeles and played lead roles for a year before he began to get leading roles in silent movies for Famous Players Lasky. After several years in the silent movies, Meredith left Hollywood to go to Europe. He spent three years traveling and studying theatre, principally in Germany, France, and England. When he returned to Hollywood, he made one more picture, and then played opposite Doris Keane in Starlight on the West Coast and in New York for the remaining season. Next, Meredith played summer stock in Detroit and Milwaukee, and spent a winter season with Jewett's Boston Repertory Theatre. He made a tryout tour with Laurette Taylor in The Comedienne.<sup>7</sup>

Maple Avenue Days, 1927-1943" (Master's thesis, Trinity University, 1972), 18, 19, 70; Dallas Morning News, 15 September 1935, III: 15; Toni Beck, "The Arts-Fine and Performing," in The Book of Dallas, eds. Evelyn Oppenheimer and Bill Porterfield (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), 211.

<sup>7</sup>Eason, 76; Kenneth MacGowan, Across America: Towards a National Theater (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 115; New York Times, 3 December 1964; Charles Meredith letters of authorization, Works Progress Administration (WPA), Federal Theatre Project (FTP): Texas, Record Group (RG)

Meredith wrote later that he had always been interested in play direction primarily and began to direct plays at the Lobero Theatre, Santa Barbara's Little Theatre. He returned to professional theatre for a year to direct and play repertory at the Vine Street Theatre in Hollywood. In 1930 he moved to New Orleans, where he became Guest Director of the Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre. Meredith, whose wife Margaret was from Dallas, was delighted to accept the directorship of one of the premier Little Theatres in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Meredith's peripatetic life typified theatrical careers. It permitted him and other devotees to work with one another, share ideas, and develop friendships across the country. The National Theatre Conference further served the participants in Little Theatre, community theatre, and academic theatre to wipe out that "sense of distance and aloneness" that theatre workers away from New York City felt. In February 1932 E. C. Mabie, Director of Drama at the University of Iowa, assembled men and women on the forefront of the Little Theatre and community theatre movement and leaders in academic theatre to address their needs. Founders of the National Theatre Conference included Gilmor Brown, Pasadena (CA) Community Playhouse, Frederick Koch, Carolina (NC) Playmakers, Thomas Wood Stevens, St. Louis (MO) Little Theatre, Frederick

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69, National Archives.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.



McConnell, Cleveland (OH) Playhouse, and Jasper Deeter, Hedgerow (PA) Theatre. All advocates of a "national decentralized American Theatre," the founders of the NTC agreed on missions to focus on theatre as art and to focus on theatre as important to social and educational life. Mabie drew up a plan for regional theatre organization for the NTC.<sup>9</sup>

The spontaneous growth of community and Little Theatres followed other movements aimed at changing and improving life for citizens and their communities throughout the United States. Reform movements such as the city beautiful movement, the importance of recreation, and the emphasis on adult education along with regionalism influenced the function of community and Little Theatres. The goal to humanize cities led to the development of parks and recreation departments, that in turn sponsored programs featuring organized play as well as outlets for creative expression, such as puppeteering, pageants, children's theatre, and drama. The thrust toward conscious social cooperation evolved into an array of efforts by large and small communities that featured drama, pageants, fairs, festivals, and parades.<sup>10</sup>

Part of this trend toward conscious social cooperation resulted in the phenomenon of pageantry that swept the country in the early

<sup>9</sup>"The National Theatre Conference," Theatre Arts Monthly 16: 4 (April 1932): 333-334; Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 245.

<sup>10</sup>Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, Progressivism (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1983), 30, 78; MacGowan, 157.

twentieth century. Pageantry was an art form for communities that illustrated the collaborative spirit of all theatrical productions. Not only did the participants write the script for the show, but also they acted the parts, built the scenery, and made the costumes. Pageants literally expressed communities' feelings and beliefs about themselves. Reformers envisioned pageants as useful art that could both entertain and educate. Pageants embodied the educational reform ideas that emphasized play, imagination, and experience versus rote learning. Participants in pageants learned history and the democratic principles of cooperation and self government, and for immigrants, the language. Pageants developed audiences for dance, theatre, and music. The idea that the depiction of local events could have universal meaning and that community based pageants reflected democracy because of citizen involvement paralleled the emergence of regionalism, in which advocates for decentralization based ideas upon the local having universal meaning. Thomas Wood Stevens in St. Louis and Frederick H. Koch in North Carolina were influential innovators and advocates for pageants.<sup>11</sup>

The academic theatre developed into a viable force in American life as colleges and universities incorporated aspects of theatre into their curricula. For example, George Pierce Baker started his "47

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<sup>11</sup> Naima Prevots, American Pageantry: A Movement for Art and Democracy (Ann Arbor, MI: U. M. I. Research Press, 1990), 2-5; Frederick H. Koch to Hallie Flanagan, WPA, FTP: National Office General Correspondence (NOC)-Regions (Reg), RG 69.

Workshop" at Harvard in 1912 to stimulate play writing. In 1913 Thomas Wood Stevens began the Department of Drama at Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. E. C. Mabie arrived at the University of Iowa in 1920 and coordinated independent student productions, while organizing a leading university curriculum that included coursework in acting, production, design, and directing.<sup>1 2</sup>

Advocates of adult education and the importance of its relationship to theatre argued that participants in drama experienced a healthy "freeing their personalities through creative expression." Cities created recreational programs in which drama, children's theatre, and classes in creative dancing played an integral part. "Civil pride and civic pleasure by a happy use of leisure" was the rationale for this development.<sup>1 3</sup>

The announcement of the creation of the Federal Theatre Project at the National Theatre Conference in late July 1935 aroused great enthusiasm among those who attended the conference. In addition, press coverage generated interest across the country. Hallie Flanagan had conferred with Charles Meredith at the conference, asking him to be one of fourteen regional directors. When he returned to Dallas, Meredith wrote Flanagan that he was eager to be part of the Theatre Project, particularly if the job gave him creative control. He reported that directors of Little Theatres in Memphis,

<sup>1 2</sup>MacGowan, 115, 118.

<sup>1 3</sup>Theatre Arts Monthly 14: 7 (July 1930): 627, 15: 12 (December 1931): 1040.

Fort Worth, and Shreveport also were enthusiastic about cooperating with the theatre project.<sup>14</sup>

Meredith proposed that the FTP in the Southwest use "already established Little Theatre organizations and buildings in the Southwest." He favored urban centers where Little Theatres had cultivated audiences for legitimate theatre. He believed that drama programs at universities and colleges in the region were negligible and that touring and independent companies were impractical. In addition to Dallas at \$20,000 and New Orleans at \$23,000, Meredith listed nine cities stretching from Memphis to Santa Fe with active Little Theatres that had annual budgets of \$5,000 or more and three cities with annual budgets of \$4,000. He included nine other cities in Texas that he categorized as "border-line" because of the financial difficulties brought on by the Depression. Meredith argued that Little Theatres offered the least expensive way to put people to work.<sup>15</sup>

Most Little Theatres in the Southwest region could provide performance spaces that were not unionized. Although many movie houses had stages that could be used for theatre productions, nearly all of them were unionized. Unions not only added to the cost, but also were difficult to negotiate with. In 1930 the Dallas Little

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<sup>14</sup>Jane DeHart Mathews, The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 32-33; Meredith to Flanagan, 27 August 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

Theatre had defended its amateur status when the local stagehands' union placed it on the unfair list, a listing that prevented anyone who belonged to Actors' Equity from appearing on its stage. The Little Theatre cemented its amateur status and became exempt from union rules and pay scales. While it made its operation less expensive, the Little Theatre became rigidly amateur.<sup>16</sup>

Meredith hoped the FTP would serve as a catalyst for change within Little Theatres. Yet, he feared resistance by the Little Theatres themselves, who were trapped for the most part in the cult of amateurism. Meredith believed that incorporating professionals into the ranks of Little Theatres would lead to more productions, thus expanding their repertoire to include experimental and original productions. The financial advantages of utilizing the extant Little Theatre organizations meant that while funds would go primarily to wages, Little Theatre organizations could become self-sustaining after the initial cost, and small units could exchange performances if they were close enough to one another. He reiterated his opposition to touring companies because of cost, distance, inadequate performance spaces, and the lack of audiences prepared for theatre.<sup>17</sup>

Meredith had attended two Social Service Institute programs sponsored by the Civic Association in Dallas and was convinced that

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.; Eason, 66-67.

<sup>17</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 27 August 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

the training qualified him to take on the duties of a work relief organization. He believed that "moral rehabilitation" and "training" were responsibilities the Federal Theatre Project should assume. Self-described as "an expert budgeter" and as one who disliked to "rush in," he suggested practical solutions to employ white collar and theatre professionals immediately. He estimated that every Little Theatre with a budget over \$6,000 could employ eleven or twelve people, and theatres with budget less than that could hire five workers. His list included secretaries, box-office treasurers, carpenters, stage doormen, ticket-takers, and head ushers. Meredith expressed confidence that he could "operate the project to its fullest advantage for the Southwest," and he accepted the job of "regional administrator."<sup>18</sup>

Meredith's early proposals exemplified just how enthusiastic people from the Little Theatre movement, community theatres, and academic theatres were toward the Federal Theatre Project. Meredith thought his plan using existing facilities and organizations could accomplish more than relief; he thought it could enable the theatre in the United States to become national in scope. The ideal of service combined with the idea of using existing organizations corresponded to the models that Mabie had developed for the NTC and that John McGee had submitted for organization in the South. These ideas appealed to Flanagan, who favored decentralization of

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

the American theatre, and to Jacob Baker, the head of Federal One which included all the arts projects, who particularly favored cooperative ventures.<sup>19</sup>

As it went along, the FTP experimented with different methods to achieve the goal of relief for destitute theatre workers and, concurrently, the establishment of a national theatre. At the NTC, Meredith had told Flanagan that he did not envision the FTP nor the current status of Little Theatre as art theatre. He explained that when Little Theatres, such as the one in Dallas, had buildings which carried large debt loads the organization had to "show a profit." In order to survive competition with stock companies, touring companies, and movies, Little Theatres must raise their standards. Meredith believed the way to meet this challenge was to blend professionals with amateurs. He saw the FTP as a "wedge that will open up Little Theatre organizations to the inclusion of paid players."<sup>20</sup>

In the next ten days, Meredith drew up a budget for the Southwest region based on a thirty week season producing fifteen plays. He estimated \$25,000 for production and house costs and \$10,000 for rent, less 25 percent in Dallas if the Little Theatre were

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.; John McGee to Flanagan, 12 August 1935, WPA, FTP: NOC-Reg, RG 69; William F. McDonald in *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Art Projects of the Works Progress Administration* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 37-38, elaborates upon Baker's advocacy of cooperative ventures.

<sup>20</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 27 August 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



rented. Meredith included budget estimates for units in Houston or San Antonio with funding at 75 percent of the Dallas unit, and units in El Paso, Oklahoma, and Arkansas with funding at 50 percent of the Dallas unit. He suggested that, if units could not be housed in Little Theatre buildings, empty or abandoned theatre buildings could be rented. As an example, he cited the Circle Theatre in Dallas, renamed the Uptown Theatre, that had spent most of the last four years empty.<sup>21</sup>

Meredith listed production staff, house staff, and company jobs that the FTP could fill in a thirty week season. The production staff consisted of the director, technical director, stage manager, head carpenter, chief electrician, flyman, property man, scene painter, assistant painter, and the crew: grips, clearers, assistant electricians, and assistant flymen. The house staff included the house manager, press agent, treasurer, assistant treasurers, secretary, janitor, porter, ticket taker, head usher, ushers, doorman, cloakroom attendant, and advance man, if the company toured. For the company there would be the visiting star, leading man, leading woman, second man, second woman, juvenile, ingenue, character man and woman, utility men and women, and extras. Meredith thought they could operate with as few as fifty-one people, but the unit could employ as many as twenty more people in various categories, not including extras. He further broke down the needs into production costs, estimating

<sup>21</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 6 September 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69



\$7,025 "per ten production of usual repertoire," with house costs at \$9,345, and rent for the building at \$9,400. Meredith knew that the top payscale for workers removed from relief rolls would be about \$94 per month and that there was the option to employ some who did not come from relief rolls, but he was unsure just what the policy was and, he added, he did not know how many people were registered on relief rolls.<sup>22</sup>

Early in the planning stages Lester Lang, Hallie Flanagan's assistant and former technical director of the Dallas Little Theatre under Hinsdell, wrote his old friend at Southern Methodist University, David Russell. Apologizing for the delay in drafting specific plans for a regional organization, Lang pointed out that the Washington office had concentrated first on the areas where the need was greatest: New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Washington looked to theatre centers such as Dallas, Pasadena, and Cleveland, where "existing non-profit, private, Civic or public theatres" operated to provide the organizational base for companies made up of FTP workers. Lang clarified policy regarding hiring exemptions. "To complete the personnel of a project and to insure technical standards," the Theatre Project could employ up to ten percent non-relief personnel, and five percent non-relief directors and technicians as supervisors. Lang went on to suggest that it would be possible to transfer people from one project to another, depending on need. The

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

plan to set up secondary companies at Little Theatres fell in line with the thinking of many of the early directors who signed on to administer the FTP.<sup>23</sup>

On 21 September Meredith wrote Lester Lang to describe how overextended he felt. His duties as director of the Dallas Little Theatre, alone, demanded fourteen hours a day. Mayor George Sergeant declared 16 to 21 September as "Little Theatre Week," to coincide with the membership drive and recognize its importance as "one of our most worthwhile civic institutions." While the Little Theatre embarked on a membership drive to bring subscriptions up to 3,000 from 1,600, Meredith personally interviewed people to enroll them in the Little Theatre's Southwestern School of the Theatre. He was in pre-production planning for the Little Theatre's season opening play, Rain from Heaven, scheduled for 21 October and announced the cast on 29 September. Moreover, Meredith continued to teach at Southern Methodist University. Meanwhile, he dealt with accusations that the Little Theatre was delinquent in paying its taxes and handled a misunderstanding about the Little Theatre building's use that led to the cancellation of a young actors' production one week before opening. Meredith suggested that he could be regional director on a part-time basis. The alternative would be to make his appointment immediate and he would divert his students and classes

<sup>23</sup>Lester Lang to David Russell, 17 September 1935, WPA, FTP: NOC-Reg, RG 69.

to others. He wrote that while he would like to be "a dollar a year man," he could not afford it. He felt he needed an assistant and thought Lang's suggestion of David Russell "an excellent idea."

Meredith realized that if the scope of the FTP in the Southwest grew to more than one or two units he would need a full time assistant.<sup>24</sup>

In an illuminating post script, Meredith related part of a letter he had received from another Little Theatre director. While he disagreed with the writer, Meredith believed the attitudes he had expressed were widespread enough for Lang and Flanagan to take note. John McGee, regional director of the FTP in the South, had proposed that Little Theatre boards hire twenty professionals as the minimum number required for a FTP producing unit. The director worried that the proposed six month project would cause psychological and social problems among his amateurs, and his board feared this would threaten the "Little Theatre spirit." He also felt that doubling the season would over saturate the city leading to a box office drain. When the director had presented McGee's FTP proposal, his board turned him down summarily. The board felt rushed and refused to budge. Meredith reiterated his belief that Little Theatres would be enthusiastic about possibilities of a FTP, but would cooperate only if they "receive some tangible benefit."

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<sup>24</sup> Meredith to Lang, 21 September 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Dallas Morning News, 8 September 1935, III: 11; 15 September 1935, III: 14 September 1935, II: 2; 29 September 1935, IV: 9; 30 August 1935, II: 2; 4 September 1935, I: 10.

Meredith thought that cities of more than 60,000 could support at least fifteen productions a year. He suggested that the FTP put on supplementary seasons, renting Little Theatre facilities and employing twenty person units initially. The idea of rental income flowing to Little Theatre organizations suffering the long term effects of the Depression would overcome their objections and, Meredith confirmed, that was the situation in Dallas at his Little Theatre.<sup>25</sup>

The search for eligible theatre workers generated publicity and interest across Texas. Mrs. Charles L. Kribs, Jr. wrote that the Dallas Woman's Club was sponsoring a one act playwriting contest to stimulate and recognize regional talent. Letters from Abilene, Galveston, Kerrville, Alpine, and Texarkana arrived at the Dallas office asking for information on how to participate. Meredith sent letters of inquiry to the relief offices in Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston. When W. T. Moore, Supervisor of Labor Management in the Dallas district, found only eight people available for reassignment, he wrote, "This cannot be taken as a true picture." Elizabeth F. Gardner, WPA Assistant State Director of Intake and Certification, reported only twenty people in the entire state of Texas had registered as theatre workers, and half of them were listed as motion picture operators. Meredith thought they could probably be used as electricians on theatre projects.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Meredith to Lang, 21 September, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>26</sup>September 1935; Meredith to Lang, 21 October 1935; Meredith to Flanagan, 21 October 1935, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

Meredith assigned thirteen volunteers to locate workers eligible for reclassification: eight in Dallas District No. 4 and five in Fort Worth District No. 7. He wrote to colleges and universities to inform them of the Theatre Project's plan to cooperate with them to test plays of regional playwrights, to present classical repertory, to supplement existing productions, and to expand their drama programs into new areas. The Manual for Federal Theatre Projects stipulated that twenty qualified workers would constitute the minimum size of a federal drama unit. L. H. Hubbard, President of Texas State College for Women, responded with interest and Meredith suggested that TSCW co-sponsor a unit via the Fort Worth district.<sup>27</sup>

The national office joined local, state, and regional efforts to locate eligible theatre workers. Flanagan wrote to the University of Texas seeking directors, designers, technicians, playwrights and experienced theatre workers to fill non-relief supervisory jobs. She wrote Mary McCord, Professor of Speech at Southern Methodist University, calling for names of unemployed students and graduates who would be eligible for the theatre project. Lester Lang wrote to an old friend in Dallas asking if Louis Hexter, who was involved in founding several Little Theatres in the Twenties, including the Dallas Little Theatre and the Negro Little Theatre in Dallas, was "still

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.; Meredith to L. H. Hubbard, 15 November 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

directing a Negro group," because he hoped for a "Negro theatre as well."<sup>28</sup>

Mary McCord recommended seven people whose resumes included university work, Little Theatre credentials, and a few other persons with professional theatre experience. On 2 October Flanagan directed that all relief workers must have professional experience to qualify for placement within the FTP. This created a stumbling block for the FTP's ambitious plan for a national theatre. Universities, community theatres, and Little Theatres served as the gateway for many FTP people, while Little Theatres served as the organizational skeleton for the FTP. Many talented actors, directors, designers, and playwrights were trained and experienced, but lacked "professional" experience in the narrowly defined terms of the FTP. "Professional" meant that one had to have been paid to perform in the theatre, whether acting, directing, or designing. The directive eliminated people whose "desire was to make this his life work, but, like many others, has not been able to get a start." Of Professor McCord's seven recommendations, only one eventually found work with the Dallas FTP.<sup>29</sup>

Meredith attended the national conference for regional directors

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<sup>28</sup>Flanagan to University of Texas Extension, 11 September 1935; Flanagan to Mary McCord, 23 October 1935; Lang to Sarah Chokla, 20 August 1935, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Flora Lowrey, "The Dallas Negro Players," *Southwest Review* 16: 3 (April 1931): 374.

<sup>29</sup>McCord to Flanagan, 28 September 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; McDonald, Federal Relief, 522.

on October 8 and 9 in Washington, D. C. Flanagan addressed the conference to reiterate the basis of artistic policy for the Theatre Project. Re-employment of theatre people on relief rolls was its primary goal. She added that people employed from the relief rolls should be treated as professionals capable of carrying out a national program that the government could support with pride. She hoped the project would accomplish the integration of artist and audience from which both would benefit. She wanted relevant theatre that would reflect the country, its past, its present, and its diverse regions and populations. She encouraged experimentation in original methods of production and the development of new American plays. Flanagan envisioned the Federal Theatre Project as "national in scope, regional in emphasis, and democratic in allowing each local unit freedom under these general principles."<sup>30</sup>

Flanagan followed up the conference with a letter to each regional director detailing regulations, office administration, and procedures. Jacob Baker sent a letter to H. P. Drought, Texas State WPA Administrator, notifying him of Meredith's appointment and requesting him to add Meredith to the state payroll as of 1 October at a salary of \$2,000 annually. In addition, Baker requested secretarial or stenographic help for the director's office in Dallas. Flanagan

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<sup>30</sup>Dallas Morning News, 4 October 1935, Eli Sanger Collection, Jerry Bywaters Collection on Art of the Southwest, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX; Hallie Flanagan, Arena, The Story of the Federal Theatre (New York: New York Times Company, 1985), 45; McDonald, Federal Relief, 503-504.



suggested that Meredith make an appointment with Drought to sign the oath of office and to get travel authorization necessary for reimbursement.<sup>3 1</sup>

Flanagan outlined administrative procedures for hiring, wages, stationery and franking privileges, weekly reports to Washington, telegrams, and listed the materials that the Washington office would provide to Dallas in the following weeks. The first forms to be sent from Washington were Project Proposal Forms: WPA Form 320A. WPA Form 320, request for Project Approval, would soon follow. Supplies of stationery, franking labels for packages, copies of manuals and copies of Supplement #1 to Bulletin #29 all originated out of Washington. Flanagan recommended that even the hiring for the Dallas office, while actually a local procedure, should be done in consultation with state officials. Wages should conform to regional prevailing levels. There would certainly be work enough for stenographers and secretaries because every report to Washington had to be in triplicate, and Form 320 in sextuplicate.<sup>3 2</sup>

Meredith and the fledgling FTP operation in Texas faced the universal problem of Theatre Projects during that fall of "WPA administratives and supervisors, both State and District, so overworked that they have been able to give but little time to our project." Reluctant, not to say recalcitrant, state administrators gave

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<sup>3 1</sup>Flanagan to Meredith, 11 October 1935; Flanagan to Meredith, 21 October 1935, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>3 2</sup>Flanagan to Meredith, 11 October 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



short shrift to Theatre Project directors, while they focused their efforts on larger projects. For example, State Administrator H. P. Drought, announced his hope to approve \$4,000,000 for Dallas County road projects to employ 3,000 men, and the city submitted proposals for \$1,700,000 for park improvements that would employ several thousand more for a year. Drought had turned down Meredith's requests for appointments and delayed implementing Baker's directive, so that by the end of October Meredith was underwriting the cost of secretarial work personally.<sup>3 3</sup>

As interest in the project mounted, letters of inquiry drew delayed responses or none at all because there was no office help. At the same time Dallas WPA officials announced that 2,112 former relief clients were at work on projects and that for the coming week 500 more per day would be employed on new projects. The National Youth Administration had managed to obtain jobs for 282 high school and college students, while Meredith struggled simply to get travel authorization via Chief Clerk of the WPA Harry Kinnear's Washington office. In the months to come travel authorization would cause more headaches because of changing regulations and the efforts of the state WPA administrators to exert control over the project activities and expenses.<sup>3 4</sup>

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<sup>3 3</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 13 November 1935; Meredith to Flanagan, 4 November 1935, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Dallas Morning News, 1 September 1935, II: 1; 9 November 1935, I: 5.

<sup>3 4</sup>Ibid.; Meredith to Flanagan, 21 October 1935; Meredith to Flanagan, 22 November 1935; Lang to Meredith, 23 January 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG

Blame for the slow implementation of the Dallas Federal Theatre Project cannot be attributed to Drought's hesitation alone. The federal government was slow to release funds, even after authorization had been approved. On 9 November 1935 Jacob Baker notified Flanagan that \$6,784,035 had been allocated for the Federal Theatre to fund projects until 15 March 1936. Yet in her 22 November report on payroll statistics, Flanagan wrote Hopkins that even though Texas estimated 25 people on its payroll "not one cent has gone forward to the States from Pennsylvania to Texas."<sup>3 5</sup>

State administrators objected to federally dictated appointments that added to their budgets. Drought was so vigorous in his opposition that he required the Dallas headquarters to be designated the "Texas State Office" and not as a Regional office. The State Administrator was slow to authorize requests for project approval, for changes in personnel, and for funding. Flanagan sent authorization to Meredith on 14 October to initiate the Federal Theatre Projects "on the basis of their artistic integrity and social desirability," transmitting copies to Drought, as well. Two months later the ever skeptical Drought telegraphed authorization of \$22,000 to operate the project for six months. Yet, the allocation remained in limbo, Lang reported to Flanagan because of "inadequate verification

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<sup>3 5</sup>Flanagan to Harry Hopkins, 22 November 1935, WPA, FTP: NOC-Travel regulations, RG 69.

from the Texas administrator."<sup>3 6</sup>

Meredith was hampered further by confusion surrounding his appointment of E. D. Bryant. He needed an assistant and found Bryant "thoroughly capable of assuming considerable responsibility," but because of Drought's jostling for precedence in the power to appoint, the approval took a month. In the January 1936 reorganization, Meredith again nominated Bryant to take over the newly created position of State Coordinating Project. As a result of the delay, Bryant was not situated in the San Antonio office until early March.<sup>3 7</sup>

Despite his frustrations, Meredith remained loyal to the ideals of the Federal Theatre Project. While he directed S. N. Behrman's Rain from Heaven in October and Clifford Odets's Waiting for Lefty and Till the Day I Die, which opened in December at the Dallas Little Theatre, he wrote repeatedly of his belief in the value of preserving the talents of the unemployed theatre workers. He embraced the idea that the Federal Theatre Project could be the reforming agent that would have "a desirable and lasting effect on community theatres throughout the country." On 4 November Meredith proposed projects that could employ "500 qualified workers from relief rolls" for six months in Texas at cost of \$217,680, in Oklahoma at \$87,072, and in

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<sup>3 6</sup>McDonald, Federal Relief, 156-157; Meredith to Lang, 12 December 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas; H. P. Drought, 11 December 1935, WPA, FTP: NOC-Individuals; Lang to Flanagan, 16 December 1935, WPA, FTP: NOC, all in RG 69.

<sup>3 7</sup>Meredith to Lang, 12 December 1935; 8 January 1936, WPA, FTP: NOC-Meredith; E. D. Bryant to Ferguson, 11 March 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, all in RG 69.

Arkansas at \$43,536.<sup>38</sup>

Still unfunded, one month later Meredith wired to Lester Lang a revised plan. Cutting personnel and the period of operation to four months, Meredith thought projects in Fort Worth, San Antonio, and two units in Dallas could start within two weeks. Houston, which was still reclassifying, could start in three weeks. Co-sponsors had been found and he expected to be able to make more proposals as reclassification continued. The WPA sought local sponsors for most of its projects to obtain local funding and support. The FTP aimed for sponsorship from Little Theatres, universities, and parks and recreation departments. The concerted efforts of the small cadre of FTP volunteers and brand new office help had identified theatre workers on relief and had mailed letters to each of them asking them to come to the office in Dallas to be reclassified. To be eligible, workers on relief rolls had to obtain a card from Dallas FTP headquarters and fill it out, so they could be transferred from Federal Emergency Relief Administration rolls to WPA theatrical worker status.<sup>39</sup>

E. D. Bryant reported that initially the National Reemployment Service had no category for theatrical workers, but once the word spread, professional theatre workers besieged the Theatre Project

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<sup>38</sup>Henry Edgar Hammack, "A History of the Dallas Little Theatre: 1920-1943" (Ph. D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1967), 211; Meredith to Flanagan, 4 November 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>39</sup>Meredith to Lang, 9 December 1935, WPA, FTP: NOC; Meredith to Pierre de Rohan, 17 December 1936, WPA, FTP: Regional Reports-Reg III, both in RG 69

office in Dallas. Meredith's December request stated that Fort Worth had 126 qualified eligible workers and needed \$6,000 per month. The Dallas puppet unit had 38 eligible and needed \$2,600 per month. San Antonio had over 70 eligibles and needed \$5,000 per month, while the Dallas production unit had 72 eligibles and needed \$4,000 per month. Houston had more than 70 certified workers and needed \$5,000 per month.<sup>40</sup>

Meredith's plans for the Theatre Project were grounded in the idea that theatre workers on relief in Texas and Dallas, in particular, could gain experience, training, and rehabilitation during the spring of 1936 and be prepared for jobs when the Texas Centennial opened in June. He advocated that the FTP become involved with the early planning for the event, so that those people on its relief rolls would be in prime positions for work at the Centennial. According to state publicity, 138 separate local celebrations were planned to occur between 1 March and 31 August 1936, and 240 for the entire year. In addition to Meredith, others in Texas, such as Walter Walker of the San Antonio Junior Chamber of Commerce, thought that the FTP and Centennial plans could work "in perfect harmony."<sup>41</sup>

Hallie Flanagan made a special two day stopover in Dallas on her

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid. The National Reemployment Service and/or the United States Employment Service interviewed, registered, and classified workers for jobs on WPA projects.

<sup>41</sup>Meredith to Lang, 21 September and 12 December, 1935; Meredith to Flanagan, 27 August, 6 September, and 21 October; Walter Walker to Flanagan, 24 October 1935, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Ragsdale, 160.

nationwide tour to assess the progress and plans for the Theatre Project. Arriving from Los Angeles on 18 December, she stayed with her former student, Kalita Humphreys. Meredith arranged a conference for Flanagan with J. J. Carl, head of WPA Professional Projects in Texas, and Dallas District WPA Supervisor, Gus Thomasson. While there were no minutes from this meeting, the results were typical of Flanagan's impact. Gus Thomasson devoted part of the next day's district meeting to praising Flanagan's energy and talent. Meredith wired Lang that Drought was going to request \$106,000 for four months, "due to Mrs. Flanagan." Drought's telegram to Baker with the \$106,000 request crossed Baker's to him recommending \$75,000. Even conservative Congressman Hatton W. Sumners got into the act. He telegraphed Baker requesting "immediate appropriation for WPA theatre projects already set up." Meredith wrote Flanagan that her visit gave everyone a real "boost" and that he still hoped for an allotment for Texas to achieve "our long term objectives for better theatre and better human beings."<sup>4 2</sup>

Complicated and frequently changing procedures tangled Federal Theatre Project communications, despite or because of the triplicate and sextuplicate forms. Letters, telegrams, and telephone calls

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<sup>4 2</sup>Dallas Times Herald, 18 December 1935, II: 5; Dallas Morning News, 19 December 1935, Sanger Collection, Jerry Bywaters Collection on Art of the Southwest, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX; Meredith to Lang, 19 December 1935; H. P. Drought to Jacob Baker, 19 December 1935, Drought to Baker, 23 December 1935, Hatton W. Sumners to Baker, 20 December 1935, Meredith to Flanagan, 20 December 1935, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

contradicted and sometimes countermanded one another. Structural impediments had WPA officials at odds with FTP officials and almost everyone at odds with state officials. The hierarchy canted to such a degree that at times it appeared no one was in charge. Other times, FTP or WPA leaders ignored clear authority. The overlapping efforts to address unemployment failed to work in concert. Applicants could never be sure if their proposal was delayed because it were improperly filled out or misaddressed or because an official at another level simply opposed the project. Meredith referred to it as "delay that tops other inscrutables."<sup>43</sup>

The enormous experiment to tailor jobs to meet the skills of unemployed professionals grew more complicated as relief workers registered for jobs in specific categories. For example, at first Texas had very few theatrical workers registered because the National Reemployment Service had no theatrical classification. By mid-1936 the FTP listed three pages of jobs with four classes of wages and fifty-one different categories for the unemployed theatre professional.<sup>44</sup>

The Federal Theatre Project in Dallas had problems from its inception, some universal to the FTP and some unique to Dallas. The structure that directed everything from Washington was cumbersome and, at the same time, integral to the success of the

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<sup>43</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 3 March 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>44</sup>WPA, FTP: Classification and Personnel Lists, 1936, #2, RG 69.



overall project. Certainly Charles Meredith relied on the power of Washington officials and their interest in the Dallas projects to help him deal with uncooperative state officials, such as WPA State Administrator H. P. Drought. However, the long lead time required by the approval process both for the plan and for the financial resources hindered speedy production and completely quashed spontaneous performances. The varied categories of theatre workers and the fact that most of them were white collar or professionals kept the size of the projects relatively small and the cost relatively high. The number of people working on a show usually hinged on its number of actors, who generally comprised sixty percent of employees. The structure of the WPA that worked well for its many large construction projects, did not fit as well for the Theatre Project.<sup>4 5</sup>

The federalization of work relief signaled a change that Texas officials questioned because of their loss of control over some personnel and over financial outlays. While initiation of work projects remained with the states, the federal government operated those projects and controlled spending. The legislation to fund the WPA put fiscal decisions in the hands of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This distinguished it from earlier relief efforts in which the federal government turned funds over in the form of grants to the states for local projects. While state and local officials saw

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<sup>4 5</sup>McDonald, Federal Relief, 519.



advantages in construction and beautification projects, they thought support for the arts was a radical departure from traditional governmental responsibility. State officials failed to see any lasting good that would emerge from such ephemeral projects as the theatre. Texans' attitudes that theatre was an avocation rather than a profession reinforced opposition to the Dallas Theatre Project. By December 1935 Meredith's cautious approach and Texas's grudging state officials kept the Dallas show in the planning rather than the production stage. The news of the \$75,000 allotment was as good a Christmas gift as anyone in the Dallas Federal Theatre Project had anticipated.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>McDonald, Federal Relief, 129.

## CHAPTER 3

### ON WITH THE SHOW

When the announcement of the \$75,000 allotment arrived, the Dallas Federal Theatre had one operational unit, two more that had approval but awaited funding, and a fourth project lined up for Meredith's approval. As headquarters for Region No. 3, the Dallas Theatre Project funneled state and regional data that affected Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma to and from Washington and Texas state headquarters in San Antonio. Oklahoma, under the direction of John W. Dunn, was processing proposals for the regional director's approval. Arkansas reported eighty-one available theatre workers in District No. 2, even though the state lacked a director for the Theatre Project. Ft. Worth had approval for one unit, and Houston and San Antonio were organizing as fast as they could reclassify theatre workers. In addition, committees in Austin, Waco, and Beaumont planned proposals for theatre units.<sup>1</sup>

Dallas organized itself along functional lines, with a separate number for each of its troupes. Texas Project No. 1 was non-producing and provided the personnel and materials for the state

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<sup>1</sup>E. D. Bryant to Pierre De Rohan, 17 December 1935, WPA, FTP: Regional Reports-Region (Reg) III; Bryant to Charles Meredith, 18 December 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, both in RG 69.

and regional office. Conceived on 7 November, this group of eight filled the long requested "secretarial assistance." It included Meredith's assistant, E. D. Bryant, publicity director Robert C. Peck, play reader and research writer Bruce H. Espie, and office manager, Richard D. Baldwin. Larry L. Jordan, Christine Davis, Charlotte Tomlinson, and Nina Saint acted as stenographers, typists, file clerks, and mimeograph operators. Dallas Project No. 1 operated out of the Allen Building, which served as headquarters for WPA District No. 4 and also housed the National Youth Administration (NYA) and the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). Dallas Project No. 2 planned to establish experimental theatre productions that focused on regional subjects by regional playwrights. This unit projected 150 employees and expected sponsorship by the Little Theatre of Dallas. Project No. 3 planned to employ thirty-eight people to establish a marionette theatre unit. Project No. 4 proposed a vaudeville variety and circus unit to employ sixty-four people. Each of the three production units intended to charge admission for some of their performances in order to underwrite expenses and travel.<sup>2</sup>

Dallas Project No. 1 worked for much of December 1935 and January 1936 to establish Project No. 6, a pageant proposal for the Texas Centennial celebration at Dallas. The Dallas Project sought sponsorship from the Texas Centennial Central Committee. They researched history, characters, and costumes, and made budget

<sup>2</sup>Bryant to Charles Meredith, 18 December 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

proposals covering labor, material, construction, preparation, and production costs. In December 1935 the Dallas Theatre Project proposed The Lone Star Rises, as an outdoor pageant to employ 1,000 for six months.<sup>3</sup>

Curtis Somers-Peck, the author who served as the Theatre Project's publicity director under the name of Robert C. Peck, described The Lone Star Rises as a "commemorative historic educational" pageant that would cover "the period from the arrival of the first white men through annexation." The show would have fourteen scenes of continuous action, utilizing the southern half of the Centennial Stadium, before an audience of 20,000 in the northern half of the stadium. Somers-Peck planned scenarios that included herds of cattle, the combined use of microphones with large action scenes, and dancers, musicians, and singers joined with a huge cast.<sup>4</sup>

The Dallas unit budgeted for 776 employees with 200 coming from the National Youth Administration and 300 "unemployables," that the FTP would train and use as supernumeraries. The Dallas FTP thought that the proposal to put "unemployables," those whom the federal government had returned to state responsibility, to work would be particularly attractive to Dallas officials burdened by a

<sup>3</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 8 January 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; Report of Activities, Regional District #10, 15 December-15 January, Texas Projects Reports: Supplementary #2, WPA, FTP; The Lone Star Rises by Curtis Somers-Peck, 27 December 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, all in RG 69. With the changes in project numbers, Project No. 5 (formerly No. 4) was the Vaudeville-Circus Unit that never received Meredith's approval.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

large number of unemployed persons uncertified for federal relief. Labor costs based on security wages would equal \$206,313, with \$46,719 underwritten by the FTP, \$21,000 by the WPA, and \$138,000 coming from the Centennial, in its capacity as sponsor. Including material costs of \$45,423, to be equally shared by the FTP/WPA and the Centennial Committee, the total expenditure for an eleven month pageant project with five months spent in rehearsal and preparation, and six months in performance would amount to \$251,736.<sup>5</sup>

While Somers-Peck worked on The Lone Star Rises, the Dallas Project cooperated with Centennial promotional activities, including lending slogans such as "Texas, a Welcome in any Language," for use at the Rose Bowl. They justified the pageant for its value as employment for unemployed theatre workers, its artistic worthiness, and "its significance to the community as an event prepared, manned and produced wholly by Texas people." General Manager W. A. Webb and his Texas Centennial Central Committee thought the entire \$75,000 allotment should be turned over to his committee, but the WPA and Dallas Theatre Project did not want to lose control of the funds. Despite the cooperation of Gus Thomasson, who headed the WPA District in Dallas, and the efforts of the Dallas FTP, Centennial officials failed to reach any agreement for sponsorship of a theatre project. This was a blow to the recently energized Dallas Project, but

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

Meredith devised a different tack.<sup>6</sup>

Meredith proposed that "Historical and Educational drama" projects be presented in the four largest metropolitan areas of Texas: Dallas, Ft. Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. His plan divided the funds so that Dallas received \$27,000 for two projects, San Antonio received \$23,000, Houston received \$18,000, and Ft. Worth received \$7,500 for one project each. Dallas adapted The Lone Star Rises for a production unit that would dramatize the biography of Sam Houston at schools and colleges throughout the state. The Ft. Worth, Houston, and San Antonio projects would present pageants to coincide with the annual Rodeo and Fat Stock Show, the celebration of the Battle of San Jacinto, and the annual Festival of Flowers. Dallas's second unit provided research and secretarial work for the regional office. In addition, researchers read plays by local playwrights to build material of regional interest.<sup>7</sup>

By mid-January 1936 the Dallas FTP had read thirty-five plays, which the staff synopsisized and forwarded to the Bureau of Research and Publication in New York. They had targeted two plays, Cobwebs by Ft. Worth author Mary Louise Hartman and The Wall by Dallas author Ross Lawther, for potential productions. These projects met

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<sup>6</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 8 January 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; Report of Activities, Regional District #10, 15 December-15 January, Texas Projects Reports: Supplementary #2, WPA, FTP, both in RG 69.

<sup>7</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 8 January 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; Report of Activities, Regional District #10, 15 December-15 January, Texas Projects Reports: Supplementary #2, WPA, FTP, both in RG 69.

with enthusiasm from Flanagan, who called them "splendid" and believed the regional material would propel the productions into the Centennial.<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis upon research that warranted a second unit in Dallas coincided with the interest by Jacob Baker in creating a "central file" in Washington. He requested information about leisure time projects so that the Theatre Project would have a "means of broad national contact" to disseminate information to interested people. Flanagan's interest in the development of audiences for live theatre led her to have the Dallas unit draw up committees of interested and influential theatre and arts patrons in cities across Texas, who might be useful to the FTP.<sup>9</sup>

In spring of 1936 the Washington office sent audience surveys that were distributed at various performances. Over its four year life span the FTP collected 45,000 surveys from 58 different productions. In addition, Dallas sent requests to every Little Theatre in the three state area for its history and a list of productions and their successes. For The Lone Star Rises production, Dallas sent out letters to Boards of Education in 144 cities and received 135 positive responses. The unit planned its itinerary and based its cost projections upon this research.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.; Flanagan to Meredith, 17 January 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Report of Activities, Regional District #10, 15 December-15 January, Texas Projects Reports: Supplementary #2, WPA, FTP; John O'Connor, "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience," in Theatre for Working

The importance that both the regional and national offices placed upon research reflected a common theme of the New Deal agencies. The development of professions that based their actions upon scientific study of problems and scientific solutions to those problems meant that research into the needs of citizens and the effect of actions taken needed to be quantified. Flanagan knew how very ephemeral live theatre was. The use of portable stages that enabled performances in areas where no one had ever seen live theatre meant that many audiences gathered in non-theatrical settings for only a short time. When the performance ended, the crew would strike the set and pack it into the truck and the theatre and its audience literally vanished. In Dallas there was little news coverage of performances. The only record of most performances emerged from audience surveys and bi-weekly reports from the research unit in Dallas. To document their activities the FTP had triplicate and sextuplicate forms, but that was hardly adequate for the very magic of performance. Nevertheless, the FTP and the Dallas research unit used surveys as a tool to gain immediate audience responses. In addition, the Dallas FTP requisitioned a photographer to document its activities. The Dallas FTP photographer spent his first month building his darkroom and workshop and waiting for necessary equipment. Eventually, several photographs of the Dallas FTP

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Class Audiences in the United States: 1830-1980, ed. Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel Friedman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 173; Richard L. Slaughter to Larry L. Jordan, 9 May 1936, WPA, FTP, NOC-State Correspondence, both in RG 69.



appeared in the Federal Theatre Magazine, the nationally distributed in-house newsletter edited by Pierre de Rohan.<sup>11</sup>

By early February Dallas Project No. 2 had grown to twenty-three people and had absorbed Project No. 1. It continued to read plays and had begun to write scenarios for a new play about the fall of the Alamo. Dallas Project No. 3, the Experimental Project, still awaited funds for its sixty person unit. J. J. Carl, State Director of Professional and Service Projects, wrote Meredith regarding Project No. 3, "We are wondering if liberties taken with questions of social progress that are experimental in nature could not be easily unorthodox views." He suggested that Meredith change the description and intent of Project No. 3 to limit it to production of plays of a regional character that deal "with other than social adjustment." Carl ultimately agreed by telephone to approve Project No. 3. The Houston Project awaited funds for its seventy-four person project, as did the Ft. Worth Project for sixty-four people. In Oklahoma, John Dunn had five proposals approved by his state administrator and regional director, Meredith, and he anticipated receiving more than \$20,000.<sup>12</sup>

The Dallas Federal Theatre spent part of February dealing with the ongoing reluctance of state administrators to release funds and to

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce H. Espie to Flanagan, 10 March and 17 March 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; Federal Theatre Magazine 1, no. 6: 19, WPA, FTP, all in RG 69

<sup>12</sup> J. J. Carl to Meredith, 25 January 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; Bryant to Flanagan, 27 January 1936, FTP, WPA: Texas; Bryant to Flanagan, 2 February 1936, Regional Reports-Reg III, WPA, FTP, all in RG 69. The frequent redesignation of projects can be confusing to readers and researchers. Project No. 3 was formerly Project No. 2.

approve projects. As if that were not enough, Lester Lang sent a blunt inquiry regarding the Ft. Worth project's labor costs. He questioned the disparity between the director's salary of \$200 per month and the business manager's of \$150, while the majority of actors, actresses, and stagehands fell into unskilled and intermediate classifications. Of the four broad classifications for pay purposes, unskilled and intermediate fell below technical and professional. Lang objected to "paying bookkeepers, stenographers, etc more money than many of the stage crew are being paid." He pointed out that directors in New York earned no more than \$175 and supervised from 200 to 600 people. If there were no theatre workers who qualified for professional and technical classification, Lang suggested that the director and business manager were being overpaid. Flanagan, on the other hand, exhorted Bryant to move ahead to reach peak employment by mid-March. She warned that quotas would be filled by 15 March, but the Dallas office was stalled awaiting the arrival of Treasury Form A-3, which would allow the requisition of workers.<sup>13</sup>

E. D. Bryant reported at the end of February that the Dallas unit had nothing in production, yet theatrical activities proceeded on several fronts. The Dallas Theatre Project had gained the free use of space for rehearsal, laboratory workshops, an office, and an

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<sup>13</sup>Bryant to Flanagan, 26 February 1935; Lang to Meredith, 6 February 1936; Flanagan to Bryant, 27 February 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

auditorium with a small stage at Fretz Community Center in Dallas. Located at South Lamar and Corinth, Fretz was the first community center in Dallas. It provided a kindergarten, a day nursery, a milk station, supervised play, and a field house with free baths for the residents of the surrounding industrial area. The Marionette Project, also working out of Fretz Park, had established a cooperative program to teach Dallas school children how to make marionettes and produce puppet plays. Another group had completed two acts and were working on the third for the play about the Alamo, entitled This is My Country. Work moved forward on local author Ross Lawther's "experimental expressionistic" play, The Light on The Wall. Researchers developed a history of regional theatre in Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. Several FTP workers were advising the Woman's Club of Dallas and planned to direct productions of the two winning Centennial Prize Plays, Lo, the Gaunt Wolf and Thespis in the Wilderness. The Dallas FTP celebrated Washington's birthday at the University Club with the newly formed thirty-five piece Tipica Orchestra sponsored by the Federal Music Project (FMP) and other federal agencies, including the Resettlement Administration, the Veterans' Bureau, and the District WPA at the University Club.<sup>14</sup>

Flanagan responded enthusiastically to Bryant's report of Dallas

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<sup>14</sup>Report of Activities, Regional District #10, 15 December-15 January, Texas Projects Reports: Supplementary #2, WPA, FTP; Bryant to Flanagan, 18 February 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, both in RG 69; Maxine Holmes and Gerald D. Saxon, eds., WPA Dallas Guide and History (Dallas: Dallas Public Library and University of North Texas Press, 1992), 18.

Theatre Project activities, reiterating her appreciation for original and regional themes. She reported that Jacob Baker favored the efforts made by the Dallas Project to cooperate with recreational agencies, such as the Dallas Parks and Recreation Department. In fact, Dallas, Houston, and Ft. Worth had established cooperative programs with local parks departments by the beginning of March. Baker feared that when funding ran out for the WPA Federal Theatre Project many of the people on its rolls might not be able to find work in commercial theatres. About forty percent of unemployed theatre professionals were considered unemployable by commercial theatre people. Baker believed that with FTP training theatre workers could contribute to programs for leisure activities and offer leadership in recreational programs that would have long-term value to the community.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to procedural hurdles, the Dallas Theatre Project had to perform under the differing directions that the federal and state administrators of the program embraced. While J. J. Carl opposed experiment and unorthodox views, Flanagan favored experiment believing it to be one of the factors that was integral to the change necessary to create a truly American and national theatre. Flanagan believed that the Federal Theatre freed its units from some of the common theatrical pressures, such as the box office, small casts, and

<sup>15</sup>Flanagan to Bryant, 27 February 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; William McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 564.

the necessity for frequent public performances. She wrote, "Within reason we can do any plays we wish in any ways we wish." She advocated using this freedom to explore new methods of production, lighting, dance, choric speech, acting, and writing. She proposed laboratory forums, similar to the Federal Music Project's Composer's Forums, in which participants explored new theory and established artists explained different techniques. Suggesting that "experimentation need not be done in public," she envisioned dancers and designers, playwrights and directors working together in bare bones settings before small audiences composed of fellow theatre workers to discover how effective their scripts, designs, and techniques were.<sup>16</sup>

Flanagan's vision for the future combined with her vitality and her determination to surmount the details of the daily administration of the FTP made her a role model for the regional, state, and local heads of Theatre Projects. She acknowledged the stresses of FTP administrative detail and the pressure of theatrical production, at the same time that she advocated "experimentation is more valuable to our project than an imitative production, however, excellent." In addressing two pressing, yet discrete, concerns, vaudeville and plays for Civilian Conservation Corps camps, Flanagan stated the practical side of the issue and then made cutting edge proposals. Fully one

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<sup>16</sup>Carl to Meredith, 25 January 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; Flanagan to Meredith, 11 February 1936, WPA, FTP, both in RG 69.

third of the people on FTP rolls were vaudevillians, while 300,000 boys in CCC camps wanted entertainment and were a huge new audience for theatre. Flanagan believed vaudevillians and directors could experiment with the techniques that made vaudeville exciting: its pacing and timing, its variety, and its sense of the pause and sense of the climax to create new styles of rapid fire acrobatic theatre that would be "distinctly American." For CCC camps, she urged techniques in which actors break down the "fourth wall" to involve the audience. By performing in the center of the mess hall, for example, actors could draw audience members into their performances. Experimentation with new forms would lead to the expansion of American theatre, Flanagan wrote, and only through change and quick change, at that, could the theatre in the United States re-employ its out of work professionals.<sup>17</sup>

At the end of February 1936 employment in the Federal Theatre Project in Dallas and the rest of Texas stood well below its quota. Only the Dallas administrative project reached its quota, or, to use WPA terminology, "persons written on the project." The Dallas Office Project employed twenty-one relief workers and two non-relief. The Dallas Experimental unit, which had been written for sixty, employed twenty-eight relief and three non-relief workers. The Ft. Worth Project, which had been written for sixty-four, employed thirty relievers, two non-relievers. Houston, which had been written for

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<sup>17</sup>Flanagan to Meredith, 11 February 1936, WPA, FTP, RG 69.

seventy-four, had thirty-nine relief and four non-relief employees. The State Co-ordinating Project, created during the January 1936 reorganization, listed only Charles Meredith and E. D. Bryant.<sup>18</sup>

From its inception the WPA had granted a ten percent exemption to cover a variety of situations for project workers. Up to, but no more than, ten percent of workers on a project did not have to be certified as on relief. The FTP depended upon this exemption and found that to adhere to professional standards, in many cases, it needed the special twenty-five percent exemption granted to the four arts projects in Federal One. When the 5 March "stop order" arrived, most projects in Texas were at half strength. Directors across the state realized they could not produce the shows they had planned if they had to stop hiring new employees. Meredith, frustrated by the ineffective procedures, pointed out that delays had forced him to request an exemption.<sup>19</sup>

The "stop order" of 5 March 1936 thwarted a unique production that Charles Meredith wanted for the Centennial. Meredith had continued to explore opportunities to coordinate Dallas FTP activities with the Centennial celebration. He proposed that the FTP cooperate with the Centennial to produce Shingandi, a ballet by David Guion with an "all Negro cast." With Theodore Koslov directing Guion's

<sup>18</sup>Reports on Sponsored Project Units, 29 February 1936. WPA, FTP, RG 69.

<sup>19</sup>Martha H. Swain, Ellen S. Woodward: New Deal Advocate for Women (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 108; McDonald, Federal Relief, 177-78; Meredith to Flanagan, 3 March 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



ballet, Meredith envisioned a regional triumph that would place the Dallas FTP in the headlines. David Guion, the Dallas composer of "Turkey in the Straw," had been recognized as one of ten outstanding American songwriters in 1935. William Farnsworth, who had replaced Lester Lang as Flanagan's assistant, wired Meredith that the "March fifth ruling seemed to block production." It was little consolation to Meredith and the Dallas FTP that Farnsworth planned to produce Shingandi in New York with a large African-American dance troupe already with the FTP under the direction of Nikolai Sokoloff, who was Flanagan's counterpart at the Federal Music Project.<sup>20</sup>

E. D. Bryant opened the State Coordinator office in San Antonio just as the "stop order" was issued. He did everything he could to facilitate the extension of an exemption for the Theatre Project in Texas, but he, too, recognized that Texas needed help from Washington. People, materials, and projects needed the exemption.<sup>21</sup>

Charles Meredith traveled to New Orleans to confer with Jacob Baker, who had overall responsibility for Federal One, on 11 March 1936. Frank Bentley, Regional Supervisor of Professional and Service Projects, and J. J. Carl, Texas State Administrator for Professional Projects, joined them to discuss the problems facing the FTP in Texas.

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<sup>20</sup> Meredith to Flanagan, 14 March 1936; Dallas Morning News, 5 April 1935, I: 17; William P. Farnsworth to Meredith, 16 March 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; McDonald, Federal Relief, 604.

<sup>21</sup> Bryant to Flanagan, 11 March 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



Very little changed for the Federal Theatre Project in Texas as a result of this conference. John McGee wired Washington on 20 March 1936 that Meredith had detected no change in state administrator's attitudes and wanted McGee to travel to Texas if possible. McGee, a Grinnell College graduate, had been director of the Birmingham (AL) Little Theatre when he accepted Flanagan's offer to become Regional Director of the South for the FTP. In early 1936 he joined the national office to assist Flanagan in the administration of the FTP. Heading "flying squadrons" that helped local and state Theatre Projects with a variety of problems, he had the respect of both Flanagan and Meredith.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the "stop order" on 5 March, Federal Theatre employment grew slightly during March. The Dallas Production unit reached forty-seven (forty-one relief, six non-relief) workers. Ft. Worth grew to forty-three (thirty-eight relief, five non-relief), adding eight relief and three non-relief workers. Houston reached fifty-four employees (forty-seven relief, seven non-relief), adding eight relief and three non-relief workers. Good news for the administrative unit in Dallas meant that three workers departed for private employment. At the end of March none of the producing units in Texas met the employment quotas projected for the first six months of operation. While underemployment meant the Texas Theatre Projects were not

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<sup>22</sup>John McGee to William Farnsworth, 20 March 1936, WPA, FTP; John McGee Personnel File, NOC-Individuals, WPA, FTP, both in RG 69.

in the red, it signaled their lack of speedy employment that President Roosevelt intended for all WPA programs. On the other hand, Texas Theatre Projects had enough money from their allotment to extend the project beyond 15 March 1936. John McGee estimated that the cost to continue the projects until 15 May 1936 with 168 employees would be \$40,000, and that the Texas projects had \$60,000 on hand.<sup>2 3</sup>

The Dallas Theatre Projects consistently pursued several goals. The Marionette and Dance Units sought the cooperation of local sponsors and established close relationships with the Dallas Recreation Department and the National Youth Administration. This achieved the "hearty approval" of both the Park Board and WPA district officials. In addition, the Dallas Theatre directors emphasized the importance of local and regional sources for all of their productions, while making experimental work central to their efforts.<sup>2 4</sup>

Kalita Humphreys held the position of Stage Director of the experimental group rehearsing Ross Lawther's play, The Wall. Humphreys came to the Theatre Project on the recommendation of Hallie Flanagan, head of the Federal Theatre Project. After she graduated from the Shipley School in Pennsylvania, Kalita Humphreys studied theatre under Flanagan at Vassar College. When

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<sup>2 3</sup>Reports on Sponsored Project Units, 29 February 1936 and 31 March 1936; McGee to Farnsworth, 20 March 1936, both in WPA, FTP, RG 69.

<sup>2 4</sup>Bruce H. Espie to Flanagan, 10 March 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

she graduated in 1935, Humphreys joined her parents in Dallas to make her debut and to throw herself into theatrical life at the Dallas Little Theatre.<sup>25</sup>

Both interest and society brought Humphreys into contact with Charles Meredith and the Dallas Little Theatre. She won the role of Tillie in the Little Theatre production of Til the Day I Die, just as she was presented at the fifty-second Idlewild Ball in November 1935. She continued to attend debut teas, dances, cocktail parties, and receptions, while in rehearsals. Even though reporters criticized the propaganda aspects of Clifford Odets's play, calling it "frankly Communistic," and observed that the play was sluggish and needed more rehearsal, they wrote that Humphreys's performance was good. When Flanagan made her national tour in December 1935 to survey early progress of the Theatre Projects across the country, she stayed with the Humphreys at the Stoneleigh Hotel in Dallas.<sup>26</sup>

Kalita Humphreys began as a volunteer Stage Director for the Dallas FTP in December 1935. She interviewed candidates for the Project and supervised the classification of eligible workers. She reviewed play synopses to select possible productions. Her talent and Flanagan's support enabled her to assume the position of stage

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<sup>25</sup>Espie to Flanagan, 17 March 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Margaret C. Clary, editor, Dallas Blue Book 1936: Centennial Edition (Dallas, TX: Margaret C. Clary, 1936), 37.

<sup>26</sup>Dallas Times Herald, 1 December 1935, III: 19; Dallas Morning News, 3 November 1935, III: 1, 2; 9 November 1935, I: 10; 10 November 1935, IV: 3; Henry Edgar Hammack, "A History of the Dallas Little Theatre: 1920-1943" (Ph. D. diss., Tulane University, 1967), 211.

director of the experimental staff activities. In addition, her energy enabled her to advise the Woman's Club on their Centennial Prize Plays, to supervise the work on a new play about the Alamo and Texas independence, and to participate in every aspect of the production of Ross Lawther's play, The Wall. Humphreys exemplified non-relief personnel essential for the success of Theatre Project Units.<sup>27</sup>

Curtis Somers-Peck described The Wall as an "impressionistic problem drama, a sociological satire," that was to embody in sound, speech, and movement the futility of life. The Wall represented the barrier between Youth's search for the ideal and his ultimate realization of the futility of progress. The Youth's efforts to escape the monotony of routine began in a cemetery, moved into a rhythm and jazz dominated experience with business, and shifted to a flower garden where romance blossomed. Ten years later, pasty faced, glassy eyed characters, moving to off stage noises of clicking, sliding machinery, surround the Youth who has become trapped in the hopelessness of business rhythms. The characters then engage in (rather stereotypical) scenes critical of big business and the courts for their support for big business against the individual. As The Wall emerged in the final scene, cacaphonic sounds and irregular tempos

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<sup>27</sup>Report of Activities, Regional District #10, 15 December-15 January, Texas Projects Reports: Supplementary #2, WPA, FTP; Bryant to Flanagan, 3 February 1936, Regional Reports-Reg III, WPA, FTP; Espie to Flanagan, 10 March 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, all in RG 69.

absorb the Everyman character into rhythmic participation, as a cog in the wheel.<sup>28</sup>

Somers-Peck recommended The Wall despite its pessimism, because of the opportunity it provided for original and ingenious staging and, in particular, the inclusion of symphonic choral music. However, he cautioned there was a "danger of its being a fog instead of mist," because the main dialogue failed to convey a definite point. He suggested that work to clarify the dialogue would solve the problems he had identified and thought the opportunity to participate in a play of excellence would have a positive effect on the entire Dallas unit. With two principal leads and thirty-four supporting parts, of which fifteen would constitute the moving and speaking chorus, The Wall employed the majority of The Federal Players.<sup>29</sup>

The Experimental company of the Dallas FTP set up laboratory workshops at the Fretz Park Community House, where they worked Monday through Friday from eight A.M. until three P.M. NYA employees worked with the FTP company from nine-thirty until noon. The schedule of laboratory work included one hour each of speech, movement, and pantomime. Rehearsals lasted from one o'clock until three. Twice a week the unit spent the afternoon in lab work on make-up.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Report, 16 January 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid..

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

The Federal Players had four play directors: Joe Burger, Aline Del Valle, Ray Ridle, and Charles Graham. Benedetta Collie was maitresse de ballet, and also served as head of the Marionette Project. Two NYA instructors, Kitty Jones and Louis Jones, cooperated with the Federal Players. Ben Wadlington was artist and scenic designer, along with Jessie L. Wilson who served both as artist and costume designer.<sup>3 1</sup>

In February 1936 Kalita Humphreys wrote Flanagan an effusive letter to tell her how much fun she was having and how kind Charles Meredith had been. She had thrown herself into the laboratory work with Ross Lawther to discover what he believed to be the meaning of his play, The Wall. She thought he was unsure, while she thought she knew what he meant. Humphreys expressed distress over Elmer Rice's resignation from the New York City FTP and sympathized with Flanagan about the New York situation.<sup>3 2</sup>

Rice had threatened to resign because Washington officials intervened to prevent the opening of the first living newspaper, Ethiopia. When Flanagan accepted Rice's resignation, the incident boiled over into the press and became the first controversy to brand the Federal Theatre Project with notoriety. Artists felt that the Roosevelt administration had used too heavy a hand to suppress theatrical creativity that portrayed the Fascist attack on Ethiopia.

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<sup>3 1</sup>Ibid.; Bruce Espie to Flanagan, 1 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>3 2</sup>Kalita Humphreys to Flanagan, February 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

Steve Early, Roosevelt's secretary, thought the play presented international figures, such as Mussolini, in an unflattering light. Jacob Baker insisted upon changes, Rice resigned rather than compromise. Thereafter, Jacob Baker assured powerful southern Senators that future plays that dealt with current events and foreign affairs would be cleared with the administration first.<sup>3 3</sup>

The Dallas FTP experienced little criticism of the political content of its productions that had scarred New York, primarily because it had not produced anything. Jimmy Lovell expressed skepticism of the Theatre Project at the time of Flanagan's Dallas visit in December 1935 in his column, "Reviewing the Crowd." He opposed actors being singled out for reemployment at taxpayers expense. However, one scrape demonstrated the passionate opposition to plays with political commentary and the chilling effect of such criticism.<sup>3 4</sup>

Three members of the Dallas FTP: Kalita Humphreys, Joe Burger, and John Dillon advised the Centennial Committee of the Dallas Woman's Club in the selection and production of a one act play dramatizing some aspect of the Southwest. The Woman's Club had offered a \$250 prize and promised to have the play produced at the Dallas Little Theatre with Charles Meredith directing. One of the winning entries was Lo, the Gaunt Wolf. Written by Myrtle Gerard Elsey of Fayetteville, Arkansas, Lo, the Gaunt Wolf portrayed the

<sup>3 3</sup>Ibid.; Jane DeHart Mathews, The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 68.

<sup>3 4</sup>Dallas Times Herald, 18 December 1935, II: 8.



poverty of tenant farmers in eastern Arkansas.<sup>3 5</sup>

Reverend Abner Sage of the First Methodist Church in Marked Tree, Arkansas wrote Senator Joseph T. Robinson, the Senate Majority Leader who was from Arkansas, accusing the WPA and the FTP of conspiring to mount a production of Lo, the Gaunt Wolf at the Texas Centennial. He had heard that Lo, the Gaunt Wolf depicted sharecroppers' troubles brought on by the Cotton Reduction Program of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). Sage, a vociferous opponent of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), characterized the play as "propaganda for the STFU and the Communist crowd who are backing them."<sup>3 6</sup>

Senator Robinson was concerned enough to send an inquiry to Lawrence Westbrook, Assistant Administrator of the WPA, who asked for information from Flanagan. William Farnsworth, Flanagan's assistant, replied that he had very little information, but he confirmed that Humphreys, Burger, and Dillon were cooperating with the Woman's' Club to serve as advisors and directors for the play. Westbrook investigated the charges further and defended the Dallas unit by distancing it from responsibility for sponsorship and choice of Lo, the Gaunt Wolf. He concluded that the play had made

<sup>3 5</sup>Dallas Times Herald, 18 December 1935, II: 8; Bryant to Flanagan, 18 February 1936; J. Abner Sage to Joseph T. Robinson, 16 April 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>3 6</sup>George Brown Tindall, The Emergence of the New South: 1913-1945 Volume X, A History of the South (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 421; Sage to Robinson, 16 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



only one performance which demonstrated the WPA and FTP goal: to avoid "situations which might lead to controversy and misunderstanding." While Sage was dissatisfied with the WPA administrator's response, Senator Robinson believed that the WPA had done as much as it could and considered the matter at an end. Despite Harry Hopkins's idealistic promise of a "free, adult, uncensored theatre," critics and administrators faced challenges that hampered the fulfillment of that as a policy.<sup>37</sup>

Dallas Theatre units continued to focus their efforts on creating productions by local FTP workers, on working with young people from the National Youth Administration in the experimental theatre, dance, and marionette construction and shows, on laboratory work to sharpen workers skills, and in rehearsals for production. Kalita Humphreys and Curtis Somers-Peck now coordinated all production units at Fretz Community Center. NYA participants received speech and diction instructions from Ray Ridle. Benedetta Collie taught rhythm and movement. Alline del Valle taught pantomime. Kalita Humphreys and Joe Burger led rehearsal and improvisation and Charles Graham joined Humphreys to teach make-up. The Federal Players helped prepare vaudeville acts and one act plays for NYA

<sup>37</sup>Joe T. Robinson to Lawrence Westbrook, 7 March 1935; Lawrence Westbrook to Flanagan, 14 March 1936; William P. Farnsworth to Westbrook, 20 March 1936; Robinson to Westbrook, 6 May 1936; Sage to Robinson, 16 April 1936; Westbrook to Robinson, 14 May 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Hallie Flanagan, Arena: The Story of the Federal Theatre (New York: Limelight Editions, 1984), 8.

theatre participants, with the intention that they would visit other parks and recreation centers to teach and entertain. In addition, Humphreys and Somers-Peck conferred with Ruth Garver, Dallas Recreational Supervisor, to develop plans to establish a cooperative venture for Dallas Children's Theatre. Cooperation went so well that Bruce Espie, who succeeded E. E. Bryant as Meredith's assistant in the Dallas office, thought there was the possibility of transfer for some of the Theatre Project's workers to the Dallas Parks Department<sup>3 8</sup>

Alline del Valle, who was one of Professor Mary McCord's recommendations to Flanagan back in September 1935, directed the rehearsal for This is My Country, the Alamo play written by the Dallas FTP staff. Del Valle used play rehearsal as an opportunity to make script revisions, with the intention of presenting an eventual production before community audiences. Joe Burger, who had played a variety of roles at the Dallas Little Theatre, prepared several one act plays designed to dovetail with the main production, so that rehearsal for the one act plays would prepare unit actors for the main production. Curtis Somers-Peck led the music rehearsals for The Wall, and brought in the "Oratorians," a choral society, who wanted to volunteer to participate in the production of The Wall. Benedetta Collie and her NYA students had begun touring all the Dallas Community Centers with the puppet shows, Punch and Judy

<sup>3 8</sup> Espie to Flanagan, 12 March 1936; Espie to Flanagan, 17 March 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69;

and Hansel and Gretel. In addition, Collie and her NYA crew were writing a new marionette show, Wild West, enlarging the portable stage, improving the lighting, and adding to the scenery for the marionette productions. Ben Wadlington and Jessie Wilson, unit artists and scene designers, had submitted sketches for The Wall for Meredith's approval. B. M. "Goofy" Goff directed the technical crew, which was repairing scenery and building sets for the experimental stage.<sup>39</sup>

B. M. Goff had twenty-five years experience as a tent show operator in Texas. He owned a complete outdoor stage, which he loaned to the Dallas FTP. Goff's stage was portable, completely covered, contained dressing rooms, and had three hundred seats. The first use of the portable stage was planned for 6 April when the Federal Players would present Goff's three act comedy, The Trial of Ellen Blake. The cast included Ray Ridle, Goff, John Dillon, Lon Dumas, Albert Lackey, Beatrice Akin, Kitty Jones, and Charlotte Tomlinson. The Dallas Recreational Department cooperated to provide the sets, and the Federal Music Project provided musicians for the Federal Players' Theatre Orchestra. If this play proved a success before the Fretz Park audience, it would tour city parks.<sup>40</sup>

By the end of March 1936 activities in the Texas FTP units seemed well under way and opening dates were scheduled.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.; Espie to Flanagan, 1 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

Although San Antonio, Waco, Austin, and Beaumont still had not made any progress in establishing Theatre Projects, Ft. Worth rehearsed George M. Cohan's The Tavern to open 10 April with plans to charge admission. Houston rehearsed an original play, Pioneer Texas, by Chester Snowden and Royal Dixon to open 15 April with free admission. Rehearsal had begun on the Dallas unit's experimental production, The Wall, but no opening date had been scheduled.<sup>4 1</sup>

State Administrator H. P. Drought's doubts about the quality of the Federal Theatre Project in Texas continued to delay its production schedule. In spite of the 11 January 1936 bulletin establishing procedures, he questioned Flanagan about charging admission, reporting that Texas had "no fixed policy," because most of the Federal Theatre productions were of a recreational nature and had been performed before underprivileged people. Jacob Baker wired Drought to emphasize that the administration favored the development of paid audiences. Pointing out that this policy had been widely discussed and had Harry Hopkins's approval, he urged Drought to have Texas FTP productions participate in charging admission on a test basis. William Farnsworth wired Meredith to confirm that Drought had given permission for "worthwhile companies" to charge admission. This issue required everyone involved to send letters, dayletters, and telegrams voicing their

<sup>4 1</sup> Espie to Flanagan, 17 March 1936, WPA. FTP: Texas, RG 69.

opinions and, then, to await responses. Ultimately, Jacob Baker, Hopkins's Administrative Assistant and head of the entire arts program, bluntly instructed State Administrator Drought to comply with federal policies.<sup>42</sup>

The "stop order" of 5 March 1936 directing the Dallas FTP unit to freeze hiring, caused delays also. While Meredith had requested an exemption from the 5 March "stop order," his request got caught up in the ever tangled crosscurrents of state and federal rulings, misunderstandings, and generally slow responses from the divisions involved in getting people from relief rolls to jobs for which they were suited. Even though the Dallas Project had requisitioned sixteen people "by name" for its project before the 5 March "stop order," some had been assigned to other WPA projects or had been lost in the confused files of the Division of Labor Management. Delay was prolonged when it was decided to wait to transfer people on the requisition list until payrolls on various projects closed. Of course, these closing dates varied and the Division of Labor Management waited until the last payroll closed to make any transfers. This confusion resulted in the loss of one week's pay for at least one man who was transferred off his former project one week before he was notified to report to the Theatre Project in Dallas. On 31 March J. J. Carl ordered the reduction of the Dallas Project from forty-seven to

<sup>42</sup>McDonald, Federal Relief, 515; Jacob Baker to H. P. Drought, 30 March 1936; Drought to Baker, 31 March 1936; Farnsworth to Meredith, 3 April 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

thirty-one, because the "lost battalion" of sixteen workers had been added after the March "stop order." Once again, it took the combined efforts of Meredith and the national office to convince Carl that Dallas had acted in good faith to acquire the sixteen relief workers. J. J. Carl then wired Jacob Baker for another exemption. Baker wired back that Texas could have 168 workers on its FTP rolls.<sup>43</sup>

While the Dallas FTP focused most of its attention on the rehearsal and technical preparation for the production of The Wall, activity continued in experimental one act play production and expansion of the program to other parks. FTP artists and technicians provided creative aids to the recreational program of the Dallas Parks Department. Master Carpenter David Crockett and artist Jessie Wilson produced a series of pictures forming a huge stage "Story Book" that was used at centers across the city. Alline del Valle and Ray Ridle chose several one act plays by Texas authors to produce with those actors not involved in The Wall: The Stranger by Mrs. S. A. Lindsey of Tyler, one of the entries in the Woman's Club Centennial Play contest, and two by Louise Harper of Corsicana, Forever, Amen and The Dead are Here. Kitty Jones and Louis Mathews directed NYA drama activities at Pike's Park Community Center, where they mounted a "Minstrel Revue" that toured other community centers and planned to open a three act comedy drama,

<sup>43</sup>Espie to Flanagan, 3 April 1936; J. J. Carl to Baker, 2 April 1936, Baker to Carl, 7 April 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

The Man from Texas, on 1 April. Jones wrote Who is Guilty?, in which she included scenes for the NYA dancers, to follow The Man from Texas. Because Jones and Mathews were cast in The Trial of Ellen Blake, the Dallas unit at Fretz Park planned to absorb the NYA players from Pike's Park, so they could continue their expanded activities under the direction of Jones and Mathews.<sup>4 4</sup>

By April Benedetta Collie's Marionette Project had been consolidated as a branch of the Federal Players. It consisted of six experienced NYA actors and constructors and three adults. Texas Outlook described the National Youth Administration teenagers as: "Old enough to earn a living and young enough to be enthusiastic about it." Of 11,770 young people in the Texas NYA, 1,128 worked on WPA projects, and around 500 worked in Recreation Projects. Starting on 11 November 1935, Dallas Recreation Centers had offered jobs to 191 students with the highest grades to promote "dancing, dramatics, and handicrafts and other forms of entertainment." The Dallas Recreation Department and the Dallas Federal Theatre Project cooperated to employ NYA apprentices in the Marionette Project, the Experimental Theatre, and in the Dance Project. Working part-time, NYA employees earned \$15 per month. The puppet troupe had appeared in every community center in the city and planned to expand its audience by doing an exhibition in City Hall Auditorium on 4 April for Dallas school children. Work on the "Horse Opera," as

<sup>4 4</sup>Espie to Flanagan, 1 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



Collie called her next production, Wild West, included a moving cyclorama to give action to the puppet play. With very little cost, Collie reached a large and enthusiastic audience, and at the same time taught NYA participants and relief workers how to mount marionette productions.<sup>4 5</sup>

Just as others in the Dallas FTP did double duty, Collie performed in several arenas. She taught movement and rhythm daily to the cast of The Wall. Her rather grand title, Maitresse de Ballet, must have seemed fitting to all who knew her. Both intimidating and ingratiating, Collie caught up her bright red hair with a vivid green bandeau and wore a whistle that she blew to get the attention of her class. She was a short sturdy woman of fifty-eight, who was a former associate of the Imperial Russian Ballet. Apparently those early experiences, Kalita Humphreys conjectured, led her to make-up her eyes to look like a bird's. Somers-Peck noted that she had gained her puppetry experience in London and Johannesburg. John McGee thought she was imaginative and a very capable teacher. He felt her marionette troupe deserved to be exhibited at the Centennial.<sup>4 6</sup>

The hubbub of the multi-production schedule of the Dallas FTP gave the players a boost in early April, and in addition, seven

<sup>4 5</sup>Ibid.; "NYA Youth at Work," Texas Outlook 20: 3 (March 1936): 24; Ibid., "The NYA and the Student," Texas Outlook 20: 9 (September 1936): 26; Dallas Morning News, 9 November 1935, I: 9.

<sup>4 6</sup>Humphreys to Flanagan, 21 March 1936; Somers-Peck to Flanagan, 31 October 1936; John McGee to Flanagan, 22 April 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



workers found jobs in the private sector. The Trial of Ellen Blake opened to a audience of 300 people, and the Park Board immediately requested that it tour all its recreation centers. The Man from Texas played one performance at Pike's Park to a crowd of two hundred. The one act plays were presented at community centers, and rehearsals for The Wall continued. The FTP and the Oratorians presented a cantata, Olivet to Calvary, to an audience of 500 at Fretz Park on 13 April. Meredith remarked that this performance was characterized by strict artistic musical standards and that the audience would "absorb this sort of culture if given in homeopathic doses."<sup>47</sup>

John McGee visited Texas in April to assess its Theatre Projects for the national office. While Projects in Texas has gotten off to a very slow start, they appeared to be ready for a solid future. Administrative problems with procurement procedures and the handling of admission money had been thrashed out, and he thought state officials were fairly enthusiastic about the Texas Projects. He attributed Baker's intervention to the change in attitude regarding charging admission for professional productions. McGee met with H. P. Drought who said he was satisfied with the progress of the FTP. McGee suggested that the Texas FTP move from leisure time projects to professional productions geared to charging admissions.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Espie to Flanagan, 8 April 1936 and 15 April 1936; Meredith to Flanagan, 24 April 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>48</sup>John McGee Report on the Texas Project to Flanagan, 22 April 1936, WPA,

McGee recognized both Kalita Humphreys and Benedetta Collie for the creative job they were doing, particularly in adapting material to the "peculiar requirements of their varied personnel." Humphreys had taken tent show and variety actors and a group of NYA young people and was molding them into capable performers. With emphasis on choral reading and abstract theatre, Humphreys was pulling off the difficult task of creating an experimental form which was entirely new for her theatre workers. Collie offered professional guidance and training to amateur talent, and had been especially effective with the Marionette Project.<sup>49</sup>

The financial situation of the Theatre Project in Texas revealed that the state had at least \$20,000 of the \$75,000 allotment remaining. McGee attributed this to the "stop order" of 5 March that prevented San Antonio from initiating a Theatre Project and limited the other Projects from reaching their quotas. He recommended that the FTP use the surplus from the undermanned Projects to extend the Theatre Project in Texas through June. In addition, he suggested that they write in a financial cushion for transportation of the Texas Theatre units to perform at the proposed WPA Exhibit Hall at the Texas Centennial.<sup>50</sup>

During one four day stretch in April, The Trial of Ellen Blake, Hansel and Gretel, and a trio act of FTP players proved to be big hits

FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

with community audiences. The Trial of Ellen Blake drew audiences of 1,200 at Pike's Park on a Friday night and 500 on a cold and windy Tuesday evening at Lagow Park. The trio of Goofy Goff, Katherine Atcherly, and a Mr. Denton drew 750 for a performance at City Hall on Saturday. Collie's puppet show, Hansel and Gretel drew 500 at Fretz Park on Monday.<sup>5 1</sup>

The popularity of these production led to repeat bookings at City Hall and at parks across the city. As part of the FTP community outreach, Joe Burger gave a lecture at the Moorland Branch of the YMCA to the Negro Little Theatre on one act play production. Collie took her marionette troupe to Wahoo Park, one of the community centers devoted to African-American residents of Dallas. The Oratorians and the Federal Ensemble performed before large crowds at Fretz Park. The WPA district administrators were so happy with the FTP programs that they set up an experimental tour for the Dallas County towns of Duncanville, Cedar Hill, and Rockwall. The WPA wanted the Federal Theatre presentations to coincide with the opening of their new buildings, such as the new gymnasium and community center in Duncanville<sup>5 2</sup>

The focus of much of the success of these FTP activities was Goofy Goff, whose comedic talent carried the shows. Meredith recognized Goff's unique talent, while at the same time expressing condescension

<sup>5 1</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 24 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>5 2</sup>Ibid.; Curtis Somers-Peck to Flanagan, 2 May 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

regarding the audiences. He characterized the material as, "rural" and "hokum," but "easily assimilated." This echoed Meredith's early concern that the FTP could enjoy success only where Little Theatres had trained audiences. Nevertheless, Goff opened another of his three act plays, Dad's Girl, to an audience of 1,500 on 1 May. His players included: Ray Ridle, Marcelle-Lorraine Peck, Kitty Jones, Katherine McFadden, Ben Anderson, Raymond Banks, and Lon Dumas. The following week they traveled to city parks, performed one evening for the CCC Camp at White Rock Park, and traveled to Grand Prairie, where the PTA sponsored the appearance.<sup>53</sup>

During the month of May the Federal Players expanded their repertoire. Using their mobile stage, the Theatre Project played Dad's Girl drawing audiences that ranged from 1,200 to 2,000. In conjunction with the Federal Music Project, the FTP developed a second unit to alternate with Dad's Girl. Goofy Goff acted as master of ceremonies and was "responsible for the low comedy part." The second unit included Punch and Judy and Hansel and Gretel, an African-American quartet, acrobats, a Federal Music Project Hawaiian trio, and two dance acts developed by Collie for her NYA apprentices. In addition, an orchestra of eight Federal Music Project musicians accompanied both units.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Curtis Somers-Peck to Flanagan, 14 May 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Dallas Times Herald, 17 May 1936, in WPA, FTP: Press Clippings, 1935-1939, RG 69.

Curtis Somers-Peck replaced Bruce Espie, who resigned for a job in the private sector, as Meredith's assistant in April. He reported that Audience Surveys were distributed at every performance, but one from Dad's Girl provided the flavor of the performance and its effect on the audience. Mrs. L. B. Rose wrote: "Excellent. Entertaining. This is good, clean, entertainment for playgrounds. We want more of it." Mr. and Mrs. J. D. Wilson added: "I think it is the swellest ever I saw. They really know how to act." John Troglin wrote: "Not only entertaining but constructive, and aids in building community spirit." Under the everyone's-a-critic category, Mrs. William J. Johnson wrote: "Players ok. Musicians should play louder. Have someone sing." Mr. and Mrs. N. H. Thomson added: "Music needs horn or something to make it louder in the rear." Overall the audience found that it enjoyed the play and was pleased to be asked to participate in a questionnaire.<sup>55</sup>

Newspapers reported audiences "yearned to see flesh and blood actors." While John McGee called Dad's Girl, "a rather unfamiliar vehicle," the Dallas Journal called it "an hilarious English type farce comedy," and the Dallas Times Herald said it was "convulsing community audiences." The two units were popular enough to be booked three times a week through 25 June.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup>National Play Bureau Audience Survey Reports, 1936-1938, A-N, WPA, FTP, RG 69.

<sup>56</sup>Dallas Times Herald, 17 May 1936; Dallas Journal, 25 May 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Press Clippings, 1935-1939; McGee to Flanagan, 12 May 1936, Regional Reports-Reg III, WPA, FTP, all in RG 69.

One of the key elements in the popular success of the FTP in Dallas was the mobile stage that B. M. Goff provided the Project. It enabled the Dallas Theatre Project to reach audiences that had never seen live theatre before. The audience's enjoyment was genuine and enthusiastic and they wanted to see the FTP continue. People who came to performances could not afford the movies, much less any version of live theatre. Even though the Federal Theatre wanted to develop a paying audience, their appetite had to be whetted first. By taking the theatre to the audience, the Dallas Federal Theatre Project achieved this first step in the national agenda to develop an audience. Using a one and one-half ton truck, the mobile theatre carried everything it needed to set up a theatre, including 400 canvas folding chairs.<sup>57</sup>

The stage crew consisted of a carpenter, an electrician, a property man, and a painter, one of whom doubled as the driver. They could set up the stage in one hour, and after the performance they could strike it in thirty minutes. The floor of the truck served as the center of the stage, with the whole stage extending to a width of thirty-two feet and a depth of eighteen feet. They tried to improve the acoustics by extending the stage middle outward about fifteen feet to form a shell. This also served to cover the orchestra pit. The proscenium opening was twenty feet, but its height was only eight

<sup>57</sup>Curtis Somers-Peck to Pierre de Rohan, 20 May 1936, Southern Reg-III, WPA, FTP, RG 69.

feet, so they used paint to help overcome this problem. Lighting was provided by porcelain sign reflectors extending out four feet just at curtain height, projecting a fairly effective distribution of light. They built stage rigging using hinges and pins to create the equivalent of a grid and a frame for skypieces and chandeliers. However, when the chief electrician found private employment, the mobile stage was paralyzed. Rigid regulations required J. J. Carl to relay Meredith's requisition to Hallie Flanagan to receive a special exemption to hire another electrician.<sup>58</sup>

All accounts of Kalita Humphreys's work with the cast and crew of The Wall told of the high expectations of this production. Its experimental nature, the melding of many talents and the sharpening of others took time. The added elements of choric speech and modern dance required separate rehearsals. After more than two months of preparation, The Wall was not yet ready for previews. Humphreys found her cast to be enthusiastic and willing, but experimentation required time. McGee had reviewed Humphreys's other project, the Alamo play, now entitled, This Our Country, and had sent all but the second act back for revision.<sup>59</sup>

The Centennial celebration, scheduled to open 6 June 1936 with a visit from President Roosevelt on 12 June, formed the backdrop for life in Dallas in 1936. Publicists created enormous excitement both

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.; J. J. Carl to Flanagan, 25 May 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas RG 69.

<sup>59</sup>McGee to Flanagan, 12 May 1936, Regional Reports-Reg III, WPA, FTP, RG 69.



in Texas and across the country, literally drumming up business. Flanagan wrote Meredith that, as she waited in the anteroom of the Mayor's office in Chicago, she heard a very loud band approaching and looked up to see Texans in ten gallon hats parading through the halls beating drums and laying siege to the office. The crowd all knew Meredith and Texas Governor James V. Allred even told her Meredith was very involved in the staging of the Centennial.<sup>60</sup>

Everyone, it seemed, made plans that coincided with the Exposition. The Dallas Little Theatre, for example, added Lynn Riggs's Borned in Texas to open on 8 June in honor of the Centennial and Meredith's old mentor, Thomas Wood Stevens. Thomas Wood Stevens resigned as head of the Midwest region of the Federal Theatre Project in order to direct the Globe Theatre productions at the Centennial in Dallas. Stevens planned to produce Shakespeare with a professional stock company for the duration of the Centennial Exposition. Despite its slow start, the Dallas Federal Theatre Project hoped it would show off its creative talent at the Centennial. While the Centennial was the siren song for commercial theatre ventures, the Works Progress Administration wanted to build an exhibit hall to demonstrate its activities, and the Dallas Federal Theatre Project wanted to grab new audiences at the Centennial for its venues.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup>Flanagan to Meredith, 13 May 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.; Hammack, "Dallas Little Theatre," 216.



CHAPTER 4  
THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT  
AND THE TEXAS CENTENNIAL

The Centennial celebration of Texas independence from Mexico was the focus of activities statewide, but for Dallas it held singular importance. Dallas business and civic leaders expected the Texas Centennial Exposition to bring twelve million visitors to the city, boosting the economy and providing jobs. They hoped to duplicate the Chicago Century of Progress which reported, at the end of its two year run on 30 October 1934, that thirty-eight million attended, generating \$160 million in income, and providing a half million jobs directly and indirectly. By March 1936 building permits in Dallas reached \$4 million, more than all of 1935, and by April permits reached \$6,364,390. The Centennial payroll rose to \$300,000 per week in late April, growing to \$400,000 in May for 10,000 workers, that included about fifty local artists and sculptors who worked on the exterior decoration of the new buildings. The Reemployment Service in Dallas County reported employment up 400 percent: they placed 16,157 workers in 1936 compared to 3,666 in 1935.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"Visual Education is the Theme of Texas' Centennial of Independence," Texas Outlook 20: 7 (July 1936): 10; Kenneth G. Ragsdale, The Year America Discovered Texas: Centennial '36 (College Station, TX: Texas A & M Press, 1987), 69, 181, 224-225, 300-301.

The Texas Centennial Central Exposition was a private corporation linked to the State Fair of Texas, also a private corporation, and the Park Board of the City of Dallas by contractual agreements and by mutual interest in the success of the Centennial celebration. George Dahl, Chief of the Technical Division and Centennial Architect, developed the original concept for the design of the Centennial. Ray Foley headed the Department of Public Works.<sup>2</sup>

While the Park Board had agreed not to borrow any money, it worked diligently to receive grants from the Public Works Administration and gathered data for a blanket application to the Works Progress Administration. Harry E. Gordon, Park Board member, and Scott Dunne, architect for the band shell in Fair Park, traveled to the Hollywood Bowl stopping at points along the way to gather information. Funds for this foray came from the Park Improvement Fund. On 13 August 1935 the Dallas Park Board applied for a \$1.4 million grant, and on 27 August 1936 the Park Board made a blanket application to the WPA for park improvements. On 31 December the WPA announced funding of \$1,207,535 to the Park Board, contingent upon their provision of \$281,826.81. By 9 January 1936 the amount appropriated for the Park Board had grown to \$1,267,535 for fifty-nine parks.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>City of Dallas Park Board Minutes, 8 January 1935, 327; 19 June 1935, 368-377, both in vol. 8, in City Hall of Dallas, TX; Ragsdale, 91, 95-96.

<sup>3</sup>Dallas Park Board Minutes, 23 July 1935, 415; 13 August 1935, 430; 27 August 1935, 442; 6 September 1935, 448; 31 December 1935, 560; 9 January 1936, 1936, all in vol. 8. Substantial portions of these funds went to Centennial

Entertainment for the Centennial included every aspect of theatre. The Third National Folk Festival brought groups from twenty states and thirty Texas communities to participate in singing, storytelling, dancing, and playmaking. The Carolina Playmakers presented Texas Calls and Quare Medicine by Paul Green, and the Waco Negro Thespians presented Green's The No 'Count Boy. The Old Globe Theatre, under the direction of Thomas Wood Stevens late of the FTP, was a scale reproduction of the Elizabethan theatre. It seated 500 in continuous double galleries for Shakespearean plays by a professional stock company. One former FTP employee thanked Flanagan for the opportunity to work in CCC productions to get "over a very rough spot," because he now had a job at the Globe in Dallas, where the notorious "security wage" was absent. Tony Sarg, the preeminent professional puppeteer, brought his Marionette Theatre to the Centennial.<sup>4</sup>

The Centennial Midway abounded with showgirls. The Streets of Paris advertised "45 Continental artists, 24 glorified Belles

improvements.

<sup>4</sup>National Folk Festival, 6, souvenir program, Eli Sanger Collection, in the Jerry Bywaters Collection on Art of the Southwest, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University; Anna Blanche McGill, "The National Folk Festival: An Evaluation," Southwest Review 21: 4 (July 1936): 426-427; Maxine Holmes and Gerald D. Saxon, eds., The WPA Dallas Guide and History (Dallas: Dallas Public Library and University of North Texas Press, 1992), 372; Ragsdale, 249; Marvin Kline to Flanagan, 27 June 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69. While the security wage was designed to be a month's pay for a month's work, in a confidential report that surveyed average hourly pay through 15 July 1936, the WPA reported that security wages ranged from 27.3 cents per hour to 41.3 cents per hour for "white collar" workers in Texas, in WPA, FTP: Employment, 1935-1936, RG 69.

Parisiennes and 1,000 sensations," and featured Mlle. Corinne and her famous apple dance. The Streets of All Nations claimed Mona Lleslie, who dived into a flaming pool that was extinguished just before she splashed in. In addition to The Nude Ranch, bare breasted shows and peep shows played the Midway. Ripley's Believe It or Not Odditorium competed with Hollywood Animal Stars and Admiral Richard E. Byrd's "Little America" to attract fairgoers. Hell Drivers crashed cars in the Cotton Bowl, while another amusement section stretched a quarter mile along the eastern side of the fairgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

The Centennial had a Midget village with more than seventy-five little people, who elected a mayor and city council. The Black Forest Concession covered an acre and had a 1,600 seat restaurant, an ice skating rink, a German village, and a rathskeller. In addition, an English village and the City of China pavilion attracted patrons. The Hall of Communication demonstrated modern uses for radio and telephone, and introduced television. Art Linkletter broadcast live coverage for the CBS radio network, and the popular radio duo, Amos 'n Andy, broadcast a live show from the Centennial. Gene Autry shot a movie, The Big Show, during the Centennial.<sup>6</sup>

The Cavalcade of Texas enthralled its audiences, who sat in the grandstand of the old racetrack to see this spectacular open-air

<sup>5</sup>Ragsdale, 229-230, 258, 259; Joanne Smith, "Relive the Centennial," Texas Highways 33: 10 (October 1986): 31.

<sup>6</sup>Ragsdale, 247, 258; Dallas Morning News, 15 October 1994, IV: 1; "An Educational Exposition," Texas Outlook 20: 2 (February 1936): 16.

pageant. The "stage" was 300 feet wide and 170 feet deep, with bluffs and mountains built up to 60 feet high. It had eighteen reversible sets. Cavalcade used a forty foot water screen flooded with colored lights to obscure the set changes. The souvenir program listed 240 pantomime actors. In addition, the Schreiner Ranch provided Longhorn steers, Swift and Company provided Hereford cattle, and Wilson and Company supplied Clydesdale horses. The King Ranch and the Chavez family of New Mexico lent two authentic stagecoaches for the production. New lighting techniques and a sound booth led to innovations. For example, actors in the sound booth synchronized their voices with the pantomime actors on stage.<sup>7</sup>

Jan Isabelle Fortune, a Dallas newspaperwoman and playwright, was the author of Cavalcade of Texas, which was a sweeping historical pageant that stretched from pre-Columbian Texas to 1889 and the "Law West of the Pecos." Fortune had written fifty-two Texas history plays broadcast by Dallas radio station, WFAA, and by the end of the decade she departed for Hollywood, where she worked as a writer for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. David Guion wrote the theme song, "Cowboy Love Song." Mark Hamilton, the original director, was replaced immediately after the exposition opened, because the show ran four hours. The Centennial wanted to do two shows a night and needed changes to be made. Blanding Sloan, the

<sup>7</sup>Ragsdale. 249; Cavalcade of Texas, 4-6, souvenir program, Texas Centennial Exposition, Eli Sanger Collection, in the Jerry Bywaters Collection on Art of the Southwest, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University.

lighting director, and A. L. Vollmann, the production supervisor, cut the show's length and added a new finale. The cast was rebellious, but the show opened on schedule at 8:15 P. M. on 21 June 1936, and a second performance commenced at 10 P. M.<sup>8</sup>

Cavalcade of Texas proved to be a huge success. Each week between 60,000 and 70,000 people bought the forty cent ticket to see the show. With an original budget variously estimated at \$110,000 or \$150,000, Cavalcade had gross receipts of \$60,000 weekly. Despite the Texas weather, Cavalcade demonstrated how successful first-rate outdoor show business could be.<sup>9</sup>

Typical summer heat scorched visitors and performers alike. When President Roosevelt visited the Centennial on 12 June 1936, the temperature was 89 F., but it was considerably hotter in the Cotton Bowl, where he made a twenty-six minute speech. Heat spells broken by violent storms affected Cavalcade of Texas and Federal Theatre productions. One thunderstorm hit about eleven o'clock the evening of 20 July wrecking everything in its path and marooning the FTP Follow the Parade cast in the band shell until three A. M. The Follow the Parade equipment suffered so much damage that officials were forced to delay their opening for four days. In addition, the storm caused \$23,250 damage to Cavalcade properties and forced the show to cancel several performances. The Macbeth

<sup>8</sup>Holmes and Saxon, 219, 246; Rogers, 16; Ragsdale, 249.

<sup>9</sup>Ragsdale, 251.

company arrived and rehearsed on two days that still hold the temperature records for August in Dallas: 10 August 1936 hit 109.6 F. and 11 August hit 107.2 F. Dallas advertised the Centennial as the first air-conditioned exposition. Exhibitions contained almost five miles of air-conditioned space, and seventy-five percent of the Midway shows had air-conditioning.<sup>10</sup>

The Federal Theatre played catch-up trying to show off its best productions at the Texas Centennial. After its first rebuff by officials in January 1936, Meredith tried again with the proposal of Shingandi, the all black ballet by David Guion. The 5 March "stop order" quashed that idea. Still optimistic, Meredith thought the theatre in the WPA Exhibits Building "seems a big opportunity."<sup>11</sup>

Meredith hoped against hope that the WPA Exhibits Building would be forthcoming for the Centennial. Gus Thomasson, WPA director of the Dallas district, wanted the building to exhibit WPA work from all forty-eight states. David Williams, the architect, planned a small, but well-equipped theatre. Deputy State Administrator Robert Smith told Meredith he had wrangled an additional \$15,000 for the FTP in Texas to use for the Centennial. Meredith admitted with some surprise that the Texas Theatre Units were shaping up, but he thought a Resettlement Unit from New York and touring marionette troupes would add to the impact of the FTP

<sup>10</sup> Ragsdale, 230, 256, 286; Meredith to Flanagan, 23 July 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>11</sup> Meredith to Flanagan, 23 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



productions. The New York City FTP created Resettlement Units to disperse its huge number of unemployed theatre professionals. The FTP planned to send these Units throughout the country to offer local Theatre Projects and Recreation Projects their expertise and to teach new techniques. The New York FTP would enjoy the added benefit of reduced costs once the Units resettled.<sup>12</sup>

Meredith wrote Flanagan that his very busy schedule prevented his giving the Theatre Project his full attention. He offered to work full time beginning in June, and Flanagan noted "yes" in the margin of this letter. Meredith continued in a rather equivocal tone about his future with the FTP. He realized that he brought a recognizable name and reputation to the FTP; if Flanagan replaced him, he hoped it would be someone with a "National reputation in the theatre."<sup>13</sup>

When John McGee assessed the Texas Federal Theatre program for the national office in April, he concurred with Meredith that the Centennial presented an opportunity for the FTP "to demonstrate its nationwide usefulness." He envisioned a project like one in North Carolina with a Resettlement Unit. Meredith and McGee proposed that the Houston Project's Pioneer Texas get an extension beyond 15 May to appear at the Centennial. Their proposal also included figures for tours by Tampa's Cuban Revue and New Orleans's Dion Boucicault's After Dark, which was Bernard Szold's first effort as

<sup>12</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 29 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.



head of both Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre and the New Orleans FTP. The Tampa Unit would cost \$6,500 for thirty people for thirty days, while the New Orleans Unit would cost \$3,950 for thirty people for thirty days. They wanted a New York Unit and a Los Angeles Unit, and suggested that Lois Fletcher book those tours immediately.<sup>14</sup>

Lois Fletcher worked as a field agent, traveling from trouble spot to trouble spot in the Southern Region. Jane Mathews wrote in The Federal Theatre that Fletcher was effective because she, even more than other field agents, possessed "the sensitivity of diplomats and the toughness of top sergeants." McGee entrusted her with endless tasks, which were sometimes thankless, to boot. She served in conjunction with McGee's "flying squadrons," to help struggling Theatre Projects move forward.<sup>15</sup>

Flanagan was effusive in her response to the McGee-Meredith proposal. She favored the \$15,000 funding, tours from New York, and, possibly the Arkansas Centennial Pageant, scheduled for President Roosevelt's visit to Little Rock on 6 June. She wanted Meredith full time and promised him \$3,600 a year if the 1937 appropriation passed. Flanagan had lost seven regional and state

<sup>14</sup> John McGee to Flanagan, 22 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; McGee and Meredith Proposal to Flanagan, 1 May 1936, WPA, FTP: Southern Region #2, both in RG 69.

<sup>15</sup> Hallie Flanagan, Arena (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 84; Jane Mathews, The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 91.

directors within this first year and hoped to retain as many as she could. She bragged that New York was "winning press and box office with Murder in the Cathedral, and the Negro Macbeth."<sup>16</sup>

However, stop, then start characterized the nature of the FTP in Dallas and Texas. After the 5 March "stop order," the rejection then approval of the WPA Exhibit Building theatre mystified FTP people in Texas. Receiving funding on 20 May, the WPA planned to open its Exhibit Building on 15 June. Mixing good news with bad, Meredith telegraphed Flanagan requesting immediate help to clarify the purchase of supplies. The General Accounting Office had informed J. J. Carl that funds were for personnel, not supplies. Months old purchases had to be substantiated, before any current requisitions could be filled. Money woes that required the intervention of the national director delayed implementation of local productions, such as The Wall.<sup>17</sup>

Meredith attended one performance of Pioneer Texas and was disappointed in the quality of its staging and acting. He echoed that same assessment regarding the Dallas Unit, as well. While the performances were popular and well-attended, the audiences were "so-called underprivileged groups." The staging and acting needed

<sup>16</sup>Flanagan to Meredith, 13 May 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Mathews, 87. In his memoir, Run-Through, (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1980), 178, John Houseman wrote, "The word 'black' was taboo. 'Negro' was in official and general use though there was some ideological disagreement as to whether it should be spelled with a small or a capital N."

<sup>17</sup>Meredith to Flanagan, 20 May 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; Meredith to Flanagan, 21 May 1936, WPA, FTP: NOC-Charles Meredith, both in RG 69.

great improvement. He believed a director-teacher might be able to update techniques, and he asserted that the FTP would have failed if this were not accomplished. However, Meredith did not offer to act as a director-teacher, nor did he suggest anyone in the Dallas Project to perform that function.<sup>18</sup>

As the debut of the WPA Exhibit Building drew closer, John McGee proposed that the Federal Theatre operate almost continuously for the entire Centennial. He suggested that the New York Unit producing Davy Crockett move to Dallas, play Crockett, for two weeks, and then rehearse another play for several weeks while Tampa's Cuban Revue appeared. The two Units could alternate through the end of September. McGee's proposals implied very little confidence in the Dallas Units, except as fillers. In the meantime, Meredith, at McGee's urging, forwarded the proposal to have forty-five members of Houston's Pioneer Texas produce its show for three weeks at the Centennial. He estimated the cost to be \$3,875.<sup>19</sup>

William Farnsworth responded that Form 320 had not been filled out properly. "You realize, of course, that pursuant to Bulletin #35, Part II, Section 5, authorization to travel this company will have to be given to the Agent Cashier by Mrs. Flanagan." He added that if Flanagan agreed to the tour, it would be considered a "Supplementary Project" and would have to go through the entire

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>McGee to Flanagan, 26 May 1936; Farnsworth to Meredith, 2 June 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

application and approval process, up to and including Washington. Plans for the Centennial were still subject to the same byzantine methods applied to every other proposal.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the plans and projections that McGee, Meredith, Flanagan and a host of others made to stage the best shows for the Centennial, State Administrator Drought decided against out of state troupes performing in Texas. Further, he questioned whether Texas FTP Units should even participate in the WPA exhibit at the Centennial. He thought they might be diverted from what he saw as their goal, "to provide dramatic entertainment for underprivileged people." Frank Bentley, Regional Supervisor of Professional and Service Projects, responded to Drought's obstinate refusal reiterating that the goal of the FTP was to "employ professional theatre people to put on high standard shows." Bentley, the soul of diplomacy, suggested that underprivileged people might visit the Centennial and should not have to miss the Federal Theatre Project shows. Drought indicated that he might be persuaded to change his mind, if he could be assured of the troupes' excellence, and, more telling, if their participation did not incur "any expenditure whatever." McGee rejoined the fray agreeing to meet Drought in San Antonio on 11 June.<sup>21</sup>

Gus Thomasson told McGee that the WPA Building would be a

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Esther Porter to McGee, 3 June 1936; Bentley to Bruce McClure, 3 June 1936; Bentley to Drought, 3 June 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

waste of money if the Federal Theatre and other projects could not be represented by their best work. He added that he had not been consulted before Drought made his decision. McGee thought it absurd that the WPA Exhibit Building might have none of the best the FTP had to offer.<sup>22</sup>

Hallie Flanagan traveled on the Presidential train that made a swing through the Southwest stopping first in Little Rock on 6 June 1936. The Arkansas Federal Theatre Project, produced and directed by McGee's "flying squadron," presented a pageant celebrating that state's centennial in honor of President and Mrs. Roosevelt.

President and Mrs. Roosevelt then toured Houston, San Antonio, Eagle Lake, and Austin before their arrival in Dallas on 12 June. Flanagan used this opportunity to visit the FTP in Houston, where she met its director, Cyril Delavanti. She shared her hope that the troupe would take their show to the Centennial. In addition, she asked Delavanti to work with John McGee to create a single Texas Unit comprised of the best theatre workers from across the state to tour the state in 1937. Rejoining the Presidential train, Flanagan managed a long conference with H. P. Drought, who agreed to touring companies, a twenty-five percent exemption for non-relief labor, and agent-cashiers.<sup>23</sup>

Agent cashiers were bonded individuals who received cash

<sup>22</sup> McGee to Bentley, 3 June 1936, WPA, FTP: NOC, RG 69.

<sup>23</sup> Flanagan to Farnsworth, 11 June 1936, WPA, FTP: NOC; Flanagan to Cyril Delavanti, 15 June 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, both in RG 69. Non-relief employees had not been certified as being in need, most frequently they were supervisory personnel.

advances to purchase supplies and materials necessary to produce a show, and they collected admissions. In order to tour, a Unit had to have an agent-cashier. In Texas, an ongoing controversy pitted local FTP business managers, such as Richard Baldwin in Houston, against Herbert Crate, the local WPA District Supervisor, who refused to abide by federal instructions and denied the Houston Project authorization to collect admissions, while Drought refused to authorize agent cashiers. Flanagan worked real show business magic to wring the concessions from Drought.<sup>24</sup>

Once in Dallas, Flanagan toured the Centennial, inspected the WPA Building, and met with Centennial officials. Flanagan, Meredith, McGee, Lawrence Westbrook, Assistant Administrator of the WPA, and Mrs. John Lyons, head of the Federal Music Program in Texas, met with Paul M. Massman, Director of Special Events, to work out plans for FTP touring companies to play the Centennial. They agreed to book Follow the Parade in the WPA Theatre and Macbeth in the new Symphony Bowl. Constructed of rough faced concrete with only the inside of the shell plastered, the Symphony Bowl had a stage 143 feet wide and 53 feet deep. It could accommodate 300 musicians and was equipped for sound. Pylons containing loudspeakers and spot lights encircled the seating structure that sloped up from the stage to a height of twenty-five feet. Space for an audience of 4,000

<sup>24</sup>William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 295-296.

appealed to Flanagan. Contracts were drawn up as a result of this productive meeting.<sup>25</sup>

Next, Flanagan visited the Dallas FTP and met with the directors of the various Units. She sensed that they were somewhat bewildered by the approaching activities, but her schedule forced her to leave before she could clarify the situation. Despite his earlier pledge to work full-time on the Theatre Project during the summer, Meredith taught students at the Little Theatre School and, yet again, did not have time enough for the Federal Theatre Project. Flanagan determined she needed McGee and his "flying squadron" in Dallas.<sup>26</sup>

Flanagan thought that Meredith would be the perfect director for the play, Triple A Ploughed Under, and that he should continue to coordinate Dallas Project activities, but she needed McGee and his Arkansas crew to put on top notch shows that charged admission at the Centennial. Flanagan still harbored hopes that the Theatre Project in Dallas could achieve excellence. For example, she encouraged the FTP to develop children's performances in conjunction with the Little Theatre. She wanted them to produce Mr. Static, with a friend of Kalita Humphreys directing.<sup>27</sup>

John McGee began the work to move his "flying squadron" from Little Rock to Dallas immediately. He thought the paperwork could

<sup>25</sup>Paul M. Massman to Harry Hopkins, 13 June 1936; Farnsworth to Massman, 26 June 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Holmes and Saxon, 375.

<sup>26</sup>Flanagan to Meredith, 15 June 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.



be completed and people settled within one week. In a move to bypass delay and other difficulties, McGee notified Flanagan that he had implemented a scheme to finance equipment needs with funds from the Information Department. McGee reiterated his belief that the Dallas and Texas Theatre Projects could not succeed without a twenty-five percent exemption for non-relief labor and a twenty-five percent exemption for "other than labor costs."<sup>28</sup>

When Drought confirmed his agreement with Flanagan to grant the twenty-five percent exemptions and to authorize the appointment of agent cashiers, he conceded that he would have no jurisdiction over the companies brought in from outside Texas to play the Centennial. However, he expressed interest in the choice of plays that would be presented. He did not want "unfavorable criticism," and specifically mentioned Triple A Ploughed Under as a play that had evoked such criticism. This threw a wrench into McGee's plans, because he wanted to do Triple A Ploughed Under. He thought it was a production the Dallas Experimental Unit could mount with its relief personnel, and possibly with the addition of a few non-relief actors.<sup>29</sup>

By late June McGee was learning about agent-cashiers and submitting an updated proposal for the Centennial venue. He admitted to William Farnsworth he had no idea how to handle the

<sup>28</sup>McGee to Flanagan, 15 June 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>29</sup>Drought to Flanagan, 16 June 1936; McGee to Flanagan, 19 June 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



paperwork for agent-cashiers. Farnsworth explained the intricacies of disbursements and agent-cashiers by phone. That settled, McGee sent a simplified list of what shows he wanted the Dallas Unit to produce: Triple a Ploughed Under, Benedetta Collie's Unit to produce children's marionette shows, Pioneer Texas from Houston, Follow the Parade from Los Angeles, and concerts by the Federal Music Project.<sup>3 0</sup>

In discussions of the appointment of a business manager for the Texas FTP, Frank Bentley put his finger on one of the issues that hampered the Federal Theatre Project in Dallas and Texas. Bentley wrote Bruce McClure, Flanagan's assistant, that "clear directions as to functions" had to "be clarified." The business manager had to know that he would be subordinate to McGee. Had lines of authority been established earlier, the Texas Theatre Project might have gotten a better start and Texas FTP leaders might have succeeded in productions that later were scrapped because of delays. Officials at every level attempted to interpret and understand the murky layers of authority and the various bulletins and appendices that directed everyone's actions.<sup>3 1</sup>

In June and July changes in leadership, fiscal status, and focus of the Federal Theatre Project at national, state, and local levels affected the Theatre Project in Texas and Dallas. Ellen Woodward, director of

<sup>3 0</sup>McGee to Farnsworth, 20 June 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; McGee Report, 23 June 1936, WPA, FTP: Southern Region #3, both in RG 69.

<sup>3 1</sup>Bentley to McClure, 26 June 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

Women's and Professional Projects for the WPA since July 1935, took over Federal Number One from Jacob Baker in July 1936. One immediate consequence in the state of Texas was the change from J. J. Carl to Mrs. Mary K. Taylor, as the assistant state administrator for the Theatre Project, the Writers' Project, and the Music Project. Meredith found Taylor "splendidly helpful," and anticipated "the friendliest and most efficient cooperation from her department." However, Taylor's new position thrust her into the conflicting and thoroughly confusing matters concerning the Federal Theatre's funding and exemptions at the Centennial. John McGee installed his "flying squadron" in Dallas, and in the process reduced Charles Meredith's status to part time. At this point Kalita Humphreys left the Dallas Experimental Project and was replaced by Ray Ridle. While Meredith continued to coordinate local FTP activities, his efforts were closely directed by McGee and his field agent, Lois Fletcher.<sup>3 2</sup>

FTP budgets were exhausted at the end of the fiscal year, and WPA white collar projects and the NYA in Dallas operated on emergency allotment funds until 1 August. Meredith wired

<sup>3 2</sup>Martha Swain, Ellen S. Woodward: New Deal Advocate for Women (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 57; Meredith to Flanagan, 20 July 1936, 23 July 1936; Somers-Peck to Flanagan, 17 June 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69. Mrs. M. K. Taylor wired Woodward questioning whether to follow McGee's instructions or Aubrey Williams's, who was Assistant Administrator in Washington, regarding authorization forms. In addition she requested information about the twenty-five percent exemption, Herbert C. Bauers's nomination to be agent-cashier, and funds for special equipment for the FTP at the Centennial, in 20 July 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

Washington that the Dallas Recreation Department was acting as co-sponsor of the Dallas Units' activities at the Centennial. Projects for the Centennial needed money to start operations, and McGee suggested the transfer of \$7,000 in "unencumbered" funds from the Alabama Project and more than \$8,000 left unspent from Texas Projects to the Centennial.<sup>33</sup>

The leadership changes and the fiscal realities of scant funding led to the changed focus of the Federal Theatre Project in Texas and Dallas. Instead of concentrating on local efforts to provide unemployed theatre professionals with work, the FTP marshaled its forces to show off its best productions to the very large audiences at the Centennial. By and large the Dallas Project had provided work for down and out professionals in a recreational setting, rather than in professional productions envisioned by FTP leadership. This FTP goal moved from providing jobs that were suited to the talents of the unemployed to the needs of the FTP to demonstrate its usefulness as an institution.

The Dallas Units that had utilized B. F. Goff's mobile stage continued to perform "homespun plays" for community audiences. At Marsalis Park, they drew more than 1,000, mostly women and children, who thoroughly enjoyed the performance. The troupe traveled as far as the CCC camp at Cleburne and tried to work out

<sup>33</sup> Dallas Morning News, 3 July 1936, I: 9; Meredith, 2 June, 1936; McGee to Flanagan, 16 June 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69;

plans for regular CCC appearances. Somers-Peck proposed expanded activities at Dallas recreation centers with the support of Ruth Garver, Recreational Supervisor for Dallas Parks. The proposal included work for twenty-three people in a Unit that would be designated as the "experimental recreational production company." McGee questioned whether any relationship with the FTP could continue considering the wholly recreational nature of the Dallas FTP productions.<sup>3 4</sup>

By 6 July the new staff joined Meredith's office and set up in the Allen Building. The United States Employment Service (USES) interviewed, registered, and classified workers, in this case, those who were transferring from Arkansas, and tried to limit transfers to two per day. Lois Fletcher "put on her armor" and got all the folderol with the USES office solved in one afternoon, and left town that night. Herbert C. Bauers, McGee's nominee for agent-cashier in Texas, began to set up accounting procedures for the tours, and requisitioned all the equipment the FTP had acquired in Arkansas. During the transition from Baker to Ellen Woodward, requisitions, contracts, and exemptions were delayed and, sometimes, lost. Bauers wired McGee, "Everything at a standstill" on 13 July.<sup>3 5</sup>

<sup>3 4</sup>Somers-Peck to Earl L. House, 15 June and 19 June 1936; House to Somers-Peck, 9 July 1936; Somers-Peck to Flanagan, 2 July 1936; McGee to Somers-Peck, 8 July 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Dallas Morning News, 3 July 1936, II: 1.

<sup>3 5</sup>Herbert C. Bauers to McGee, 7 July 1936; F. C. Harrington memorandum to Ellen S. Woodward, 9 July 1936; WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; McDonald, Federal Relief, 189.

Bauers's wire notwithstanding, the "flying squadron" leapt into their new jobs. Fred Morrow, director of the Arkansas pageant, began work on Injunction Granted, a living newspaper production from New York City. William Perkins, stage and set designer, worked on scale designs for a New Orleans production, while Sol Miroff, technical director, began to estimate its costs, and Lois Fletcher was in and out of town. McGee insisted that the entire staff concentrate on promoting Follow the Parade as its primary goal. These activities represented typical methods that McGee used to meet the demands of the far-flung and growing area that the "flying squadron" served.<sup>3 6</sup>

Flanagan, McGee, Fletcher, and Meredith wired repeatedly for the twenty-five percent exemption that Drought had requested before Woodward took over. Money woes continued to dog the FTP and, in particular, the WPA Exhibit Building. In the rush to build the Exhibit Building and to save money, officials had cut corners. Just one week before the opening of Follow the Parade, the theatre had no equipment. McGee wired \$1,600 from Washington, just in time to quell "what might have been a riot." On 24 July Woodward informed Taylor that another \$5,600 was available for equipment. Installation of lighting equipment and construction of the stage and sets were essential for Follow the Parade and Macbeth. Blanding Sloan of Cavalcade had his men build the stage in the WPA Exhibits building,

<sup>3 6</sup>McGee to Bauers, 15 July 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

while Fletcher found carpenters to build the sets for Macbeth.<sup>37</sup>

"People must know where you are to fill the theatre," Fletcher wrote McGee, who had wired that it was illegal for FTP to buy advertising for touring companies. However, Fletcher pointed out that the Dallas FTP had abysmal publicity in three areas: not getting positive coverage, not getting any coverage, and spending money poorly on what she called "New Yorker" ads, which told nothing about the show. The contract with the Centennial provided a \$600 budget and Zerilda Ross, publicist for the WPA Exhibit Building, was responsible for Dallas promotional information. Fletcher used clever tie-ins with big name bands, such as that of Phil Harris. In addition, she convinced the manager of the General Motors Exhibit building to let the Follow the Parade band practice in its air-conditioned space early in the morning. The general manager invited them to play after the building opened to the public, and the Follow the Parade stage manager ballyhooed the show at the WPA Theatre.<sup>38</sup>

Within weeks of their arrival in Dallas the "flying squadron" identified why the Dallas Project had languished. Lax administration by Charles Meredith had led to procrastination and confusion. For example, no contracts had been drawn up regarding rehearsal of the

<sup>37</sup>Flanagan to Woodward, 15 July 1936; McGee to Bauers 15 July 1936; Fletcher to Farnsworth, 22 July 1936; Meredith to Flanagan, 20 July 1936; David Williams memorandum to Julius F. Stone, Jr., 15 July 1935; McGee to Sol Miroff, 16 July 1936; Bauers to McGee, 18 July 1936; Woodward to M. K. Taylor, 24 July 1936; O'Neil Ford to Howard Miller, 13 July 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>38</sup>Fletcher to McGee 22 July 1936; McGee to Bauers, 16 July 1936; Bauers to McGee, 15 July 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

touring Units. No action had been taken to build the necessary equipment for Follow the Parade or Macbeth. Initially, Nat Karson, the designer for Macbeth, planned to build everything in New York and ship it to Dallas. While he believed Meredith to be very good at policy making, Fred Morrow described the situation as "a tangled mess." Meredith lacked the executive skills to manage the Project and had no competent administrative help to compensate for his deficiency. Adding to those problems were attitudes of "it can't be done," or "manana" that choked both production and administrative efforts. Morrow feared administrative weakness would ruin the production of his show, Injunction Granted, for which he already had to contend with the poor acting skills of the Dallas Experimental Unit. He believed the administrative work of organizing the new statewide coordinating project designed to supplant the local projects in Dallas, Ft. Worth, and Houston, while coordinating local cooperation with the tours of Follow the Parade in July and Macbeth in August required the presence of Lois Fletcher, who traveled extensively. Fletcher's drive and her ability to handle state officials would be integral to the success of the FTP's efforts at the Centennial. Morrow was near the breaking point, but told McGee that he would give plenty of notice if he decided to resign.<sup>39</sup>

Whenever she was in town, Lois Fletcher energized the Dallas Project. She asked for and received wide cooperation from Project

<sup>39</sup>Fred Morrow to McGee, 25 July 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.



employees and Centennial officials. She acted as mediator and mentor. For example, she intervened when Bauers and Perkins argued over scenic designs and their costs. She calmed both Perkins, whom she described as "hot headed," and Bauers, who was "demanding." She even tried to persuade Meredith to exert his position of superintendence over the Project. However, Fletcher realized that the Unit needed administrative structure to help people know where they stood. She remedied that with a meeting at which she distributed a "Division of Authority" chart. Her single page diagram delineated every position in a hierarchy, descending from John McGee through Lois Fletcher to Charles Meredith with Fred Morrow beneath him. Herbert Bauers, Sol Miroff, and William Perkins shared the level below Morrow, with Curtis Somers-Peck and Larry Jordan first and second under Bauers. To clarify their duties and responsibilities, Fletcher added instructions at the bottom, noting that O'Neil Ford, who was in charge of the WPA Exhibit Building required everyone's full cooperation, as did Zerilda Ross, who was employed by the WPA to handle all its publicity for the Centennial. To reiterate their importance, Fletcher said, "Not one line of publicity is to go out from this office unless it has first been okayed by Miss Ross and Mr. Ford."<sup>40</sup>

McGee told both Morrow and Fletcher that he concurred with their assessment of the Dallas situation. He implored Fletcher to

<sup>40</sup>Fletcher to McGee, 22 July 1936, WPA, FTP: NOC-Fletcher, RG 69.



focus on the Centennial, and she agreed not to neglect Dallas in order to oversee the projects in Oklahoma and Louisiana. McGee persuaded Morrow not to resign, telling him he wanted to nominate him as State Director in Texas, or at least place him in some special assignment. McGee had discussed this tactic with Lois Fletcher who agreed. In other advice for Morrow, McGee thought he should give up Injunction Granted and substitute Men at Work. Injunction Granted had failed dismally in New York, according to McGee. In addition, McGee recommended against a production of Noah because of the excessive royalty charges and the prohibition from charging admission to defray the royalty costs.<sup>4 1</sup>

On 29 July 1936 John McGee received official authorization to make all decisions regarding employment for the Federal Theatre Project in Texas. The twenty-five percent exemption did not come through, however, and he was directed to employ at least ninety percent relief personnel. By this time Ellen Woodward had picked up the reins and was exerting her administrative skills to make Federal One responsive to Washington budget constraints. In Texas the move to coalesce the best actors from the projects in Houston, Dallas, and Ft. Worth, creating a new project and setting it up in San Antonio, resulted in cuts in personnel. Unlike dismissed actors on relief in New York and Chicago theatre centers, theatre workers in Texas did

<sup>4 1</sup>McGee to Morrow, 29 July 1936, Fletcher to McGee, 17 October 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

not protest.<sup>4 2</sup>

Signing Follow the Parade for the Centennial was a coup for both the FTP and the WPA exhibit. Created when Eda Edson took over the Vaudeville Unit in Los Angeles, Follow the Parade employed 100 vaudevillians in a fast paced musical revue that opened on 12 April 1936 to rave reviews. In Los Angeles it played to big audiences for fourteen weeks, charging admission of fifty cents. Before it toured, Eda Edson and Frederick Stover, the scene designer, visited Dallas to inspect the set-up. Meredith and Morrow met Edson and Stover at the train and took them through the WPA facilities. Edson worried about the WPA facilities, which were incomplete, and the band shell, which she thought too large. However, Stover thought he could handle either venue. Meredith encouraged Stover to return to Dallas to supervise the work before the opening of the show. Edson sized up the competition and thought she should increase the size of the show, but that their Los Angeles personnel would do very well.<sup>4 3</sup>

J. Howard Miller, FTP administrative officer, estimated expenses for the tour of Follow the Parade at \$13,563, including trucking and other expenses. The company would travel by train with round trip tickets costing about \$60 each, and each of the employees earned a per diem allowance of three dollars. Miller anticipated 100 percent return through ticket sales in Dallas. What he could not anticipate

<sup>4 2</sup>Flanagan to McGee, 29 July 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>4 3</sup>Federal One 20: 2 (November 1995): 3; Dallas Morning News, 2 July 1936, I: 12; Meredith to McGee, 7 July 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

was the enormous storm that broke the show's travelers and damaged other equipment, delaying the opening four days.<sup>44</sup>

The delay proved fortuitous; as the Exhibit Building amphitheater was completed to the satisfaction of Edson and her staff. The opening was a big hit, as audiences bought tickets that ranged in price from twenty-five to sixty-five cents and packed the theater to see the revue. John Rosenfield, theatre critic for the Dallas Morning News, wrote that with twenty-six scenes and a cast of 145, the show moved with incredible speed and was a terrific bargain at sixty-five cents. "You are singularly conscious of being entertained by a form of entertainment that really cannot die," Rosenfield continued. He praised the costumes for their ingenuity and good taste, the ramps and flats for their modernistic effects, and the lighting and sound for their effectiveness, despite the din of city noises. He complimented the Federal Theatre for their preservation of the wittiest and truest sample of American minstrelsy, "The Two Black Crows," Moran and Mack. Billy Van had replaced Mack in this old time team. John William Rogers, Dallas Times Herald critic, called it a "high powered concentration upon vaudeville," noting that it moved fast enough to keep even the youngsters' attention. The Dallas Journal, which opposed the Federal Theatre Project in principle, reviewed Follow the Parade as being "bang up entertainment . straight from the

<sup>44</sup>J. Howard Miller memorandum to Woodward, 8 July 1936; Fletcher to Farnsworth, 21 June 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69. Travelers are the hardware that move stage curtains, allowing them to open and close.

shoulder, without the usual excess baggage of build-up." Edson, dressed in a tuxedo, conducted the orchestra, which got kudos, also.<sup>4 5</sup>

Follow the Parade grossed \$1,552 in its first four performances, and staff reported that audiences were growing and that the Centennial might want to extend the run. However, the show ran only through its original schedule, ending 2 August. Total grosses were reported as \$2,409.87 by Harry Bell, who acted as agent-cashier because the Texas office had lost the forms nominating H. C. Bauers. Bell forwarded the receipts in late September, enclosing the comment that considering it was "107 in the shade all the time," that was the best that could be expected. In addition to paying customers, Follow the Parade had issued 580 passes and 42 special child tickets. If this was to be a test of the Federal Theatre Project touring its best companies, the results demonstrated that they needed significant changes just to break even.<sup>4 6</sup>

The Dallas FTP spent time preparing for the arrival of Macbeth during the Follow the Parade run. They ordered an extra 1,500 passes, increased the budget for advertising, requested that an advance man come immediately, and asked Washington for more mats and stills for publicity efforts. In addition, they revised contracts with the Centennial so that the Macbeth cast could reserve

<sup>4 5</sup>Dallas Morning News, 27 July 1936; Federal Theatre Magazine 2: 1, 25-26 both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>4 6</sup>Eddie Vaughn to H. Howard Miller, 29 July 1936; Harry W. Bell to Bob Enger, 29 September 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

several days to rehearse in the band shell. With Fletcher's encouragement and William Farnsworth's endorsement, Karson, who designed the sets and costumes, agreed to have local people build sets for the band shell. Once McGee brought him the plans, Karson flew from New York to Dallas to supervise the carpenters. The designer achieved an effective visual effect by building a frame around the band shell that suggested a tropical forest setting.<sup>47</sup>

This production of Voodoo Macbeth had emerged from the collaboration of John Houseman and Orson Welles. Houseman, headed the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project in New York City, one of twenty-two such Units nationwide. He appointed Orson Welles to stage Macbeth just before Welles's twenty-first birthday. They set Macbeth in an castle in Haiti in the Napoleonic period, and imbued it with an exotic look, sound, and mood that provided work for experienced African-American actors such as Edna Thomas, Jack Carter, Maurice Ellis, and Canada Lee. African dancers and drummers stranded in New York provided the voodoo music, while twenty witches, and sixty-five courtiers and soldiers, dressed in the brilliant costumes which Nat Karson had designed, worked in the play. Karson reportedly dressed 100 players for \$2,000. Many of the more than three hundred people in the New York Negro Unit

<sup>47</sup>Meredith to Farnsworth, 1 August 1936; Fletcher to McGee, 22 July 1936; McGee to John Houseman, 6 July 1936; Houseman to McGee, 17 July 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Dallas Times Herald, 14 August 1936, I: 17.

were cast in the Voodoo Macbeth.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, the Federal Theatre Project in New York made the arrangements for the Macbeth Unit to embark on a five and one half week tour, with the first stop to be the Centennial celebration in Dallas. Initial figures projected 142 people traveling for only seventeen days, placing the cost at \$22,841.50. J. Howard Miller, Acting Administrative Officer, estimated that the show should return \$17,000 through ticket sales. He based this estimate upon the nationwide advance publicity that both Follow the Parade and Macbeth had garnered, and he anticipated record attendance for both these shows. By the time the troupe left New York the tour had grown to 165 people and plans included an itinerary making stops in Indianapolis, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Syracuse, after their Centennial appearance.<sup>49</sup>

On 9 August the Macbeth company boarded three air-conditioned coaches on a train that carried one diner and three seventy foot

<sup>48</sup>Houseman, Run-Through, 175; Mathews, 75; Ronald Ross, "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre: 1935-1939," Journal of Negro History 59: 1 (January 1974): 41; Glenda E. Gill, "Canada Lee: Black Actor in Non-traditional Roles," Journal of Popular Culture 25 (Winter 1991): 79; J. F. McDougald, "The Federal Government and the Negro Theatre," Opportunity 14: 4 (April 1936): 135; John Houseman, The Entertainers and the Entertained: Essays on Theater, Film and Television (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 18. Some of this information emerged from a panel discussion, "Swing Mikado and Voodoo Macbeth: Spectacle and Exoticism in the Federal Theatre," at the Federal Theatre Festival, 28-31 January 1993, sponsored by the Institute on the Federal Theatre Project, George Mason University. The panel included Richard France, Ralph MacPhail, and Jerome Shannon and was moderated by Rick Davis.

<sup>49</sup>Miller memorandum to Woodward, 9 July 1936; Macbeth itinerary, WPA, FTP: Office of Isabel Stuart, Travel Supervisor, July, 1936 -June, 1937 (Stuart), RG 69.

baggage cars through to Dallas. At St. Louis six air-conditioned sleepers replaced the coaches, and at midnight on 10 August the cast and crew arrived in Dallas. The size of the Macbeth company required four advance agents who were supposed to handle everything from tickets and meals to rooms, plus getting the troupe to and from rehearsals. Chandos Sweet, John Silvera, Matt Meeker, and Harold Lane were charged with this responsibility for the Macbeth Unit, with Sweet serving as General Manager. Their arrival in Dallas was marked by chaotic lack of organization that forced McGee to intervene to straighten out the arrangements. Lack of proper funding interfered with the set up in Dallas. Abe Feder, who was technical director of Macbeth, borrowed personal funds to pay the hotel bills. Adding to that aggravation, the Texas Division of Finance refused to honor the New York Unit's authorization for payroll. Woodward had to wire authorization in order to prevent a two week delay in paying the members of the troupe.<sup>50</sup>

Macbeth opened in the band shell on 13 August to good reviews, but a very small audience. John William Rogers, critic for the Dallas Times Herald, praised the creative vitality of this Macbeth production. He remarked that Shakespeare's great talent had led to fresh and unexpected adaptations of his plays over three centuries,

<sup>50</sup>Macbeth itinerary, WPA, FTP: Stuart; Macbeth, souvenir program, Sanger Collection, in the Jerry Bywaters Collection on Art of the Southwest, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University; McGee to Farnsworth, 13 August 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; Bentley to Woodward 10 August 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas; Woodward to Drought, 13 August 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, all in RG 69.



and he predicted that this Macbeth would become an addition to that history. He praised Edna Thomas, as Lady Macbeth for her intensity, vibrant voice, and commanding figure, while Maurice Ellis, as Macbeth, brought a physical presence to the amphitheater, and Eric Burrough, as Hecate, brought a powerful vitality and rich voice. The voodoo dances, the colorful costumes, and the enthusiastic cast made the production both interesting and memorable. Rogers pointed out that while the sets and lighting were excellent, the band shell handicapped the performers because the placement of microphones led to a certain "jerkiness" to the presentation. He added that the actors had managed these difficulties with aplomb, and could be heard distinctly. He recommended that readers see the play.<sup>51</sup>

Abe Feder's lighting drew special coverage. With 142 lighting cues, Feder built three switchboards to operate the lighting. and had a crew of men to read the script, call the lighting cues, and then turn switches and plug and unplug wires to change scenes and moods. The murder of Banquo, in which the plot is hatched in fading light of sunset, and then Macbeth exits in semi-darkness, as Hecate enters in the last glimmer of the setting sun, effectively demonstrated Feder's talents. The murderer ascends the parapet in silhouette, and Hecate, in complete darkness says, "Let it come down," and Banquo and his killers appear in a beam of mustard yellow light. The ensuing

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<sup>51</sup> Macbeth Road Tour, WPA, FTP, RG 69; Dallas Times Herald, 14 August 1936, I: 17. Jack Carter, who starred in the role of Macbeth in New York, did not make the tour to Dallas.



struggle moves from light to dark and Banquo falls dead into a pool of light. The band shell lacked a curtain, but the lighting crew devised a plan to mask set changes. They turned the footlights toward the audience, temporarily blinding them, while changes were made.<sup>52</sup>

The Harlem Unit's Macbeth was a smash hit in New York. It sold out in the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, and then moved down to Broadway, where it continued to draw full houses. However, the road show was not as popular in Dallas, as in the other cities it toured. Possibly because of the heat, combined with its outdoor venue, it drew only 4,766 people during its ten day run. The Centennial split the gate receiving thirty-five percent while the FTP received sixty-five percent. Macbeth earned only \$1,023.56 for the FTP, their biggest gate was approximately \$350, which meant that they sold slightly more than 760 tickets. Only Indianapolis earned less than Dallas and that was even with a seventy-thirty split. In all the other cities on the tour, the FTP got 100 percent of the gate, but when the tour concluded, Macbeth had earned only \$14,099.79. The tour cost \$96,844. As an experiment to gauge how cost effective touring was, both Macbeth and Follow the Parade demonstrated that road shows as operated by the FTP could not break even.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Dallas Times Herald, 13 August 1936, II: 7.

<sup>53</sup>Houseman, Run-Through, 203; Macbeth Road Company Box Office Statement, WPA, FTP: NOC, RG 69. Commercial road companies had discovered this during and immediately after World War I. There is little evidence in the National Archives or local papers to account for the poor attendance of

In mid-July McGee told Meredith to draw up a new state coordinating project and that personnel "should be cut to the bone." This new project gathered the best people from Dallas, Houston, and Ft. Worth for a single Unit in San Antonio. In August Meredith resigned as State Director, and Fred Morrow succeeded him, when the new Project set up headquarters in San Antonio. Curtis Somers-Peck continued to supervise the greatly reduced Dallas Project. Beginning in September, twenty-three people, all on relief or who were NYA participants in the program, remained on the rolls in Dallas. This group put on regular performances of marionette plays, dance productions, and a few one-act plays at the WPA Exhibit Building Theatre. When Ellen Woodward visited Dallas on 9 November she saw The Gardener's Apprentice dance production. State Administrators toured the Exhibition, also. Somers-Peck reported audiences that varied between 200 and 400 for the FTP shows mounted during the waning days of the Centennial. When the Centennial closed 29 November 1936, so did the Dallas Federal Theatre Project.<sup>54</sup>

The reconstituted Texas Federal Theatre Project struggled along in San Antonio until the final ax fell 15 July 1937. While the Project

Macbeth in Dallas. It may have been its radical departure from classic presentation or it may have been unspoken segregation that kept audiences small.

<sup>54</sup> McGee to Meredith, 17 July 1936; McGee to Flanagan, 18 August 1936; Semi-Monthly Activity Reports, 15 May 1936 - 15 December 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

produced plays at a more professional level in San Antonio, Fred Morrow, Acting State Director, developed a facial tic and sick headaches that incapacitated him for days. Lois Fletcher, who had so much energy and was effective in dealing with the minutiae of production in the San Antonio, continued her peripatetic management style, leaving much of the day-to-day detail to H. C. Bauers. Now assisted by Richard Baldwin, who came from the Houston Project, Bauers criticized the way Morrow and Fletcher handled the myriad problems that trailed the FTP wherever it was. Fletcher's exasperation showed when she wrote in mid-October that "Texas must have the worst personnel in the country."<sup>5 5</sup>

The growing emphasis on box office income placed even more pressure upon the San Antonio Project to succeed, but they did not get an official agent-cashier until December 1936. Six months after his nomination, H. C. Bauers became agent-cashier for Texas. Despite the move to fresh territory, the FTP in Texas failed to appreciate its opportunity to develop a new audience. From the socially elite audiences for the Dallas Little Theatre to the "intelligentsia and cognoscenti" who patronized the San Pedro Playhouse, the Theatre Project in Dallas and Texas failed to bridge the chasm between Little Theatre audiences and the community audiences it developed in Dallas with its mobile tent theatre.<sup>5 6</sup>

<sup>5 5</sup>Fletcher to McGee, 17 October 1936; Fletcher to McGee, 30 October 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>5 6</sup> Fletcher to McGee, 30 October 1936; Semi-Monthly Activity Reports, 31

From July 1936 forward the WPA began to review exemptions for non-relief employees. All the regional, state and local directors who worked for the Federal Theatre Project, but were not certified as needy, fell into this category. In August 1936 Woodward had informed Taylor that coordinating projects in Texas could have "high or complete" non-relief labor percentages because they were counted against the national numbers. The Texas coordinating project consisted of supervisory personnel. The same exemptions were allowed until 15 September, then extended until 1 November 1936. On 23 November quotas were reduced to ten percent and exemptions for other than labor costs were reduced to twelve and one half percent. Reductions continued, and more cuts led to a further reduction of personnel.<sup>57</sup>

Protests in San Antonio took the form of letter writing and petition signing. Despite the very strong support of Maury Maverick, the mayor of San Antonio, who had clear and strong support of New Deal programs, McGee held firm in the face of Woodward's questions about the political outcome of the closing. McGee thought that if Texans could persuade her to change her mind and rescind the closing order, the FTP would be "swamped with similar demands from elsewhere." He pinned the responsibility for the closure of the Federal Theatre Project on the attitude of the Texas State WPA

December 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>57</sup>Woodward to Drought, 13 August 1936; McGee to Farnsworth, 25 February, 1936, both in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; McDonald, Federal Relief, 178;

Administration.<sup>58</sup>

The Federal Theatre Project was designed first and foremost to employ out of work professionals. Hallie Flanagan and many of the Federal Theatre directors and supervisors wanted the Project to be the vehicle to create a national decentralized theatre. They based their choices of materials and their choices of unemployed professionals upon their talents and abilities to foster the creation of a national theatre. Out of work professionals in Dallas and Texas were experienced in tent shows, minstrel shows, and old time vaudeville, but they lacked what both the New York and Los Angeles Units possessed. Dallas and Texas Units lacked energetic, vitally creative directors and supervisors passionately devoted to the notion that the people on their projects could be taught or retrained to do first class work. Nor were Dallas directors able to tailor material to the extent that Eda Edson did for her vaudevillians, or that John Houseman and Orson Welles did for the Negro Unit in Macbeth.

Despite the Mobile Unit's popularity and the quality of the Marionette Units productions, the Dallas Theatre was unable to capitalize on the Centennial and its more than six million visitors. When the Centennial closed its exhibition, the WPA Exhibits Building Amphitheatre closed, also. The twenty-three security wage Federal Theatre Project employees in Dallas lost their jobs. This small

<sup>58</sup>Henry B. Seaton to Sen. Tom Connally, 15 June 1937; McGee to Flanagan, 25 June 1937; McGee to Woodward, 30 June 1937, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

program discontinued, in part because of cuts designed to save WPA funds. The WPA and the Federal Theatre Project discovered that the operation of small professional projects was expensive and decided that to preserve other projects some had to be sacrificed. Dallas was one of the early victims of a policy that eventually closed the Theatre Project in Texas seven months later. Lack of strong local support, particularly in the form of good sponsors, combined with fiscal cuts and the absence of support from the regional director and the national director led to the abandonment of the Dallas Federal Theatre Project and sealed its demise.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The Federal Theatre Project in Dallas was part of a huge effort by the federal government to move 3.5 million people from dole relief by putting them to work. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration to employ "the maximum number of persons in the shortest time possible." In spring of 1935 more than 4.9 million people were on relief, over one half million, about eleven percent, were white collar employees. Professionals and technical workers comprised about fifteen percent of the white collar category. Almost 4,000 actors were listed as professionals who had lost their jobs and were receiving some form of relief. Yet, in Texas only twenty professional theatre people had been identified as qualified by need to be placed on relief by FERA Intake and Certification in the fall of 1935.<sup>1</sup>

Led by Harry Hopkins, the Works Progress Administration tried to create work opportunities that matched the experiences and

<sup>1</sup>Executive Order No. 7034, 6 May 1935; William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 84-86. McDonald noted that Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) reported that it employed 7,000 theatre workers in 1934-35, but added the caveat that statistics were not accurate to the nth degree. This variance was small enough, that the percentages of professional people listed on FERA Intake rolls remained consistent nationally. Charles Meredith to Hallie Flanagan, 21 October, WPA, FTP: NOC-Region III, RG 69.



talents of the unemployed. Hopkins wanted to include artists in programs developed to put people to work; as a result, the WPA created Federal Project Number One to employ writers, actors, artists, and musicians. Headed by Jacob Baker, a talented, but brusque administrator who favored cooperative ventures as one solution to the unemployment crisis, Federal One had four national directors. The directors' goals, first and foremost, were to create federal programs that extended across the nation to put jobless professional writers, musicians, artists, and theatre workers to work. In general WPA planners anticipated white collar employment would average ten percent, and arts employment would average about one percent of the total number of people employed by WPA projects. In practice Federal One never exceeded two percent of total WPA employment. Federal Theatre Project employment statisticians reported that figures prior to July 1936 were not reliable; however, they estimated average monthly employment on the Federal Theatre Project in 1936 was 8,707 people.<sup>2</sup>

Hopkins chose Hallie Flanagan, director Experimental Drama Department at Vassar College, to lead the Federal Theatre Project. He believed her non-commercial theatre background would enable Flanagan to imagine the possibilities in a nationwide program to help out of work actors. To implement the Federal Theatre Project

<sup>2</sup>Employment History, 23 June 1939, WPA, FTP: Finance Office Federal One, RG 69; McDonald, Federal Relief, 86, 172.

Flanagan relied upon her colleagues in the National Theatre Conference. The original regional set up and the early supervisory personnel emerged from the NTC. Charles Meredith, director of the Dallas Little Theatre, joined other prominent directors and academicians, who accepted positions with the Federal Theatre Project. The plan assumed that Federal Theatre Projects would find co-sponsors among the Little Theatres, community theatres, and academic institutions whose directors comprised the membership of the National Theatre Conference. The leaders of the Little Theatre movement and the burgeoning academic theatre embraced the Federal Theatre Project as a vehicle to make the American theatre a truly national one, while at the same time helping unemployed theatre people.<sup>3</sup>

The Federal Theatre Project's organizational plan to rely upon Little Theatres and community theatres as regional producing centers encountered problems from the beginning and was responsible for the poor implementation of the Federal Theatre Project in many communities, especially those in Charles Meredith's Region III. Little Theatres in Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma had enjoyed enormous growth and popularity in the Twenties, but

<sup>3</sup>Meredith accepted Flanagan's offer on 27 August 1935, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69. Among prominent directors appointed to lead regions of the FTP, who were members of the NTC, also, were Jasper Deeter (NJ-PA), Frederick McConnell (OH), Frederick Koch (VA-NC), John McGee (South), Thomas Wood Stevens (Central), E. C. Mabie (Prairie), Glenn Hughes (Northwest), and Gilmor Brown (CA). McDonald, Federal Relief, 505-506.

suffered losses when the Depression hit. Little Theatres needed cash infusions to continue producing, and, at first, they saw the Federal Theatre Project as an "angel" that would enable continued production. Meredith envisioned an enormous and healthy change for Little Theatres who received Federal Theatre funding to hire out of work professionals. He believed that Little Theatres, including the Dallas Little Theatre, were enthralled by a cult of the amateur that stifled expansion of repertoire and placed a ceiling on professional growth, that in turn led to poor box offices and deficits. Little Theatre participants held their amateur status in high regard, convinced that they were unsullied by commercialism and were freed from the constraints of unions. In addition, the Dallas Little Theatre was socially exclusive, as were many others. Little Theatre Boards rejected proposals to sponsor local Units of the Federal Theatre Project for two reasons: they believed the introduction of twenty or more unemployed theatre professionals would have a socially disruptive effect upon their amateur players; and secondly, they were in such precarious financial positions that they lacked the funds required to sponsor Federal Theatre Units.

As the FTP began to enunciate its policies, Little Theatres, community theatres, and universities in Region III found they were unable to meet the requirements of sponsorship which grew ever more complicated. One of the first blows to Little Theatre sponsorship was the elimination of private entities as recipients of

Federal Theatre funds. Next, Little Theatre actors, who prized their amateur status, failed to qualify as "professionals." Even if they could qualify because of need, if they had never been paid for a performance, they were ineligible. This eliminated talented undergraduates and graduates of drama departments, also. First, funding regulations eliminated Little Theatres as co-sponsoring entities, then personnel regulations eliminated talented amateurs from participation.<sup>4</sup>

The search for eligible professionals intensified as 1 December 1935, the WPA deadline to transfer all qualified workers on relief to WPA Projects drew near. The task was complicated, because the United States Employment Service had no category to list theatre workers. Meredith used volunteers to publicize the Federal Theatre Project and by mid-December the Dallas Federal Theatre Project reported that they had located 376 eligible theatre workers. However, the national FTP employment figures showed only eight on the Dallas FTP payroll.<sup>5</sup>

The disparity between local employment reports and national reports and the necessity to use volunteers to locate eligible professionals, when combined with the absence of a category for

<sup>4</sup>Bulletin No. 29 (4 September 1935) followed by Supplement No. 1 to Bulletin No. 1 (30 September 1935) established basic procedures for Federal Theatre operations, including the "professional requirement" and the power of national directors to make final decisions on proposed projects. McDonald, Federal Relief, 130-132.

<sup>5</sup>FTP Employment Report, 31 December 1935, WPA, FTP, RG 69.

theatre workers in the USES forms, demonstrated the confusing lack of coordination between the agencies charged with finding employment for people on relief. The WPA and the FTP were trying to accomplish the same goal, employing people on relief rolls, but their constituencies were vastly different. The ninety percent of WPA workers, who were unskilled men and women, labored in large scale, quickly drawn up construction or sewing and canning projects. On the other hand, the FTP required professionals experienced in performance for its generally small scale projects. To put this in perspective, while the Dallas Federal Theatre Project reported 376 eligible workers in all of Texas, the Dallas and Ft. Worth WPA Districts, alone, had registered 52,623 eligible workers for their projects.<sup>6</sup>

The skill level of workers in Federal One and the generally small scale of the projects led to other differences between the Professional Projects and other WPA employment projects. Federal One Projects required more professional supervisory personnel. Fairly quickly, Jacob Baker realized that Federal One would need more than the ten percent exemption for non-relief personnel that the President had granted the WPA. In November 1935 Hopkins authorized Baker to grant exemptions of up to twenty-five percent non-relief personnel to the Federal Theatre Project and the other Federal One Projects. The small and unique nature of Federal Theatre Project Units meant

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<sup>6</sup>Dallas Times Herald, 24 November 1935, V: 5.

they could not capitalize on economies of scale. The higher skill level, more supervisory personnel, and increased exemptions led to greater costs per project.<sup>7</sup>

The Federal Theatre in Dallas grew very slowly, despite their claim to 376 theatre workers in December 1935, at the end of February 1936, Dallas had only fifty-four theatre workers, and the entire state employed only 129 people in Theatre Projects. This figure stood well below the claims from December, and below the 220 quota that had been approved for Theatre Projects in Texas. However, across the country Theatre Projects were growing quickly and incurring greater costs than budgets provided. To stem further growth and prevent more cost overruns, Harry Hopkins issued a "stop order" on 5 March 1936. The Dallas FTP was stunned, because the "stop order" would prevent hiring anyone else.<sup>8</sup>

After repeated pleas from officials in Texas, Jacob Baker agreed to set the Texas quota at 168 persons. The Dallas Project grew to seventy by the end of March 1936, and reported eighty-six workers in mid-May. Texas reached 167 employees by 15 May 1936, one month later Texas Theatre Project employees numbered 162, and at the end of July 1936 Texas reported 154 employees. Although a few

<sup>7</sup>Executive Order No. 7046, 20 May 1935; Administrative Order No. 35, 26 November 1935; McDonald, Federal Relief, 173-174. McDonald pointed out that the twenty-five percent non-relief exemption did not replace the security wage scale.

<sup>8</sup>Reports on Sponsored Project Units, 29 February and 31 March 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; McDonald, Federal Relief. 250-251.

theatrical workers left the Dallas Project during the Centennial Exposition, there was no large scale exodus for private employment.

The Texas quota was reduced at the end of July to 135, and, at this point, Dallas was cut to sixteen Federal Theatre workers, one supervisor and fifteen performers. The 15 August Fiscal Report showed only ninety-three persons on the Texas Theatre Project. In November 1936 the Texas quota was further reduced to seventy-five, and this cut signaled the end for the Dallas Theatre Project, which closed officially 30 November 1936.<sup>9</sup>

Compared to Theatre Projects in large urban areas with sizable commercial theatre operations, such as New York City, which employed 5,385, or Illinois with 1,086, or California with 2,080, the Dallas and Texas Projects appeared to be small. Still Dallas compared favorably to other Projects further from commercial theatre centers. For example, John McGee, formerly Regional Director who was serving as field advisor for the Southern Region, reported in the

<sup>9</sup>FTP Employment Reports, 1935-1936; Reports on Sponsored Project Units, 29 February and 31 March 1936; Semi-Monthly Activity Reports, 15 May to 31 December 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69. Employment figures varied according to different reports within the FTP archives. FTP Employment Reports by Fiscal Year divided the employees according to payroll status, unit designation, and gender, but these figures did not correspond to the Semi-Monthly Activity Reports filed by Dallas Office Unit, and after 15 September 1936 the San Antonio Unit. The Semi-Monthly Reports included National Youth Administration apprentices. Unfortunately, the Semi-Monthly Reports sometimes counted the NYA apprentices as whole people, and at other times report them as one-third of a person, which was how they were counted for pay purposes. This resulted in reports that showed seventy employees in the Fiscal Report, and at the same time showed eighty-six on the Semi-Monthly Activity Report. Approximately eighty-six people worked in the Dallas Federal Theatre Unit in May 1936.



spring of 1936 that the Alabama FTP employed eighty-four relievers, Georgia entirely lacked a Theatre Project, New Orleans had fifty-three theatrical workers, and Oklahoma listed only sixty-two theatre employees on their FTP rolls. Yet, at the end of 1936, Dallas closed while the other projects continued. In fact, Flanagan and McGee arranged for the Alabama Theatre Project to resettle in Atlanta as a loan company, forming the basis for the initial Georgia Theatre Project in January 1937.<sup>10</sup>

The size of the Dallas Theatre Project, alone, was not the cause of its demise. Its size, however, was determined by factors that did contribute to its closure. The very slow implementation by the Dallas Federal Theatre Project of the President's goal of swift and massive employment contributed to its small size. Charles Meredith's leadership of the Southwest Region of the Federal Theatre Project led to the failure of the Dallas Federal Theatre Project. Meredith did not have the time, nor the administrative ability, nor the focus to initiate and sustain a program as chaotic as the Federal Theatre Project in its first year. Meredith was a creative and ingenious director, who held three other jobs when he accepted the Regional Director's position. Within a month of his decision to head the Southwest Region of the FTP, Meredith had second thoughts because of his prior obligations as

<sup>10</sup> John McGee, Summary Report of Federal Theatre Projects in the Southern Region, Southern Region #3, WPA. FTP, RG 69; Hallie Flanagan, Arena (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 435; Douglas L. Smith, The New Deal in the Urban South (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 220-221.

Director of the Little Theatre, as a drama teacher at Southern Methodist University, and as founder and director of the new Southwest School of the Theatre, a full-time, formal school that drew students from all of the surrounding states. Throughout his period as Regional and Texas State Director of the FTP, Meredith concentrated most of his time on directing and teaching, while he left the Dallas FTP to subordinates who lacked the authority and, in many cases, the ability to act in his stead.

Meredith's biggest challenge to the speedy initiation and successful implementation of the Dallas Federal Theatre Project was the administration of the FTP as an employment program for theatre professionals on relief. At the state level Meredith faced an implacable opponent in WPA Texas State Administrator, H. P. Drought, and National Director Flanagan downplayed the administrative obstacles presented by procedural requirements at the federal level. Meredith had little stomach for the constant skirmishing necessary to push the quotas, the financing, and the project approvals through the state headquarters, and on to Washington for final approval. Drought dragged his feet at every turn, delaying the office staff for the Dallas FTP, denying approval for the Regional Director designation for Meredith, questioning the artistic integrity and value of the Federal Theatre Project in Texas, and simply refusing to act upon specific policies, such as the appointment of an agent cashier, as set out by WPA and Federal One

Administrators. Toward the end of Meredith's tenure as State Director of the FTP, observers believed his lax administrative skills contributed to procrastination throughout the Dallas Theatre Project. Losing the opportunity to produce Shingandi for the Centennial Exposition exemplified missed deadlines that led to missed opportunities. These same observers believed that Meredith's administration suffered because of inadequate administrative support, and the attitude that "it can't be done." By July 1936, Meredith had simply lost all idea of accomplishing anything more with the Dallas Federal Theatre Project than to act as genial host and guide when directors and staff from the touring units, Follow the Parade and Macbeth, visited to survey the Centennial and draw up plans for their performances.

Meredith's focus was drawn to exploration of regional themes and materials, and encouragement of experimental techniques and productions. Yet, he did not exert his creative abilities to direct or teach unemployed theatre workers, and he failed to find or use materials that would enhance their skills. While Meredith was an eloquent advocate for unemployed professional theatre workers, at large, when confronted by the reality that they were mostly tent show performers and old time vaudevillians, he delegated to others the task of retraining and rehearsal. His opinion of their performances and the audiences they drew demonstrated Meredith's

disdain for both<sup>1 1</sup>.

Meredith delegated to cohorts from the Dallas Little Theatre the tasks of directing the Experimental Unit. Kalita Humphreys, Joe Burger, and Ray Ridle, actors at the Dallas Little Theatre, and Alline del Valle, Professor Mary McCord's recommendation, comprised the directors at the Fretz Park FTP. Evidence showed that while all four directors spent time working with Federal Theatre players, Humphreys, Burger, and Ridle continued their Little Theatre careers, and made their primary focus the development and production of Ross Lawther's play, The Wall. Meredith provided a great opportunity for the three young actors at the Dallas Little Theatre, but the Dallas FTP never produced The Wall, and the Unit failed to thrive.<sup>1 2</sup>

Correspondence and reports from the Dallas Federal Theatre Project emphasized how much they responded to Hallie Flanagan's encouragement to experiment with new forms and techniques and to exploit regional resources for dramatic material. Before they had performers on their rolls, the Dallas Unit began to research and write about regional subjects, such as historical and biographical dramas.

<sup>1 1</sup> Meredith to Flanagan, 24 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

<sup>1 2</sup> Dallas Little Theatre, vol. 9-10, 1935-1937, in Jerry Bywaters Collection on Art of the Southwest, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University; "Petition of the Little Theatre of Dallas to the Rockefeller Foundation," (1940), 23, in the Jerry Bywaters Collection on Art of the Southwest, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University; Robert Crawford Eason, Jr., "The Dallas Little Theatre: The Maple Avenue Days, 1927-1943" (Master's thesis, Trinity University, 1972), 102, 172.

With reorganization and the opening of a Houston Unit, two capable members of the Office Unit left for San Antonio and Houston. Unfortunately, their replacements were not as able, and the Project suffered. When Production Units gained approval, primary focus was given to the Experimental Unit, which was the largest with forty-eight theatre workers, twenty-five of whom were performers. In addition, the Dance Unit of fifteen rehearsed with The Wall, because balletic and expressionistic movement was part of its experimental presentation. Rehearsals for The Wall began on 9 March 1936 and continued through the end of June, when its opening was postponed until the fall. Starting 15 April the Dance Troupe rehearsed various dance routines, in addition to their rehearsals with The Wall, and had their first public performance on 1 May on the mobile stage.<sup>13</sup>

The mobile stage offered the Dallas FTP a unique opportunity to present itself to new audiences in park settings that had never had live theatre. Owned by a tent show operator, B. M. Goff, who lent the stage to the Dallas FTP, the mobile stage carried everything necessary to produce a play or put on a variety show, including the seating. The Touring Unit consisted of fifteen people, ten of whom were performers. They started rehearsing The Trial of Ellen Blake, a three act comedy written by Goff, on 16 March and its first performance was 16 April. On 24 April the Touring Unit began

<sup>13</sup>Semi-Monthly Activity Reports, 15 May to 31 December 1936, all in WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69.

rehearsal on another comedy by Goff, Dad's Girl, which opened on 8 May. B. M. Goff and members of the Touring Unit and the Dance Unit played variety bookings at other venues, such as City Hall. Rehearsal for a third play, Triple Trouble, began 25 May and opened 6 July 1936. The mobile stage alternated Goff's comedies with variety acts and musical acts from the Federal Music Project. The Dallas Marionette Unit played the mobile stage, also.

The Marionette Unit, directed by Benedetta Collie, was made up of seven workers, three of whom were performers. This Unit cooperated with the Recreation Department of Dallas, touring Dallas Recreational Centers, performing, teaching children how to build marionettes, and encouraging them to write their own puppet plays. The Marionette Unit held its first rehearsal of Punch and Judy on 3 February 1936 and had its first performance on 5 February. On 16 March the Marionette Unit began rehearsal for Hansel and Gretel and gave its first performance on 30 March. Benedetta Collie created three more marionette plays, Wild West, Four Seasons, and Minstrel Show, that began rehearsal the last week of May and appeared continuously once the WPA Exhibit Building Theatre opened, until the closure, 30 November 1936.

When The Wall was postponed, the directors of the Experimental Unit decided to rehearse several one act plays by Texas authors, Louise Harper and Elizabeth Travis. Rehearsals began 24 June and the plays, done together, opened 7 July. In addition, two dance

presentations, Cowboy Whoopee and Danse Trepak, began rehearsals the last week of June. The primacy given to The Wall contrasted sharply with the poor opinions Meredith and John McGee held of the very popular mobile stage plays and variety acts. This contrast demonstrated the dichotomy between an employment program for professional actors and the Federal Theatre Project's indistinct standards of professionalism.

The Federal Theatre in Dallas employed professionals who had performed in some previous venue and had been certified as qualified by need. Mostly they were old vaudevillians, tent show actors, and people such as Curtis Somers-Peck who had been in advertising, and Benedetta Collie, who had danced in her youth with one of the Russian ballet companies. In addition, the Dallas Federal Theatre employed fifteen National Youth Administration as apprentice dancers, and several more in the Marionette troupe. Dallas FTP theatre workers attended rehearsals, filled out time sheets, performed, and needed jobs, but they failed to find jobs in private employment during the Centennial Exposition. After the quota reduction at the end of July 1936, John McGee told Hallie Flanagan, that "all the dead wood" had been eliminated, and that no more than sixty-five or seventy people would form the new Project in San Antonio. Confirming that Meredith's slow initiation and poor implementation led to its eventual closure, McGee wrote, "With the



miserable beginning, very little could be expected of it."<sup>14</sup>

Federal leadership and the policies they espoused contributed to the closure of the Dallas Federal Theatre Project, also. From its inception, the Dallas Federal Theatre Project was counseled to be patient while federal attention focused on the set up and funding of other larger projects. Partly because of its geographic distance from metropolitan theatre centers, such as New York City and Chicago, and from federal headquarters in Washington, Texas suffered neglect which its own theatre people could not counterbalance. Evidence showed that the Dallas FTP responded to each of Director Flanagan's suggestions, sometimes to their detriment. Flanagan fulfilled Hopkins's hope that she would find the opportunities in the government sponsored program. She was imaginative and energetic and unfazed by the enormous procedural burden the government program placed on its regional, state, and local directors. She frequently ignored procedural strictures, overstepping established channels of communication and end-running fiscal restrictions to implement projects she favored. Her subordinates emulated her disregard for procedure, or used regulations they understood to bypass the glacial speed of some approval processes. Unfortunately for Dallas, H. P. Drought, State WPA Director, guarded his authority with rigor and questioned every procedural lapse on Meredith's and the

<sup>14</sup>John McGee to Hallie Flanagan, 18 August 1936, WPA, FTP: NOC-Touring and Subscription Plan; McGee to Charley Tidd Cole, 19 January 1936, WPA, FTP, Texas, both in RG 69.

entire project's part.

John McGee's assessment of Southern Projects, including Dallas, combined with her own survey of Texas activity, led Flanagan to assign a "flying squadron" to improve the Dallas organization in June 1936. Led by Lois Fletcher, one of McGee's field agents, the "flying squadron" consisted of a director, technical director, stage and set designer, and an accountant. This group was clear about its goals. They saw themselves as special talents who could instigate change for the better. In addition, the "flying squadron" differed from local FTP directors because they worked as McGee's agents, which freed them from the authority of the onerous Drought.

While the "flying squadron" acted to improve the Dallas FTP, its primary focus was the smooth implementation of the national tours of the Los Angeles Vaudeville Unit, Follow the Parade, and the Harlem Unit, Macbeth, to the Centennial Exposition. Most Dallas Federal Theatre personnel dropped everything to facilitate the tours' appearances. While in Dallas, McGee's agents worked on other projects across the South, designing stage settings for the New Orleans Project, for example. Fred Morrow, the director, cast and began to rehearse Injunction Granted on 15 July, ignoring McGee's advice against it. The introduction of the "flying squadron" indicated the change in focus for the Federal Theatre Project.

The "flying squadron" offered only a temporary solution to Dallas's Theatre Project problems. The loyalty of the "flying

squadron" was to John McGee and the development of the Federal Theatre as an institution. During its first year, Flanagan had encouraged Federal Theatre activity in venues stretching from children's theatre to vaudeville. Her pursuit of every kind of entertainment meant that her message was unfocused. For Dallas, their attempt to follow Flanagan's wide-ranging directives led to the dilution of their efforts. While in succeeding years, Flanagan tightened her focus, winnowing personnel, more closely monitoring play choices, and setting the goal of audience development, for Dallas this more focused vision arrived too late. The Dallas Federal Theatre Project suffered because no one passionately advocated and fought for its continued operation.

Charles Meredith resigned as head of the Dallas Theatre Project 17 August 1936. Just as he had joined other leaders from the National Theatre Conference to launch the fledgling Federal Theatre Project, he joined them in resignation. Many were frustrated by the delays caused by the intricate and frequently changing procedures for hiring, production, and, as Meredith called them, "other inscrutables." Some found the challenges of retraining and rehabilitation of unemployed actors a nearly impossible task. The battles between state and federal administrators for precedence over personnel, policy, and funding sapped the strength of Meredith and others. The unsure funding that rescinded, then restored funds, and stopped all hiring and then relented, and the promises of funding

that never appeared appalled the directors. Ellen Woodward's appointment to head Federal One in July 1936 solved many of the problems causing friction between federal and state administrators, but it came too late for Dallas. The Dallas Theatre Project exemplified the difficulty of operating a program in which lines of authority were never completely clear.<sup>15</sup>

In areas where only a small number of eligible workers could be located, Federal Theatre Projects grew dependent upon the twenty-five percent exemption. When those exemptions were reduced, Projects such as New Orleans devised clever methods to alternate counting its non-security personnel, while the Dallas Project shrank to twenty-three security personnel. The twenty-three people of the Dallas Theatre Project put on shows in the WPA Exhibits Building Theatre until the November 1936 cuts arrived and Dallas closed. Unlike other Projects, Dallas never found an "angel" to persuade administrators to keep Dallas open.<sup>16</sup>

The Federal Theatre Project represented an example of concern by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and WPA Administrator Harry Hopkins for theatre professionals. But their concern flew in

<sup>15</sup>Jasper Deeter (NJ-PA), Frederick McConnell (OH), Frederick Koch (VA-NC), Thomas Wood Stevens (Central), E. C. Mabie (Prairie), and Gilmor Brown (CA) resigned during the first year. Jane DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 87.

<sup>16</sup>"Security" personnel were certified as in need, while "non-security" personnel worked under the exemptions granted the FTP to hire as many as twenty-five percent of personnel who did not have to qualify as in need.

the face of the widespread belief that the arts were an avocation. Many people, some of them writers for Dallas newspapers linked the arts and theatre, in particular, with luxury and questioned whether it should be a public responsibility to underwrite any citizen's avocation.

Texas state administrators favored Theatre Projects that cooperated with recreation organizations and were cool to the development of "production activities on a professional level." Even after Federal One Administrator Jacob Baker bluntly directed H. P. Drought to enact federal policy to appoint an agent cashier, a necessity for professional productions that would collect admissions, he delayed. Not until Ellen Woodward had been Federal One Administrator for five months was an agent cashier appointed for Texas. The appointment applied to the new San Antonio Theatre Project in late November 1936. While Drought's opposition to artistic endeavors quashed any Federal Artists Program for the state of Texas, a vigorous Federal Music Project operated throughout the state until the entire WPA ended in 1943. The Federal Writers' Project produced a Texas Guide, to which the Dallas Unit contributed. The Dallas Writers' Project wrote a Dallas Guide, but because of constantly changing editorial guidelines, a total reorganization of the Federal Writers' Project in 1939, and the death of its director in 1942, it was not published until 1992. The extent of Drought's opposition to artistic endeavors was demonstrated in a letter he sent

Lyons and Meredith, with copies to Frank Bentley, Jacob Baker, and a host of other WPA administrators. He declined to provide funds for travel expenses to allow musicians and actors to perform at the WPA Exhibits Building at the Centennial. He believed this was a diversion of funds that did not meet his test of putting people to work. In addition, he admitted that even spending funds for the WPA Building itself was a stretch of WPA purposes, because it did not fit in the customary statistical accounts. He added that he had other reasons to oppose WPA troupes from visiting the Centennial, but did not feel he needed to state them. One of the reason that the Federal Theatre Project closed Dallas and, eventually, Texas was Administrator H. P. Drought.<sup>17</sup>

The Federal Music Project in Texas provided a contrast to the Federal Theatre Project. Mrs. John Lyons of Ft. Worth headed the Project and demonstrated model organizational skills. The evidence in the National Archives showed elegant scrapbooks with newspaper clippings carefully mounted that told the story of Federal Musicians from cooperation with the Dallas Federal Theatre Project to the "tipica orchestras" that performed regularly from South Texas. Lyons knew how to exploit musical organizations and publications to benefit her Project, she had a regular column in the Southwestern

<sup>17</sup>McGee to Flanagan, 22 April 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas, RG 69; Maxine Holmes and Gerald D. Saxon, eds., *The WPA Dallas Guide and History* (Dallas: Dallas Public Library, 1992), x; H. P. Drought to Mrs. J. F. Lyons, 3 June 1936, WPA, FTP: Texas Centennial Plans, RG 69.

Musician, a journal covering all of Texas and the surrounding states. She overcame H. P. Drought's refusal to pay for travel expenses for musicians, and found sponsoring organizations such as Texas State College for Women, who served as state sponsor for the Federal Music Program in 1940.<sup>18</sup>

Just before the Dallas Federal Theatre Project closed, Ellen Woodward toured the WPA Exhibits Building at the Centennial. Curtis Somers-Peck, Dallas Project supervisor, was introduced to her, and on the strength of that he wrote Woodward a letter detailing the quality of Dallas productions as excellent, the size of their audiences as large, and the operation as efficient. Woodward asked her information director, Charley Tidd Cole, to follow up on Somers-Peck's report and John McGee responded for Hallie Flanagan. Describing Somers-Peck as an "imaginative writer" who was incompetent to run a Theatre Project, McGee said the Dallas Theatre Project's work was of a "strictly recreational nature," and that it had "very little chance of developing into a group with the standards set by the Federal Theatre." In the final analysis, the Federal Theatre Project had decided that if those who were eligible by experience and by need did not meet professional standards, they could not work for the FTP. The crux of the matter for Dallas, though, was that the standards were never clearly enunciated and their direction was

<sup>18</sup>Monthly Narrative Reports, 1939-1940, WPA, Federal Music Project: Texas, RG 69.



poor.

The Federal Theatre Project had very little long term influence upon theatre in Dallas. The Dallas FTP cooperated with the Dallas Parks and Recreation Department to institute a creative and entertaining Marionette Project. This cooperation extended to the scheduling of the Federal Theatre Mobile Unit at sites where thousands of people gathered to see live theatre for the first time. Several of the supervisory personnel gained valuable experience as directors and actors, but they returned to the Little Theatre soon after the Dallas Project closed. Within two years the Dallas Little Theatre was forced to declare bankruptcy, Charles Meredith left for the Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, South Carolina, and the Little Theatre struggled along until World War II broke out.

For Dallas 1936 was the year of the Centennial Exposition, and the operation of the Dallas Federal Theatre Project was only a small part of the entertainment bonanza that the Centennial generated. The Federal Theatre Project presented two of its superlative productions, Follow the Parade and Voodoo Macbeth, at the Centennial Exposition. Follow the Parade demonstrated how first rate direction and shaping material to artists' needs could produce terrific entertainment and provide jobs at the same time. Macbeth, also one of the Federal Theatre Project's premier productions, presented audiences a new and wholly entertaining Shakespeare, while employing out of work African-American actors. Participants in both of these shows went

on to careers in commercial theatre and the movies. The success of these two productions did not, however, contribute to the Federal Theatre Project in Dallas. Other than the incidental contact that players had with one another, evidence did not show that the two tours affected any careers of Dallas Federal Theatre players.

The aura of the Centennial must be taken into account during the examination of the Dallas Federal Theatre Project, because so few Dallas Federal Theatre workers found employment with the Centennial shows. Possibly, the Dallas Federal Theatre workers fell into the forty percent of unemployed professionals which commercial theatre operators said were unemployable. Possibly there was no need for the Dallas Theatre Project, for certainly thousands found work at the Centennial. Dallas County reported a 400 percent increase in employment. Yet unmet need continued in Dallas and Texas well past the Centennial and the cancellation of the Federal Theatre Project in Dallas.

The Dallas Federal Theatre Project was created to employ out of work professional theatre workers. Volunteers located almost 400 theatre workers, yet no more than 168 ever found employment with the Theatre Projects in Dallas and Texas. The potential for a larger Theatre Project was hampered by Federal Theatre Project leadership at every level. The state administrator of the WPA contributed to its short life span. Procedures appropriate for large jobs employing unskilled labor did not translate well to programs for professional in

small projects. Too many goals combined with unclear authority to implement them led to a dilution of the Dallas Federal Theatre Projects efforts. Most of all the Dallas Federal Theatre Project failed because it lacked the single-minded loyalty and determined leadership of those who could have achieved a full program of production.

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