Jobs for Workers on Relief in Milwaukee County, 1930-1994

by

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IV. WPA Projects in Milwaukee

In 1935 the President and the Congress established a new set of work and relief programs, providing limited support to local governments for unemployable populations while assuming federal responsibility for large-scale employment programs for workers on relief. For the large population of "employable" workers on relief, the Works Progress Administration, created in May 1935, was expected to operate a program of "small useful projects" and to coordinate federal works programs. Nationally, over an eight year period the Works Progress Administration, later renamed the Work Projects Administration, provided employment for a total of 8.5 million individuals. It is estimated that nearly one-quarter of all families in the United States were dependent on WPA wages at some time for their support. In retrospect, the WPA can be seen as part of a three-pronged attack on the problems of unemployment and local relief needs. First, federal aid was provided under the Social Security Act of 1935 for persons deemed "unemployable" -- the needy aged, mothers with dependent children, and blind persons. Secondly, the Public Works Administration (PWA) was expected to improve the economy through support for large-scale federal, state and local public works projects. Finally, the WPA was designed to provide immediate work for able-bodied persons on the local relief rolls.

Because of its focus on providing work for families and individuals supported by municipal and county relief agencies, WPA regulations required that 90 percent of project workers, and later 95 percent, be on public relief or certified for public relief. In contrast to the FERA programs which had provided grants to state governments who then allocated monies for direct relief and work projects, the administration of the WPA projects was tightly controlled by the federal government. Local project sponsors submitted proposals to the federal agency detailing the scope and plans for the work, locations, and budget estimates of labor, material and equipment. These plans were reviewed by the WPA district office, state office, regional office and Washington office, with final approval granted by the President. The federal administration reviewed project designs and budgets, selected and scheduled local works projects, and established employment quotas within each state. District WPA offices located in larger cities not only reviewed and approved certifications of eligible workers, but also assigned workers to projects and managed project operations.

Criteria for WPA projects:
1. sponsor legally authorized to carry out the work,
2. has a general public usefulness,
3. not result in displacement of regular employees or prevent re-employment of previously employed workers,
4. can be executed by available supply of eligible workers,
5. costs of materials not excessive,
6. can be completed by specified date,
7. work is on public property.

"My business is to try to find jobs for the unemployed -- the kind of jobs that will jerk good citizens back from the brink of despair, sharpen their skill, boost their spirits and set them on the road back to self-reliance again."

--Harry L. Hopkins, Director, Works Progress Administration
"120 workers over 65 years of age were ousted from their [WPA] project jobs and shown the way to the old age pension office at the courthouse. Another 258, mothers of small children, were told that their place was at home and that if they needed help they could get aid for their dependent children under the social security act."  

-- Milwaukee Journal  
March 14, 1937

In Milwaukee County the Department of Outdoor Relief certified employable relief workers for referral to WPA employment. One employable member, usually the male parent, was identified for each family case. County relief "visitors" continued to determine the family's "budgetary deficiency" and beginning December 1935 county relief funds were provided to families of WPA workers whose pay did not meet the minimum required. In 1936 the county reported that about 19,000 relief cases had a worker placed on the WPA, but that about 3,200 of these families required supplementary county relief payments. In addition, about 700 workers employed in private industry required supplementary aid, and the county was providing full support to about 1,500 families not able to work because of a permanent physical or mental incapacity, 1,000 cases with workers too old to be assigned to WPA and not eligible or not yet receiving an Old Age Pension, and 650 mothers with very young children either ineligible for Mother's Aid or in the process of being accepted.

The wage policy for WPA workers changed several times. Initially, WPA workers were paid prevailing wage rates but employed fewer hours so that their wages would be "larger than the amount now received as a relief dole, but at the same time not so large as to encourage the rejection of opportunities for private employment." The wage schedule for Milwaukee was $0.70 per hour for unskilled workers, e.g., park laborers ($60 a month for 86 hours); $0.875 per hour for intermediate workers, e.g., roofers ($70 a month for 80 hours); $1.125 per hour for skilled workers, e.g., carpenters ($90 a month for 80 hours); and $90-126 a month for foremen.

In July 1939 hourly wages were reduced by about 40 percent, to "security wage rates" of $0.44 for common laborer, $0.53 for semi-skilled labor, and $0.69 for skilled labor while the time these workers were expected to labor was increased to 130 hours per month. The Milwaukee Journal reported, "A storm broke as a result of the wage and hour changes. Centering in Milwaukee county, a strike paralyzed a number of WPA projects throughout the state. Building trades union members protested, claiming that the increase in the number of working hours without an increase in pay upset prevailing craft wage rate scales. . . . The strike broke after lasting nine days, when WPA officials warned workers that they would be discharged for being absent voluntarily from their projects for three days."
A. 12,000 WPA Jobs Sponsored by the City of Milwaukee in 1936

As with previous work programs, the City of Milwaukee immediately planned construction projects throughout the city's twenty-seven wards. The first city projects were approved in September 1935 and within four months, the city had over 12,000 workers employed on projects. In the first sixteen months of WPA, from September 1935 through December 1936, the City of Milwaukee operated 90 different projects, including 52 construction projects and 38 "white collar" projects.

Analysis of WPA projects in operation in 1936 shows the scope of work initiated throughout the city. That year the city created jobs for 8,192 WPA workers in construction projects including street construction and repair, landscaping, repair and construction of facilities in the city's parks, work on the Lincoln Creek Parkway, improvements of school buildings and facilities, construction of sewer and water mains, construction and improvements of city playgrounds, work to reduce flooding at Lincoln Park on the Milwaukee River, installation of the fire and police alarm system, modernizing street lighting and traffic signals, construction and improvements of bridges and public buildings, painting and remodeling the Milwaukee Vocational Schools, and alterations to two fire houses.

In addition to outdoor work, the city created jobs for men and some women not easily placed in construction work and not experienced in clerical tasks. The Public Museum sponsored the work of men and women who built exhibits and classified specimens and collections. The health department employed workers to assist in citywide immunization of children for diphtheria, smallpox and scarlet fever and to sew needed medical materials. The school board used workers to offer recreational and adult education activities, and the park board used workers to design and sew costumes for summer operas. The city created jobs for 663 "white collar" workers, modernizing city property assessment, tax, legal, engineering and school board records, surveying all privately owned properties for tax assessment purposes, conducting a fire prevention survey of all buildings in the city, and cleaning and indexing library materials.
WPA Construction Projects: City of Milwaukee, 1936
8,192 Workers at WPA Cost of $26,485,876

Street Construction - 2,520 Workers
Resetting stone curb, repairing macadam gutters; repairing and constructing curbs and gutters; raising and repairing walks and pavements; reconstructing radius corners; grading and surfacing unimproved streets; constructing shoulders, ditches and footpaths; office and engineering work. (1,256 workers)

Oiling and repairing macadam streets in the city. (836 workers)

Operating the municipal stone quarry and Lincoln Park crusher; producing crushed stone, stone curb, rubble stone and cut stone for other WPA projects in the city. (275 workers)

Repairing pavements, including wood-block, brick, asphalt, granite block, sandstone block, macadam and concrete; investigating street appurtenances. (153 workers)

City Engineers - 1,427 Workers
Ditching, grading and landscaping at the Lincoln Creek Parkway, including deepening and widening the creek, digging a new channel, extending sewerage and water systems, building roads and two small bridges for a parkway drive. (957 workers)

Blasting and excavating rock ledge in Milwaukee River bed at Lincoln Park to reduce flooding, including construction of temporary service bridge, 1,950 ft. rock and earth fill dike, retaining wall. (470 workers)

Park Board - 1,386 Workers
General improvement and landscaping of parks, squares, boulevard center plots and triangles, including grading, shaping, planting, seeding, sodding, installing sprinkling systems; drainage, walks, park driveways, tennis courts, baseball diamonds, rustic work, rip-rapping of river shorelines, construction of waterfalls and dams, cultivating of shrubs, trees, evergreens, and plants. (1,361 workers)

Repairing and painting of park board buildings, incl. band shells, bathhouses, pavilions, bridges, residences, service buildings and playground buildings in the following parks: Washington, Smith, Gordon, Riverside, Lake, Lincoln, Lindberg, Kern, Jackson, Humboldt, Mitchell and the Municipal Nursery. (25 workers)

School Board - 901 Workers
Painting interiors and exteriors of school buildings, refinishing school room and laboratory furniture, together with carpenter and other work; repainting fences, installing new fences; grading, surfacing and resurfacing school playgrounds; constructing additions to present school playgrounds; landscaping including planting of trees and shrubs and seeding and sodding; repairing and installing drainage in athletic tracks and fields; construction masonry walls. (592 workers)

Painting and repairing social center buildings, fences, recreation apparatus, bleachers, athletic equipment, and reconditioning playgrounds. (309 workers)

Sewer Department - 616 Workers
Deepening, widening, relocating, revetting Menomonee River from N. 27th St. to N. 60th St. (182 workers)

Installing storm and sanitary sewers, manholes and catch basins in Johnson Woods District. (170 workers)

Ventilating, repairing, reconditioning and bringing to grade manholes and catch basins. (127 workers)

Laying water connections for boulevard parkways; laying lead pipe water service and necessary valve and fittings from street water mains to points within center plots to connect sprinkling systems. (60 workers)
Sewer Department (cont.)

Rehabilitating the sewerage system to include necessary repairs and extensions of existing storm and sanitary sewers, manholes and catch basins. (40 workers)

Constructing new catch basins and manholes and repairing existing catch basins and manholes, resetting stone curbs, repairing macadam gutters; repairing and constructing curb and gutters; raising and repairing walks and pavements; reconstructing radius corners; grading and surfacing unimproved streets. (37 workers)

Playground Division - 493 Workers

Grading roadway and banks, filling Blue Hole dump, constructing macadam roadway, stone rip-rap wall, bridle paths; landscaping banks, planting trees, shrubs; seeding banks; laying shallow water system; laying sewer and drain tile; building catch basins; constructing toilet-shelter house, cleaning lagoon for swimming facilities. (200 workers)

Improving new playgrounds and play fields, reconditioning physical equipment of old playgrounds; grading, laying drain tile, constructing shallow water sprinkling systems, erecting fences, seeding, sodding, planting trees and shrubbery; building frame service buildings, concrete wading pools, clay and hard surface tennis courts; painting and repairing of fences, rebuilding catch basins, and sewers. (126 workers)

Constructing a brick and concrete field house containing toilet, assembly, checking, and dressing rooms; erecting playground apparatus, fencing around the outdoor theater, at the Burbank Playground. (89 workers)

Constructing a brick and concrete field house with toilet, checking assembly, shower and boiler rooms; a pergola screening wading pool from street for the Mt. Vernon Playground. (78 workers)

Electrical Services - 420 Workers

Installing underground conduit, manholes, and cables for the Fire and Police Alarm Division. (206 workers)

Constructing equipment storage building, transformer vaults, manholes, safety island, underground conduits, underground cables; resetting lighting units, resplicing and relocating underground cables, transformers and conduits as part of street lighting and traffic control systems being installed or altered. (174 workers)

Rehabilitating, repairing, refinishing, repainting, rebuilding, and modernizing street lighting units, traffic signals, playground lighting, traffic and street signs. (40 workers)

Bridges and Public Buildings - 369 Workers

Erecting reinforced concrete flat slab bridge with stone facing, spanning Lincoln Creek at N. Teutonia Ave. (157 workers)

General painting of city buildings and structures at various locations; varnishing and refinishing furniture, washing walls, cleaning and painting iron fencing and structural steel, also general inside and outside painting of buildings. (133 workers)

Grading and constructing a dry stone wall at 17th Ward Yard; plowing, harrowing, and seeding weeded areas on Honey Creek parkway; excavating and constructing a reinforced concrete retaining wall and placing rip-rap on bank of 1st Ward Yard. (79 workers)

Vocational School - 35 Workers

Painting and remodeling at the Milwaukee Vocational Schools. (35 workers)

Fire Department - 25 Workers

Alterations to Fire House #20 located on North 6th Street between West Michigan and West Clybourn Streets, and Fire House #15 located at North Water Street Bridge. (25 workers)
Public Museum - 351 Workers

- Building exhibit cases; improving lighting system; repairing mosaic flooring; painting walls and ceilings; refinishing wood floors; painting pictures of native species of birds, insects and flowers in oil and watercolor for exhibition. (174 workers)

- Classifying, cataloging and exhibiting specimens and collections; making groups, murals and models; preparing, cataloging and systematizing visual aids. (173 workers)

- Mending, repairing and cleaning historical and ethnological specimens; making new costumes for the colonial village exhibit. (4 workers)

Health Department - 44 Workers

- Immunization of children for diphtheria, smallpox and scarlet fever; registering and examining children in a city-wide Child Welfare Program; typing immunization records; establishing and maintaining clinics; tabulating and copying laboratory and dental records. (36 Workers)

- Cutting and sewing hospital linens, nurses' aprons, doctors' gowns, field bag linings, diapers, bed sheets, pajamas, and pillow case tubes; renovating Health Department records. (8 workers)

School Board - 33 Workers

- Social center recreational and adult educational activities involving holding classes in English, drama, arts, sciences and sports and other activities.

Park Board - 23 Workers

- Designing and sewing costumes for summer operas.
Tax Enforcement - 192 Workers

Modernizing real estate tax data files; compiling and combining information from the City Treasurer and Register of Deeds along with sketches showing dimensions and location of each property from official plat books of the Tax Commissioner.

City Comptroller - 95 Workers

Making a complete inventory of city-owned land, buildings and improvements, all city-owned machinery, tools and equipment including an appraisal of the present value; installing a card index system.

City Engineers - 79 Workers

Compiling permanent land records; abstracting and transcribing land records from the Register of Deeds.

School Board - 61 Workers

Completing school real estate plats and legal descriptions; recording costs of school real estate and records of cost of construction of school buildings; investigating efficiency of illumination in school classrooms; updating records of manual training machinery and mechanical equipment; cataloging and mending architectural plates, maps, sheet music, and textbooks.

School Board - 61 Workers

Cleaning, re-arranging and inventorying statuary pieces, pictures and science specimens; clipping and mounting pieces of art, catalogue and illustrative material; classifying, indexing, typing and filing pieces of reference material; stenciling and mimeographing art outlines and projects; cataloging books and magazines; repairing and re-binding books.

Tax Assessor - 40 Workers

Surveying all privately owned buildings for assessment purposes. Buildings would be measured, checked and appraised in the field, and drawings recorded along with data on the type of building, type of construction, present condition of buildings and other information needed for tax assessment purposes.

Public Library - 36 Workers

Reorganizing records and catalog indexes, rehabilitating and repairing books for circulation; examining, repairing, re-backing, cleaning, treating, rehabilitating and renewing all library books in the main library and its branches.

Sewer Department - 28 Workers

Rearranging and installing file records and index, cost, and inventory systems.

Fire Department - 24 Workers

Conducting a fire prevention survey of all buildings and premises in the city.

Building Inspection - 23 Workers

Determining new street names and house numbers on all existing records in the Building Inspector's office. Changing files and city records to correspond with the new system of names and numbers as established by the Common Council in 1929.
City Comptroller - 12 Workers

Making a complete analysis and tabulation of budgets, tax levies, assessed valuation, revenues and disbursements of the City of Milwaukee since 1835.

Land Commission - 11 Workers

Conducting a city plan survey to inventory the progress of city planning in Milwaukee.

City Clerk - 10 Workers

Checking and codifying traffic ordinances and amendments; segregating chattel mortgages into live and dead files; checking council proceedings for revocation of liquor licenses.

City Comptroller - 10 Workers

Sorting and arranging records in various City Hall vaults; supervising the destruction of old records; building shelving in vaults.

City Attorney - 10 Workers

Preparing and typing a subject index of court cases handled by City Attorney’s Office from 1910 to date; typing a copy of the digest of workmen’s compensation cases maintained in the Circuit Court library; annotating court cases and various court cases and opinions of the city attorney; compiling and typing ordinances on malt beverages and intoxicating liquors.

Real Estate - 8 Workers

Searching records for all city-owned property since 1846; preparing maps and completing records of acquisition and use of city property; inspecting and recommending future disposition of properties; appraising city-owned property.

Electrical Services - 6 Workers

Modernizing records of the Bureau.

Tax Assessor - 5 Workers

Compiling and evolving a schedule of rates, formulas and general information pertaining to depreciation and obsolescence or adoption by the Tax Assessor’s Office for future assessments.

Municipal Reference Library - 5 Workers

Cataloging and indexing unclassified library material; compiling a biographical reference file; compiling a reference file of ordinances of other municipalities; compiling bibliography on municipal subjects of interest; weeding out obsolete library materials; preparing a summary of industrial statistics for the city and a survey of statistical records kept by various city departments.

Fire Department - 4 Workers

Designing new equipment, including one fire truck (water tower), one squad truck, one engine truck and one ladder truck; recording changes made on fire boats and revising original plans accordingly; preparing stream charts and a fire equipment reference book.

Bridges and Public Buildings - 4 Workers

Cleaning and dusting all books, oil treating leather bound volumes.
The city also placed 2,891 workers on WPA projects building the infrastructure needed for a federal housing project constructed by the Public Works Administration. After abandoning plans to conduct a slum clearance program in the sixth ward, a 42-acre parcel was purchased on the outskirts of Milwaukee for the "Parklawn" apartments. The rural site required extension of sewer and water mains, streets, curbs and gutters, street lighting, police and fire alarm units, and a bridge across Lincoln Creek at North 43rd Street -- all projects constructed by WPA workers. Workers also built a six acre playground and recreational area for the families in the 518 apartments.

### WPA Projects Building Infrastructure for the Parklawn Federal Housing Project

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<th>Workers</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sewer Department</strong></td>
<td>1,901</td>
<td>Laying sanitary and storm sewers, house drains, water connections, and paved streets to serve Parklawn site.</td>
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<td><strong>Street Construction</strong></td>
<td>478</td>
<td>Grading; building concrete curbs, gutters, cement walks; paving streets around and leading to Parklawn.</td>
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<td><strong>Water Department</strong></td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Laying water mains in the streets to provide water to Parklawn.</td>
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<td><strong>Electrical Service</strong></td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Installing street lighting and Fire and Police alarm units in Parklawn.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bridges and Buildings</strong></td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Erection of a reinforced concrete flat slab bridge with ashlar stone facing, 64 feet wide by 40 feet long, spanning Lincoln Creek at North 43rd Street, in connection with Parklawn.</td>
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<td><strong>Playground Division</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Developing of the 6-acre recreation center of Parklawn. Work includes grading; planting; drainage; installing of a shallow water system; construction of a shelter shed for servicing the park; constructing and paving tennis courts, play areas and walks; constructing a wading pool, shuffleboard courts and other concrete masonry; erection of fences, installing play apparatus and flood-lighting the surfaced play areas.</td>
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B. Construction of the Village of Greendale: A Joint WPA-RA Project

During her visit to the Greendale site in November 1936, Eleanor Roosevelt noted with concern that the homes were designed solely for white families. She also complained that the laundry tubs were located next to the coal bins. A wall was placed between the tubs and the coal, but the policy to exclude Negroes from the Greendale housing was not changed.65

A second major housing project, developing the Village of Greendale, provided employment for Milwaukee area relief workers from December 1935 through May 1938. This project, one of four in the country, created an experimental "garden" community constructed by the federal Resettlement Administration (RA) on a 3,400 acre tract three miles southwest of Milwaukee.

A combination of WPA and RA workers constructed 572 homes in the village, named Greendale, and landscaped several thousand acres of green space and parkways. Histories of this project discuss the conflicting practices of federally-funded work relief and public works programs. The Greendale project employed both WPA and RA workers, with WPA approval required for authorization of non-relief workers. One historian concluded, "The R.A. hoped that ninety percent of its laborers could be taken from the relief group, but this proved to be impossible. Therefore, whenever the R.A. found it necessary to hire skilled labor from outside the relief group, the W.P.A. would approve only on the condition that a larger number of unskilled relief workers be hired at the same time. The unemployed men were willingly taken on, but R.A. officials regretted that there was often little productive work for them to do, particularly in the latter stages of construction."66

The problems in assigning work appeared to stem from several factors. Some jobs required skilled workers and the Greendale project's endorsement by the Milwaukee Building and Trades Council had likely been contingent on guarantees that mainly union workers would be hired for construction work.67 In some cases, the work was split. The community building, for example, was constructed by WPA workers; utilities were installed by RA workers. Also, the RA's emphasis on modern technology and efficiency measures conflicted with WPA methods limiting use of machines and earthmoving equipment, preferring labor intensive use of men instead.68 (Horsedrawn carts were used on site by the WPA workers.) The weather contributed to work delays. In the winter of 1935-36 ten foot snow drifts made it impossible to accurately lay out streets; in the summer of 1936, one day's 110 degree temperatures caused a dozen workers to collapse on the job.
Furthermore, WPA workers were treated differently from the workers paid by the Resettlement Administration. At every skill level, WPA "security wages" were paid below the RA wage rates. Furthermore, the WPA laborers worked 130 hours a month, while the RA laborers worked only 88 hours. The Resettlement Administration made special efforts to accommodate the skilled craftsmen they employed. The Greendale history, Main Street Ready-Made, noted, "The budgetary burden of non-relief labor at Greendale consisted not solely of large payrolls, but also of incidental funds spent to support a skilled crew. The WPA, for example, regularly asked hirees to provide their own transportation to and from work sites, but the Resettlement Administration at Greendale, relying so heavily on Milwaukee tradesmen, decided to spend $140,000 on 15,000 feet of spur line connecting Greendale with an urban electric rail line. Besides the initial expense of laying the track, the Resettlement Administration agreed to pay a surcharge on all men and materials hauled by rail."  

In all, about 2,000 men from relief rolls were employed on the project. However, fifty-five percent of the labor costs for the Greendale project were paid to non-relief workers, including many union craftsmen from the Milwaukee area. Costs of the Greendale project totaled $10.6 million, including $6.6 million for housing construction, and the remainder for roads, community buildings, schools, and landscaping.
C. Sewing Center Employing 1,000 Women

In August 1935 Harriet Clinton was named district supervisor of WPA Women's Projects in Milwaukee County. Clinton was responsible for planning and arranging worthwhile work for 2,400 women on the relief rolls who had received a first priority ranking for WPA jobs, and as she reported the following year, "This was accomplished by December 1." Only one of the largest projects Clinton established was a sewing center which by April 1936 employed 1,000 women. Only about 3 percent of the workers had experience operating power sewing machines before their employment, and the remainder were trained to work alongside more skilled garment workers. Clothing, including dresses, pajamas, overalls, jackets, wool coats, suits, and overcoats, were made, as well as sheets and pillow cases. A knitting unit produced sweaters, dresses and caps. The center designed all the garments, drew patterns and even constructed much of the machinery used. After an inspection by the State Board of Control, which managed all state institutions in Wisconsin, the center received a contract for a year's sewing work for the workers.

D. Light Manufacturing for 1,350 Unskilled Workers

One of the most successful and highly publicized WPA projects in Milwaukee provided light manufacturing work for unskilled workers who had not been selected for the city and county construction and "white collar" projects. This project engaged workers in manufacture of dolls, toys, draperies, furniture, book binding, weaving, and textile printing under the supervision of designer-technicians drawn from among graduates of the Milwaukee State Teachers College art department.

The project plan called for employment of women who had become bread winners for their families and who had not found work on other projects. Initiated by the WPA Women's and Professional Division, the project was devised by Elsa Ulbricht, an art teacher at the Milwaukee State Teachers College, and organized by one of her fourth year students, Mary June Kellogg. Clinton urged Ulbricht to develop a handicraft project for women.
Ulbricht recounted, "One of her [Clinton] suggestions to me -- and I can remember this so well -- was that we could cut out some pictures from wallpaper and make scrapbooks. And knowing her very well, I said, 'Well, I don't think that would be interesting enough for me, and if that's what we're going to do, I don't want this job.'"

Ulbricht initially anticipated that she could employ women with sewing and other skills who could be easily trained for the handwork needed. However, when she reviewed the applications on file with the Milwaukee Public Employment Service she discovered that skilled workers on relief had already been culled for other projects, including the women's sewing project, and that workers available had few, if any, apparent skills. Ulbricht described the first day of the project in an article for Design magazine.

When the Milwaukee Handicraft Project opened its doors November 6, 1935, a motley, careworn and harassed group of women were greeted and received by a small number of eager and socially sensitive young women and men into whose hands they were to be entrusted. They had been assigned from the relief lists of the United State Employment Service, in groups of fifty and one hundred at a time. Those who reported that memorable morning and the following few mornings, were nervous and excited, many of them arriving long before eight o'clock, having walked long distances. . . . They manifested uneasiness, uncertainty and great apprehension of their ability to meet the needs of this job to which they had been indiscriminately assigned and of this project about which they knew nothing. Many of them had had no work or very meager work experiences; many had been out of employment for so many months that they had become disheartened and depressed. They were of all ages, all nationalities, (some speaking very broken English), some could neither read nor write, Negro and white, of all degrees of intelligence and education. Many were poorly clothed, even unkempt, and some appeared physically weak from the lack of nourishment, medical attention and insecurity suffered for so long a time.

When it became known that the Handicraft project, unlike many WPA projects in the community, accepted African American as well as white workers, the numbers employed swelled to 900 women and men within the first weeks.

Ulbricht established a Citizens Committee of Milwaukee State Teachers College faculty and community leaders, mostly women, who reviewed educational aspects of the work and approved the products to insure that designs were of high quality.
An elected Workers' Council was created, which set many of the administrative policies, handled most disciplinary problems, maintained a grievance committee, and organized social functions for the workers.  

"The most discouraging phase of the entire work-situation at all times was the constant turnover in working personnel, which was natural and right in a work-relief program of this kind....For as soon as these workers acquired real skills, they were either absorbed in industry or transferred to projects where it was necessary to employ more skillful people."  

-- Elsa Ulbricht

Staff had originally planned to rotate workers twice a day into different production units, but this proved unfeasible given the large numbers of employees, their limited skills and the supervisory time required. Efforts were made to locate workers in a production unit which suited their skills and interests, and very simple tasks (e.g. braiding carpet strings for pull toys) were identified for workers with learning deficiencies.

In 1937 the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors took over sponsorship of the project, but the Milwaukee State Teachers College maintained its influence over development of product designs. New toys were tested in local kindergartens and nurseries before beginning mass production. Draperies made of percale ("easy to launder and press") were provided to schools and hospitals. Female workers, some of whom spoke only limited English, helped in making a collection of authentic doll costumes representing 50 countries for the state historical museum, and black and white dolls were prepared for nursery schools and hospitals. (According to Ulbricht, "Wherever there was a white doll there was a black doll too.") A number of older men who had been labeled "unemployable" due to age or physical handicaps proved to be competent carpenters and constructed looms for weaving and cabinets and cases needed by the project. The furniture unit built specially designed pieces for public rooms, including lounges at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Memorial Union, law school and dormitories, and the browsing room of the Milwaukee Public Library.

Supervisory staff changed constantly as young college graduates found non-WPA employment. There was also constant turnover of WPA employees, as workers gained skills and found work in private industry. As Ulbricht later recalled, "It was an ever-changing training program for skills because the new ones that would come would have to be taught all over again. And it took a great deal of time and patience to do that." According to Ulbricht, the constant turnover in WPA workers, "meant a continuous training of new assignees in the work-methods of the project, in work habits and in new skills, which naturally retarded the speed with which production was possible as well as lowering the craftsmanship of the product for a time, and made it ever difficult to be assured that production would flow as promised." Over the project's first eight years, more than 5,000 workers were trained.
The production units were moved a number of times due to the need for additional space, and at one time seven sites housed different production units. At its peak, the project employed 1,350 workers, housed in three floors of a factory building one square block wide. Eventually, eleven production units were established, as listed below.

"[It was decided that no matter how simple the article to be made or how inexpensive the materials to be used in the construction, the article would be well designed or it would not be made."

-- Mary June Kellogg

### Production Units of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bookbinding unit</td>
<td>rebinding old books, binding books in Braille, producing hand bound books, portfolios, cases and boxes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blockprinting unit</td>
<td>making decorative wall-hangings and draperies for use by nurseries, schools, institutional buildings and hospitals; decorating covers for bound books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>screenprinting unit</td>
<td>printing textiles for wall-hangings and draperies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weaving unit</td>
<td>making fabric for drapery and upholstery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rug unit</td>
<td>producing button hole rugs and small and large hooked rugs for schools and institutions using cotton and wool strip waste products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>applique unit</td>
<td>producing bedspreads, draperies, decorative wall hangings, and quilts for educational and penal institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doll unit</td>
<td>making cloth dolls and wardrobes for nurseries, schools, and institutions (4,000 dolls were produced for one Christmas), and dolls in historical costumes for the state historical museum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cloth toy unit</td>
<td>making washable cloth animals, alphabet books and blocks of various sizes and shapes for sick children in hospitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>costume unit</td>
<td>sewing creative and period costumes for local pageants, school and community plays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wood unit</td>
<td>cutting, sanding, painting and assembling wooden toys, including some designed for physically handicapped and mentally retarded children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>furniture unit</td>
<td>producing custom made furniture including chairs, davenports, cases, desks and tables (and using project woven materials).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Products were sold (for the cost of materials) or given to public institutions so that the federal project would not compete with sales by private industries. In spite of constant staff and employee changes, the project was able to raise funds through product sales to cover most non-labor costs, including materials and equipment for the work. The project was highly successful in marketing products to public institutions and produced a catalog for national distribution listing more than 30 items available. More than half of the product sales were to tax-supported institutions outside Wisconsin, and eventually sales were made in all of the states of the union.

Near the end of the WPA in 1941, with private employment increasing, the average age of women and men employed in the production units was 50 years of age, with the oldest worker around 68 years of age. After federal support for the project ended in 1942, Milwaukee County continued the project as a sheltered workshop for persons on county relief who had physical disabilities.
E. Examples of 1940 WPA Projects Operating in Milwaukee County

In May of 1940, the city and county sponsors of WPA projects held an open house to showcase the activities of 4,500 non-construction WPA workers. Many projects were continuations of activities initiated in 1935 and 1936. Notable projects included establishment of nursery schools for children from needy and "under privileged" families, employment of women to serve hot lunches to children in Milwaukee County rural schools, and operation of a toy loan program. The toy loan project collected and repaired toys for children and operated 20 branch toy lending "libraries." The project received wide support, as reported by a local news article:

Everyone around the county pitched in to make the toy loan project successful. Truck drivers volunteered services. Union labor organized drives among memberships. The Transport Co. carried appeals and the Red Cross sponsored a campaign. Dairy company route men plastered the city with milk bottle notices asking for discarded toys. And before long 75,000 articles, from stuffed polar bears, dolls by the thousand, roller skates and games poured in to be prepared for distribution at 20 loan centers. A total of 32,000 children registered between the ages of 2 and 16 years...[to borrow] toys."

"Tricycles, scooters, roller skates, and whatever else has been placed in attics, basements, or out-of-the-way corners by housewives because of broken parts can be put into use immediately at the toy loan centers if donated."

-Thirty Minute Review. August 3, 1939
Historical Records: First nation-wide inventory of documents of historical value is being compiled.

Public Land Inventory: Analyzing tax methods in Wisconsin, reporting the manner in which each local governmental body in the State levies, collects and spends taxes. Cause of tax delinquency are determined and proper adjustments affected.

Tax Descriptions: To correct the illegal real estate descriptions appearing on tax rolls, and furnish each assessor with adequate maps showing correct boundaries of all real estate parcels within each district.

Grantor-Grantee Index: The ownership history of each parcel of land in Milwaukee County, beginning with time of original government grants compiled in a single, running record chronologically.

Index of Research Material: All available research and statistical material in the field of Municipal planning in Milwaukee County is indexed and abstracted.

Court Records: Systematized service to the legal profession and the public reduces the cost and time in handling of court cases.

Braille: Blind supervise the sighted in transcribing works of literature.

Health: Thousand of children in public and parochial schools, in cooperation with local public health authorities, are having physical and dental examinations and hearing tests, as well as blood tests made. Physical defects are reported to the parents for referral to the family physician or dentist.

Adult Education: Adults go back to school to study the three R's, or Americanization or even chemistry. Classes formed in groups of ten or more. Vocational and avocational training.

Workers' Service: Classes in public speaking, rules of order and similar subjects for worker groups.

Exhibits: Miniature scenes are designed and constructed for display purposes to show how governmental agencies serve our community.

Writers: Histories and guide books are being prepared for Milwaukee, West Allis and Shorewood, and biographies of Milwaukee men and women for the State Encyclopedia of Biographies.

Newspapers: Rapidly deteriorating newspapers and microphotographed and indexed to perpetuate Milwaukee history.

Pageants: Production of Historical Fetes and dramatic accessories for schools and public recreation.

Nursery Schools: Nurseries are operated to develop the physical and mental well-being of pre-school children from needy and under privileged families, and to assist parents in nutritional, physical, educational and social needs of their pre-school children.

Soil Conservation: Pioneer work in soil conservation is aided by assisting in the development of erosion control.

Soil Testing: Samples are tested for farms and city garden plots.

Recreation: Trained leaders in music, drama, athletics and art expand leisure time programs of municipalities and counties: soft ball, boxing exhibitions, concerts and other activities.

Public Museum: Assistance given by WPA in all branches of museum work.

State-Wide Museum: Specimens for public museums throughout Wisconsin are being collected, repaired or made.
Natural Science Research: Laboratory assistance is provided for professors in sciences such as chemistry, zoology and botany. Also books on advanced mathematics are catalogued in the city and university libraries.

Pupil Record Analysis: Scientific data about the educational system in South Milwaukee, basis for remedial educational measures which will give students more adequate preparation for private industry.

Housing: Real Property and Land Use Survey to supply data for formulating policy as to parks, communications and other public enterprises.


School Lighting: Engineering tests made as a basis for improving the lighting and heating in the schools.

Hot Lunches in Rural Schools: Hot School Lunches served daily to Milwaukee County School children contribute to the health and betterment of future citizens. Good health is maintained -- deficiencies of the undernourished child provided for.

Art: Supplying art objects to schools and other public buildings. Stimulating art interest and promoting art education.

Handicrafts: Produces originally designed craft articles for use in tax-supported institutions and at a very low cost.

Books: Repair and binding of worn and torn books.

Household Training: Training in all branches of domestic service for young men and women.

Old Milwaukee Restored: The Church House in Estabrook Park, restored and refurnished.

Council Proceedings Index: Ready reference and cross-index to all subject matter of minutes of proceedings of Common Council.

Toys: Cleaning and repairing donated toys in order that Milwaukee children may borrow playthings from 20 branch toy libraries.

Music: "Music for You -- Under the Stars" series by a complete symphony orchestra at prices within reach of all.

Traffic: Survey to gather data to be used to prevent accidents, congestion, parking and bad pedestrian practices.

Sewing: A mechanized garment factory manufacturing over 70% of the clothing distributed by the County Relief Department.

Job Placement Clinic: WPA Youth Survey of employable youth without jobs, Milwaukee Vocational School job analyses, training applicants in job seeking technique.

The City of Milwaukee reported that in 1940 WPA workers continued projects repairing sidewalks, grading streets and alley, constructing sewers, and extending the city's fire and police alarm system and underground electrical conduit. Examples of city construction projects are summarized below. In Shorewood, WPA workers built a pedestrian tunnel at Hubbard Park. In Granville, an addition was built to the Carleton School and construction was started on the Hampton School.
Examples of Construction Work Completed by the WPA in the City of Milwaukee: 1940

Street Construction

- Repaired and oiled 52 miles of macadam streets.
- Repaired 34,700 square feet of city sidewalks.
- Stone surfacing of 6.5 miles of streets.
- Constructed 1-1/8 miles of shoulders and ditches.

Sewer Department

- Constructed 12.44 miles of sewer.
- Constructed 433 manholes and 751 catch basins.
- Adjusted to grade 1,200 manholes and catch basins.
- Abandoned and filled 300 catch basins.
- Repaired brickwork in 192 old manholes.

Electrical Service

- Constructed 4-1/4 miles of underground electrical conduit.
- Constructed 6-3/4 miles of Fire and Police Alarm System underground conduit.
- Constructed 25 center-of-street safety islands and 10 loading zone islands.
- Repaired and rehabilitated 25 traffic signals and 167 street lighting units.

"We agree that many of the persons now employed on WPA will not find private employment. This is because they are not 'employables' according to reasonable standards of private employment. These people are really relief cases and we believe that they should be cared for under the general relief program and not given preferential treatment [for defense program hiring]."

-- Citizens' Bureau of Milwaukee, 1941

By April 1940, WPA workers in Milwaukee County had constructed 84 public buildings, 884 miles of streets and highways, 31 bridges and viaducts, 206 miles of sidewalks, 187 miles of curbs, lighting for 215 miles of streets, and reconstructed 478 buildings.

The largest county WPA projects focused on the parks and the airport. In August 1940, the WPA approved $10 million in parks work, including construction of a swimming pool in Kosciuszko Park, a playground in Pulaski park, and new building and improvements at the Washington Park Zoo. Other park work financed constructing roads and bridges, and grading and landscaping parklands and recreational areas. In order to meet the nation’s defense needs, county airport work included plans for additional runways, construction of a hangar-administration building, construction for a combined airport passenger and mail terminal and administration building, and laying of drains and concrete "turning circles" on the runways. The WPA also approved construction of an addition to the Wisconsin national guard armory in Whitefish Bay, plans for an armory on the south side, and additions to the South Milwaukee vocational school."
Another 1940 project, conducted by the Milwaukee Vocational School, employed workers to interview 47,350 Milwaukee young people between the ages of 19 and 24 who were in the labor force. The survey found half of these youth employed full-time, 973 working and studying under the National Youth Administration program, 248 in CCC camps, and 1,133 on WPA. The survey was used by the placement bureau at the Vocational School to help counsel the 8,000 young people looking for work and 1,200 youth employed only part-time for minimum hours.  

"Schedule a visual demonstration of [job] placement methods for your club or employers group."  

-- Open House Brochure, May 1940

F. Accomplishments of WPA Projects in County Parks and the Museum

The most visible legacy of WPA projects in Milwaukee County is the parks system. The Milwaukee County Park Commission has stated that the accomplishments of relief labor available from 1931 through 1941 "far exceeded those of any period of equal length in the park history." During this eleven year period, $21.6 million was spent on relief work in the parks (including $3 million in county funds and $18.6 in federal monies).

The Park Commission’s success in using unemployed workers to improve parks and parkways was due to several factors. First, the Commission had developed visionary plans not only for parks, but also for a series of 84 miles of parkways. Members of the park commission traveled around the country visiting parkways and developed slide shows to promote parkway development in Milwaukee. Secondly, the commission had secured state legislation in 1927 to facilitate acquisition of land for parkways and used the opportunities afforded by the Depression to acquire land parcels which had fallen into public ownership through tax delinquency. After the city parks were transferred to the county in 1936, city staff joined the park commission. With federal monies available for public works, about 175 technical employees were recruited to turn out detailed plans for parks throughout the county. A park commission report listed the following accomplishments of WPA workers:

"The Works Progress Administration contributed to the development of practically every park in the system."  

--Milwaukee County Park Commission

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WPA Work in Milwaukee County Parks: 1935-1941

- Six reinforced concrete swimming pools were constructed, complete with filtration plants and bathhouses.
- A pavilion and wading pool were constructed at Red Arrow Park.
- A skating and boating pavilion was completed in Brown Deer Park.
- A new drive and parking station was laid out in Washington Park.
- The administration building for the Botanical Garden was completed and a new golf club house was erected in Whitnall Park.
- A shelter and recreation center was built in Smith Park.
- Service buildings were provided in Jacobus, Jackson, and Whitnall parks.
- A curling rink building was constructed at Riverside Park.
- A new elephant house was built at the Washington Park Zoo.
- A bathhouse was built at Doctor's Park.
- New roads were constructed in nearly every park.
- Walks and drives were resurfaced.
- Lincoln Memorial Drive was completely repaved.
- Sewers and drainage lines were laid and existing ones repaired.
- Jetties along the lake front were realigned and repaired.
- A retaining wall and a fence were erected along the north boundary of Mitchell Park.
- The pool in the sunken garden of Mitchell Park was cleaned and repaired.
- The lagoons at Washington and Jackson parks were drained and cleaned.
- New recreation areas were developed and old ones were modernized.
- Lighting systems were installed in some of the parks for night ball games and tennis.
Like the Milwaukee County Park Commission, the Trustees of the Milwaukee Public Museum embraced the WPA as an opportunity to expand services in spite of the economic problems brought on by the Depression. The centennial history of the Milwaukee Public Museum described the reductions in services necessitated in the 1930s: "As the Depression deepened in 1933, there were further cutbacks. The lecture series budget was wiped out. The publications fund was used up and the Bulletins went the way of the Yearbooks which had been suspended in 1932. There was no money for field research, special specimen purchases, books for the library or new and replacement equipment." Museum Director Samuel A. Barrett seized the opportunity to employ relief workers to provide an estimated $1.5 million of work for the museum.

The Public Museum sponsored the work of about 400 men and women who built exhibits and classified specimens and collections. These workers were described as "the unskilled man -- the salesman, the store clerk, the foreman -- all those indoor men untrained in any specific office procedure...[and] women who were formerly department store bundlers, waitresses, bakery helpers and that large borderline group which cannot accurately be called either clerical or manual, for which it is so difficult to plan "work." Workers remounted specimens, prepared slides for the school loan collection, sewed costumes for the wax exhibits, and re-indexed educational materials.

Barrett enthusiastically promoted the accomplishments of the museum WPA workers in the media. A bulletin board display in the museum lobby listed all the improvements made possible by the federal programs and acknowledgements to workers were posted throughout the exhibition halls. In 1938 after the renovations and specimen work were completed in the Milwaukee Public Museum, Barrett created a "State-Wide Program," which employed over 400 workers to prepare specimens, paintings, small exhibits and dioramas for other museums in the state.

"The Milwaukee museum is one of the few in the country which has seen fit to sponsor a large WPA project. Therefore the workers who are getting this training in museum technique may expect future jobs in museums all over the country. . . . it is gratifying to be assured by the director that he will unhesitatingly recommend many of his present WPA workers to other museums. "

-- WPA Supervisor for Women's and Professional Projects
"By 1938, there were only routine tasks left for WPA labor to do in the museum and Barrett, in the phrase of the day, was not about to let his federally funded crew of over 200 people 'rest on their shovels.' He instituted another series of projects known as the State-Wide Program to assist other museums with work done on contract for modest cost which provided matching funds for supplies."103


The museum history recorded the WPA workers' notable improvements to the museum.

The exhibit production schedule was moved ahead by 25 years, according to Barrett's estimate. Existing exhibits were renovated and cleaned. The Calumet Club Annex was connected to the museum by an enclosed corridor and an addition was built on the Annex for the display of the typewriter collection donated to the museum by Carl Dietz in 1934. Murals were painted and installed above wall cases throughout the exhibit halls. More than a hundred oil paintings of birds were produced as an ornithological study series. Various small exhibits and kits of specimens were created for the school loan collection. Repairs were made to the mosaic floor of the rotunda and other necessary maintenance was carried out. Federally funded employees worked in all the scientific departments where they cataloged and mounted or otherwise preserved specimens. The loose files of Trustees' minutes and monthly reports going back to the turn of the century were collated, paginated and bound in volumes for easy reference. Strikingly beautiful stained glass windows were made for decorative details throughout the building.104