



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Jay Du Von, 1963  
November 7

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Jay Du Von on November 7, 1963. The interview was conducted by Harlan Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

HP: HARLAN PHILLIPS

JV: JAY DU VON

HP: This is a directory as of 1939 and does not include, in your case, the man whom you first saw, I guess, Steve Hill.

JV: Steve Hill, right.

HP: What kind of a fellow was Steve Hill?

JV: He was a pretty good guy. I recall him as being the public printer for the State of Iowa, and he was still running his printing establishment. He was a pretty important figure in Democratic politics in Iowa.

HP: Iowa had been traditionally Republican.

JV: That's right. The Democrats mostly lived on the wrong side of the tracks.

HP: The state was divided in half.

JV: In 1932, I think they elected as lieutenant governor a janitor of the house office building or the capitol because it was a Democratic landslide. The janitor was elected, as I recall, lieutenant governor. You can check this from the record, of course. This was quite a surprise at the time. Steve seemed to me to be an awfully nice guy. He was a little surprised to see me turn up on the scene because he knew nothing about me. At that time, I was living in a little river town in Iowa called LeClair, and nobody ever lived in LeClair apparently, and the idea that anybody could be living there was fantastic! Actually, I was commuting from there to the Tri-Cities: Rock Island, Moline and Davenport. So I think most of the State WPA administration was surprised when I turned up on the scene, an appointment out of Washington, as director of the writers project and asking me all sorts of questions as to where the writers were and what they were going to write and all this sort of thing. I had quite a little problem establishing myself and the project with the administration there. For a while, I didn't know whether I was going to be tossed out on my ear, or what would happen.

HP: Was it made clear to you that the Federal projects bypassed in terms of the number that could be employed, the quota and so on?

JV: Initially it was, yes. It was made clear to me. I understood that.

HP: Did he understand it?

JV: I'm not sure but whether to him that wasn't just a detail of the operation. I think he had a deputy who was a little more hep. I don't remember his name at this point. I think he was there later.

HP: A. E. Michels?

JV: No.

HP: George Teller?

JV: Teller was the state administrator later.

HP: A. E. Michels?

JV: No, that name doesn't mean any thing to me. I don't think he was the deputy. I think the name was Jones.

HP: Iowa initially presented a strange problem because it was tied up in the Department of Agriculture, Triple A. The farm collapse was one aspect of it. Whether there was any building in a public sense, roads, highways, construction, and so on I assume that public building had to wait until Ickes.

JV: Yes.

HP: So, I don't know how much they had going.

JV: Well, they had had FERA projects the year before, and they had done a good bit of planning. There was this Iowa State planning board which operated out of Ames, and they had come up with a State plan for Iowa for all kinds of developments, of one kind or another. That was a first rate proposition. That was done by the people at Ames with FERA money and they had a good staff of people working on it. A good job was done there, I'm sure.

HP: They had an organized effort toward construction and rehabilitation.

JV: Planning -- long range planning -- along all sorts of lines . . . Conservation was one all the way . . . well, the whole gamut of what you can do by way of a master plan for a whole state.

HP: Symptomatic in a local way with the National Resources Planning Board? This kind of an approach?

JV: Right.

HP: This was done under the FERA?

JV: Yes, as a project as I recall under the National -- what was it called? The National Resources Planning Board.

HP: Yes.

JV: Fred Delano was the head of it.

HP: Right.

JV: Well, this was the Iowa unit as a sponsored project by the National Resources Planning Commission. I think they did a first rate job. They used some relief workers and lots of non-relief workers, too. They used lots of the professors and doctors at Iowa State.

HP: Yes.

JV: They did a first rate job.

HP: It's kind of hard. Did it depend on the local people? What kind of projects were developed? Was there a form, for example, for unemployed women, generally?

JV: Yes.

HP: I am trying to figure out whether, in the more creative fields, these things were tailor-made to suit the local community, that is, the local Iowa setting. That is, the writers project, for example, filled with local lore and so on. Well, when you had a large relief role in a predominantly farm area, it was quite apart from what they had done by way of research and preparation at Ames, Iowa. How is it applied? How do you make a document like this walk?

JV: Well, all those projects in the WPA were sponsored by someone. In other words, it was the local community sponsors presumably who wanted a job done. Sometimes they had to be told that they wanted the job done. Sometimes the need had to be pointed out to them. But, presumably it was something that the sponsor could get done if he would put in a minimum amount of money, and the major amount of money could go to relief salaries. This could be tearing up the street car tracks, for example, selling the scrap iron and repaving the street. The engineers would go in and figure out that this would take so many man years of employment to do it, relief wages would cost so much. So much would be needed in terms of non-wage expenditures. The total package would be project XYZ 745. Presumably this project was tailored to take care of one segment of the unemployed certified for relief in that area. So, this project would get underway and the planning people would be working on another project, designed, say, to take care of one hundred women who were on work relief from Clarinda, Iowa. This might take the form of a sewing room where they would be producing all kinds of garments for the needy, people on welfare, and things of that kind. So, all the way through, a great deal of imagination and drive and push was required on the part of the WPA personnel to develop these projects and work them up and get them started and to run them once they were started.

HP: How receptive was the atmosphere in Iowa to the work relief type programs?

JV: Oh, I think everybody was receptive to the idea of anything you could do, whether it was leaf raking or whatever it is, to get people on the payroll, get them off what bread lines or welfare they had been existing on, and give them useful work. I think they were very receptive to it. My mother was a Republican and not at all sympathetic to anything that the New Deal was doing but, after I took her around and showed her four or five WPA projects in Des Moines and the Des Moines area, she was terrifically impressed. She thought it was a

wonderful thing. How much better that these people should be here employed and that you can give them some kind of living wage than starving along the bread lines. Oh, I think there was a great acceptance of that in Iowa. My wife's grandmother was the one who tickled me. I thought she was very conservative, and I thought she would be opposed to it, but she said, "You know, the most wonderful thing about the WPA is that it gets these men out of their wives' kitchens." I said, "Let me think about that one for awhile." She said, "Don't you know nothing annoys a woman more than having a husband out of work sitting around the kitchen?" I never thought of that.

HP: That's a psychic kind of thing, really.

JV: Isn't it, though? It is sort of a woman's intuitive approach to it. "Get him out of the house and get him working!"

HP: Did this acceptance, this feeling of acceptance, broadly speaking, was it manifest in the organs which reflected the public sentiment? What about the newspapers? They seemed to be on the opposite side.

JV: Well, the newspapers were picking at the New Deal, of course, all the way through the Roosevelt administration. Gradually, they came to accept it. Some of the newspapers continued to pick at it. On the writer's project, we finally got very good public acceptance of the whole writer's project and what we were trying to do because we went around and talked to the Chambers of Commerce. We would go and talk to the publisher of the paper if necessary and tell him what we were doing and why. I remember in Cedar Rapids there was a newspaper editor who was quite a character and he made a great attack on the writer's project when it first came out. So, I bearded him in his den. I knew he was a human being just like anybody else. He wasn't really a tiger or a lion. He was a perfectly reasonable guy. I would sit down and talk to him and tell him what we were trying to do and why and what we were going to try to do in the Cedar Rapids area. We were going to set up a unit of unemployed writers and workers and we asked him if he had any suggestions and if there were any reporters who were out of work that we could use on the project. He turned out to be a very nice guy. The attacks ceased -- there were no more.

HP: Then there was on the local level this power of a persuasive presence, the use of language and so on, to convince in an educational way those who were seemingly anti for no reason except cussedness.

JV: Right.

HP: Or a commitment to a political framework which, to all intents and purposes, had passed.

JV: Well, everybody was pretty edgy in 1935. You know, the Depression had gone on a long time, and nobody really knew what was going to happen. Some of the most conservative people were sure that the Communists were going to take over tomorrow. The whole economy had been ruined, so to speak, and there was no retrieving it. We were on the road downhill so fast that there was nothing but revolution that was going to follow us. It was certainly a difficult period. I dealt with these workers from the relief roles. I found them in various stages of despair and various stages of bitterness, some of them, resignation, some of them; but by and large their response to useful work, well directed, in which their enthusiasms and talents could be enlisted, was terrific. I remember I had one man from the project come to me who was making a relief salary of \$24.00 a week and he said he was going to resign. He had been offered a job as a principal of a high school in a little country town in Iowa at \$20.00 a week, but he felt that the cost of living in this little town would be so much cheaper than in Des Moines that he was going to take it. He was anxious to get back to teaching, but he was very grateful for the employment he had for a year or so in the writer's project. They didn't want to stay on the project if anything even halfway as good turned up, if it would carry them along the lines of what they wanted to do. I've always thought of that particular case as rather representative of a general attitude there. Well, we set up the writer's project, first, with a small unit in Des Moines, about ten or twelve people, but actually we sort of commuted them back and forth to Ames and had some offices at that time in one of the University buildings adjacent to where the planning board was so that we could make use of all of the files of the planning board because they had compiled a tremendous amount of information about the State, every conceivable fact and information and this was wonderful source material for us. Later, we brought that group back to Des Moines and officed them in the old post office building and they became the nucleus, the editorial staff, that turned out the final work on the guide. Then we successfully set up units in Council Bluffs, Sioux City, Davenport, Dubuque, oh, I think, Keokuk, and perhaps four or five other strategically-located points. I mean, these people were given responsibilities for geographical areas, and they began to develop the work on specific towns within the area and also the parts of the tours which crossed the areas for which they were responsible. They fed this into the central editorial unit in Des Moines which pulled it together and coordinated it and sent it into Washington. So, that was the physical organization of it. I think that initially we had about 140 workers on the project.

HP: On the writer's project?

JV: In Iowa.

HP: Spread out in Iowa among those communities, and these were writers who qualified by being on the relief roles?

JV: Well, to say they were writers is not quite correct, because very few of them actually ever made their living as writers. Some of them had been reporters and were out of work and, in that sense, could be called that. Some of them had written as an avocation. Some of them were insurance salesmen. Some of them were ex-teachers. Some of them were people who had had clerical jobs. We had to have typists, and we had to have people who did that kind of work. The number of actual writers on the project was rather small because there weren't a great many writers in the State of Iowa who customarily made their living as writers, free-lance writers, or any kind of writers other than newspaper reporters. So, Iowa, as in many of the states, was not a fertile ground to find writers to put on a writer's project who were on the relief roles, but we had a national job to do which was to produce a series of guide books for the then forty-eight states. We had to get the best people we could to do it. We used all kinds of people, and the projects, as I told you earlier, were frequently just as good as their supervision because we were not dealing with professionals but if they had professional guidance, they could do a good job.

HP: Yes, and if the oversight was committed to the idea.

JV: Just like one professor at a college can take a group of students and turn out a terrific research job; whereas the individual students, none of whom could possibly create that kind of research job that they were participating in, but, with guidance and leadership, they could do something that the professor himself could not by himself ever do.

HP: Right.

JV: Sometimes I liken it to an archeological project where an archeologist is in charge of a group of people digging, and the diggers wouldn't know what they were doing, or what they dug up, or what was important unless there were an archaeologist in charge of it.

HP: Sure.

JV: Selecting the site, supervising it and seeing that good practices were observed, seeing that the artifacts were properly preserved and properly identified and marked on maps and things of that kind. Out of such a job a wonderful thing can come whereas the workers themselves may be relatively unskilled workers. I think this was the case with the guide. We not only had the central unit in Des Moines which worked very hard in editing this material and putting it in final shape. Then it came into Washington where it was given another look-see by the editorial staff in here. So, it did come out with a pretty darn good final product and a pretty uniform final product.

HP: That is traceable to the general outline which I think you indicated had been fashioned in Washington.

JV: Yes, there was a general outline which came out. I received it about a week after I got to work on the project. It was a mimeograph document about an inch thick, and it gave the general outline, or points which were to be covered, the titles of the essays which were to be in the forepart of the book, and then the city section which would cover the principal cities and then there was a sort of a not-too-well-thought-out tour section. When you were here last, you said that Mr. Alsberg scrapped everything that had been done for a year and a half. Ever since you said that, I've been puzzled a little bit, because the only abrupt revolution I can remember is when it was decided that much of the material in the city section and some of the material in the essay section were to be transported into the tour section and covered as you followed the tour mile by mile. That was a sizable change in format of the book, but it really didn't scrap anything. It moved it around, but it didn't scrap it.

HP: Yes. I didn't know this Henry Alsberg at all, but I would assume that the flood of material that came to him from whatever section of the country may have made him re-examine the total structure and perhaps some of the procedures that should have been followed that weren't followed, and a good bit of it was reworked, as you put it. Not lost in the sense that you would throw it out, but not accepted in the sense that it would ultimately be found in the book.

JV: I can recall whole sections being sent back from Washington to the state with instructions, "Rework this," "Incorporate this in the tours section," "Leave the rest in the city section," that kind of thing.

HP: Now we already talked about the problem of publication, that there were no funds to publish with whatsoever, but I noticed that you brought here this Guide to Dubuque which again found local sponsorship in the city of Dubuque and the Dubuque Chamber of Commerce.

JV: Right. This is what we had to do. My wife was then working on the project. She went up to Dubuque, she went in to see the City Council, she went into the Chamber of Commerce. She sold it, this job. They were very pleased

with it. We did all the work, all the writing, all the layout, everything except the bare printing of the book, which they paid for.

HP: Then it was accessible, you know, in the local community. They probably learned a lot about the local corners which you always take for granted and you never know anything about.

JV: That's true. Well, we had some sense in those days. I don't know why, but we did. We thought that the more people that read this stuff, the better. The more people that knew the history and the background of their community, the better. We knew we didn't have any money to publish it and if we could get the local community to do it, fine, wonderful. Why not? Once in a while we would run into a guy who was a real sparkplug. I remember a fellow by the name of Carl Bickle in Cedar Rapids who was president of the Chamber of Commerce who was simply crazy about northeast Iowa. He thought that it was the most wonderful part of the world and, when we mentioned the idea of getting out a guide of northeast Iowa to him, why he just caught on fire. "Wonderful, I'll help you in any way I can. We'll get the Chamber of Commerce to print it. We'll do this and that. We'll carry your people around to take photographs." Just any kind of help he could give, but there we touched a guy who was interested in history, who was vitally interested in his part of the State and you touch him there, he gets on fire. If you touch the right place, he goes. He was partly responsible for that and also for the guide to Northeast Iowa which was a separate publication put out by the Cedar Rapids Chamber of Commerce which was about three or four times as thick as that book. I'll find a copy at home. Well, we thought it was an awfully good idea to get local people interested and pushing these things and getting behind them. We finally got a degree of acceptance to this project. By the time I left Iowa, the administration thought it was a wonderful project. Keller, of course, was a different type of person than Hill. Keller was, I think, a professor of geology at the University of Iowa, of considerable professional stature in the academic world, and I think Steve Hill is dead I know. I don't recall if he died in office, or afterward. He was not well. I had some funny experiences. I told you that the . . . well, I'd better not mention this with the machine on. If you want it off, I'll tell it to you, but I don't want . . .

HP: What is it?

JV: Well, it is sort of a cute story.

HP: Why don't you tell it with the machine on?

JV: No!

HP: You will not. There is one publication here. Let's see, where is it? Of a magazine. This is called a Midwest Literary League.

JV: Right.

HP: What is the origin of this?

JV: Well, the Midwest Literary League was simply a group of people, most of them employed on the projects. We were interested in writing and poetry. We used to meet about once every week or two weeks for dinner. Sometimes we would have a speaker and sometimes we wouldn't. We decided it would be a nice thing to have a magazine. So, we started . . . actually the title was taken over from a magazine which had gone out of existence which was published in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, some time before that. We liked the title Hinterland. We felt Iowa was part of the hinterland and the emphasis largely was on regional themes, things which were part of our experience there in the Midwest. I suppose a part of this goes way back in history to Davenport, Iowa, because a group of people grew up in Davenport who had great dreams of the middle west being a kind of a cultural center, who were somewhat resentful of the fact that New York seemed to be in all the focus of every kind of interest in the arts. These people were Susan Glaspel, George Cram Cook, Arthur Davidson Ficke, Floyd Dell. All of them were . . . just happened at about the same time to be growing up in that community.

HP: Yes.

JV: In some of the works of those people you will hear reference to this possibility that we might have some kind of a renaissance of the arts in the Midwest and some regional cultural development. This was part of the same . . .

HP: . . . the general flavor?

JV: . . . general flavor, right.

HP: Well, some of these people are of interest on their own, Ruth Stuart.

JV: Ruth Stuart wrote a couple of novels. She worked on the project. Weldon Keys, I don't know what he has done since.

HP: There's a lot . . . I'm thinking of the editorial board, Carol Norling?

JV: I don't know what happened to Carol Norling. He was a friend of my wife's from Sioux City. Carol was working for, you know, one of these refrigerator companies in Sioux City. He never worked on the projects. Ray Kresensky was assistant director of the projects. David McLaughlin. Ray's a pretty well-known poet. David's written a couple of novels. Ruth Stuart has written a novel. Norling used to do reviews, I guess.

HP: Yes, but this has been not really an outgrowth of the project per se. It is an outgrowth of a deeper feeling of the young writers in the Midwest and more particularly in Iowa.

JV: Right, but the project sort of brought them together.

HP: Yes.

JV: And, we probably cheated somewhat on using project employees to work on the magazine -- things like that. We had a drunken printer, I think, and he set up type for our maps and I think he also set this stuff up for us. It is all hand-set.

HP: This is volume two, number two. I don't think there is any date.

JV: There isn't any date on it?

HP: I don't see it anywhere. Volume two, number two.

JV: I stayed on the editorial board there long after I came to Washington. I think we published that about 1939. How about running up and down the title page. Does that tell you anything?

HP: No. A Liberal Magazine. That's it, the works. This is the sort of thing that might not be duplicated in any other state unless there were people similarly interested who wanted to publish them. I know that there were large things that were published perhaps in this form by artists, particularly in the New York area.

JV: Well, the Modern Museum brought out some things that were the product of project exhibits.

HP: Yes, but this would show, you know, an identifiable community not necessarily agreeing but interested in writing, interested in the area, and the development of at least an appreciation of writing, with a really long tradition and sparked in a way, or aided and abetted, let's say, by the rude fact of life: the Depression.

JV: Well, it almost always happened that sooner or later they were sucked off to the metropolis, Chicago or New York, almost always, and the kind of interest in culture that they wanted to create just didn't happen in the middle west.

HP: Yet, there is a different flavor to the Chicago Art Institute as being a sort of a beacon to the middle west than there would be, let's say, the Art Student's League in New York.

JV: That's right.

HP: I don't know what it is, but the Art Institute of Chicago is the beacon of a wider area. It could have been set up in Davenport, Iowa, but for the chance that Chicago is an idea, even an idea in the Western novel. It's there. It is the beacon, too. It is very interesting, the kind of revolt against old Jefferson notion about people piling on top of one another in the city. That's the gist of a pleasant era in which one could breathe.

JV: Where you lived far enough from your neighbor that you couldn't hear his dog bark.

HP: Well, in terms of your later work as a kind of troubleshooter here and there in the mid-western area, were there any other areas where the writers were as imaginative and as productive in a general way?

JV: Oh, I think so. I think so. I think that when the Chicago projects got going they did a really fine job.

HP: What of some of the other states? Take Nebraska.

J V: In Nebraska you almost get into individuals. Felton was the administrator at that time. J. Harris Gable was the director of the Federal Writer's project. They had an interesting project there with some very interesting people on it. They were interested a great deal in folklore and early tales of pioneers. This is another thing we did. Go out and find the oldest people in the community and interview them for their experiences as to when they first came to Nebraska, let's say, and what relics they had. What were their cherished lares and penates that they brought with them when they came from the east, or if they came from Sweden, or overseas, well, what had they brought with them? What they still had. What was the country like when they first arrived here?

How many people lived here? What was the community like? We did thousands of these interviews, and they are fascinating. In some of the states they published them. Interviews With Old Settlers they were called. The local historical society would sponsor it. This is a gold mine, just a gold mine. They did a lot of that in Nebraska -- very, very good. We did some of it in Iowa -- not as much. I told you we did this Tombstone survey which was very interesting. We came up with some curious epitaphs, a great deal of interesting information. Each of these projects was certainly encouraged to be imaginative and to follow this vein of ore which was the cultural heritage of America, which was damned important. Even such an obvious corny thing as interviewing old settlers wasn't really obvious. Nobody was doing it, and it really wasn't corny. This was first-hand impressions from eye witnesses. Maybe, as you say, it happened a long time ago and their memories were not too good but this is what they thought they remembered anyway.

HP: This is what they had; this was their deposit. Within a few years they were dead. Most of those people are dead now.

JV: So I think it was this searching down this vein of American culture, the kind of civilization that had been created here and trying to make us more conscious of it, cognizant of it. It wasn't really as dull and drab a country as we might think it was. Terrific history, Indian background. We interviewed the Indians a lot. The states were particularly keen about that, some of them where there were still reservations within the state. Or where Indian history had played a prominent part in the development of the state, they would go off pretty hard on a tack toward the Indians. I think that was true of Kansas, as I recall, Kansas was quite hot about that kind of thing, did all kinds of special studies about Indians. New Jersey shows no director of the Federal Writer's Project. I remember the gal who was there. New York State, I don't remember too much about the State as such. I was in Albany only once. Herzog then was administrator there, and New York City, of course, that is a story all by itself. It's almost fantastic!

HP: Well, you didn't get into that too much, except when you got in Washington, looking back on it comparatively.

JV: Oh, yes, well in Washington . . . . While I was in Washington, there was constant trouble going on up in New York of one kind or another, so we got into it one way or another from the Washington standpoint. Paul Edwards was administrative officer for Federal Project No. 1 at that time. Colonel Sommervell was the administrator. Paul was a very competent guy and is still a very good friend of mine. He lives down in Puerto Rico. If you ever happen to be down that way you might happen to get Paul's recollection of the experiences as head of Federal Project No. 1 in New York City. Audrey McMahon was in charge of the Arts Projects, a fascinating gal. Chalmers Clifton was the music, George Kondolf, theater; Harold Strauss, director of the Federal Writer's Project. I can't place him. Oh, yes, North Carolina theater project did a fine job there in collaboration with WPA in setting up that lost colony operation on Roanoke Island. Well, almost the whole development of the outer banks was due to the WPA. That was nothing but sand dune before that. They planted grass, and they stabilized those sand dunes. They had projects of every kind, including a theater project over on Roanoke Island with the lost colony that built the theater that you have undoubtedly seen there. That was a very creative situation there. They did a very fine job. Then here is Ohio with Harlan Hatcher as director of the writer's project. Ohio did a good job. They had a good guide. Oklahoma with James Thompson. I don't remember him too well. Pennsylvania had Paul French. Paul set up a kind of a sponsoring organization to publish various publications in the State of Pennsylvania, a very good job out there finding local money to publish almost anything you could get written. I think they called it the Poor Richard's Society, or something like that. He was later, I guess, head of CARE, the relief organization. He would be a good man to talk to about the project in Pennsylvania. Rhode Island, I don't remember too much about. I remember the administrator Farrell Coyle very well and director of the women's professional projects, Margaret Staley. South Carolina, Mable Montgomery was the director of the writer's project and now we get into sort of the southern flavor that gets into everything down in that area where they never seem to be able to get too far away from the civil war and the history that is involved in it which is fascinating. I live down near Manassas, Virginia, and I just can't help but be interested in the battles, the first and second battle of Manassas, and the historical events and the little pieces of ground where the different actions took place. When you live in a place that is steeped in history, you get into it to a certain extent yourself.

HP: You can't really avoid it.

JV: You can't avoid it. South Dakota, this shows Lisle Reese over at Mitchel. Lisle did a good job. I visited him several times. He had some of the same problems that I had. There just weren't many out-of-work writers in the State of South Dakota. He had to go out and find people who could do a job of work, and then weld them and supervise them into a group that could turn out an acceptable guide book; it wasn't an easy job. Well, it was probably an easier job then than it would be today unless you could pay great salaries. If you were to go out today and try to find people to do a job of work like that, you would really pay for them. Texas, Jerry Frank Davis doesn't ring any bells. I visited Texas. I remember Mary Kay Taylor who was director of the women's work. I don't remember Jerry Frank Davis. Utah shows no name. It shows Maurice Howe as director of historical records survey. Deral Greenwell was the administrator and Ruby Garrett was women's and professional projects. She

was another one of those gals with a tremendous bubbling bounce about her and lots of drive and excitement. She really enjoyed what she was doing. Vermont just shows an acting director, Teresa Heidel. I didn't know her. Virginia was Eudora Ramsey Richardson. She did a good state guide on Virginia, and also she had a group of writers near Manassas who did a guide to Prince William County. It's a very first rate country guide. A good many state-county guides published. In other words, we would take any sub-division we could get a hold of and do a guide on it. Materials were available in the files to break down almost any geographic sub-division you might like. You could take the northeast corner of the state. You might take a single city and its environments, or any other reasonably suitable geographic unit and work from that.

HP: Yes, I would think that, the more it was broken down, the more it would lend itself to local sponsorship than if it were half the State or the whole state. That is a little bit different thing to sell from a publishing point of view than it is to sell Dubuque. What it is relative to is what I know in front of me.

JV: Right. Washington was Anne Windhusen and I don't remember her. Glenn Lathrop was director of the historical records survey, and he is still with us in college housing out in Seattle now. Luth Crawford in West Virginia. I don't know him too well. Wisconsin, John C. Lyons. I remember him; I hired him for the job. He replaced a kind of acting director who was in charge of the state historical society. Wyoming, Agnes Spring; I don't remember her. Let's see, Alabama, Myrtle Miles was director of the writer's project. She also had a very heavy southern flavor to the guide. Arizona, Ross Santee, and you know the Arizona Highway magazine was our big thing out of there.

HP: It is a first rate magazine.

JV: You're darned right it is. We simply wrote that magazine, started it and developed it, got the pictures and then to get someone to sponsor it. Well, the Arizona Highway Commission would put up the bill to publish it. So, we were in business and, as long as the project was in existence in Arizona, they edited the magazine, and I think that some of the workers they took over at the time the WPA went out of business.

HP: Yes.

JV: I think they took them over on the permanent payroll. Arkansas, Dallas McKown; no, that doesn't ring any bell. What is the date of this? 1939. You see, I'd been away from the project in Iowa for a couple of years, but I should know more of these people. James Hopper in California, Northern California. Southern California was Leon Dorais. I think he was a poet, as I remember. Morris Cleavenger in Colorado. I remember him. John Derby in Connecticut. Jeanette Eckman in Delaware. District of Columbia, there is no name listed for that. Florida, Dr. Corse, they did a good job in Florida and they had some interesting by-products and off-shoots of the program, local guides, local histories. Georgia, Milton Blanton was state coordinator. He is now an economist in our Atlanta office, still with us. A Federal writer, Samuel Tupper, Jr. I don't remember him. In Idaho it was Vardis Fisher. I've read all his novels. I don't know what's happened to him. Federal Writer's Project in Chicago was John t. Frederick. He succeeded me, as I recall, as director out there. He did a very good job, and very productive. Indiana . . . .

HP: Were you director of the Chicago projects?

JV: The Illinois writer's projects. After I left Iowa . . . . I was there I think three months. Then I came to Washington. It was 1937. I was there from about February of '37 to May. Part of my job was to find a new director and then come on in here. I had to find a new director before I could report here. This shows Ray Kresensky as director in Iowa. He was my assistant. Mrs. Harrison Parkman in Kansas. That was where they did a good bit on Indians. Louisiana -- Lyle Saxon, whose books on New Orleans you may or may not know, a real, real character. Ellingwood Maine, I'm sure I met him because I visited every state in the union. Maryland, Alexander Saunders. Muriel Hawks in Massachusetts. I just remember the name. Michigan was John B. Newsom. Newsom later came in and took over Alsberg's job as national director. Then when the war came along he went into the Navy quite early. 1939, that is twenty-four years ago, isn't it?

HP: Razor blades of the memory. You later . . . you know, come into the Federal office. I think in some way we could talk about that. That it is a wholly different picture from the administrator's point of view than you got out in Illinois, or in Iowa, where sort of a fire line affair cut in the pattern of the local approach to fit the local needs, as you did here, and in Illinois finding someone thoughtful enough to handle a project. But, what is the bird's eye view from the Washington scene of this program? What is the difference? Something lifted out of a Hitchcock movie?

JV: It certainly is, but it still is. I'm still in the middle of that. It is hard to disassociate yourself. It is also hard for me. I was thinking the other day that I've sort of compartmentalized my life in so many ways. There is a whole period, say the Thirties, up until '43, is one period of my life. Then the war, and then my wife died in '46, and she had been closely associated with all of this. I guess I've closed doors like you sometimes do, you know?

HP: Yes.

JV: I married again. I have a family of three children and this is probably another lifetime in some ways from all of that. Coming into Washington was quite different in many respects because you are concerned about the nationwide implications of the program rather than its local implications, and much of it, of course, is the personnel to do this and to do that and much of it is putting out brush fires as they come up here and there. Much of it is just coping with the tremendous volume of paper work that comes to cross the desk daily, answering Congressional inquiries which are constant and voluminous, talking to visiting firemen, settling jurisdictional disputes that hardly seem worth making in the first place, but are sometimes very difficult to untangle to everyone's satisfaction. Of course, in here when I came in in 1937, it was rough as you will read from this account here. We were under constant attack by the Dies Committee who were just bound and determined to prove that the Federal Arts Projects were Communist-ridden. This makes a rather uncomfortable environment to make it easy . . . .

HP: I'm surprised that you refer to it as an environment at all, but you're right; it is something to which you fall heir when you do come. It is like stepping into a raging stream that's on the way by, that's all. You just got carried and swept along, that's all. Somehow or other the equities in the affair are left for some future decade to restore them one way or another. You know, in reading for a wholly different purpose some years ago through the Dies Committee for a legal interview I was doing at the time with somebody who was in charge of the Department of Justice. You know, it is like hopping in a boat and pulling for freedom. That's what it amounted to. It is a wonder that a . . . .

JV: Well, I have some sympathy to it as I look back on it. These guys were sure that some place there were mysterious Communists who were pulling strings and so on. They didn't have much ability or desire, it seemed to me, to separate out the truth from the fanciful.

HP: Yes.

JV: Or the laughings of a paranoia from someone who is honest and sincere. If the paranoia would tell them something they wanted to hear, they would listen to it and give it exactly as much credence as they would someone who told them something they didn't want to hear. So, you were shadow boxing sometimes with . . . . well, you'll see in this record. This fellow by the name of Banta who was one of the persistent attackers of the writer's project must have been out of his mind in one way or another.

HP: Yes.

JV: And trying to defend yourself against someone like that is almost impossible. The Dies Committee -- give them full credit for this -- they thought there was something wrong someplace and they were trying to get a hold of it. Well, now we know a whole lot more than we did. Probably there was something that they were trying to get a hold of. Probably there were people who were selling secrets. Probably there were people who were doing this, that and the other thing.

HP: I don't deny that life is complex, even in an era which spawns a Martin Dies, but I would hesitate to suggest . . . well, I would make a distinction between isolating the need and pursuing it relentlessly and remorselessly as he did.

JV: Well, of course this is what McCarthy did and this certainly opens Dies as well as McCarthy to criticism. Anyone who tries to take something as a bandwagon and advance his personal prestige and notoriety perhaps.

HP: But, even a person who is whatever it was she was, Hallie Flanagan, she fulfilled a national need. The fact that she worked with ingredients which were less than stable or imaginative never occurred to Martin Dies. It had to be red, white and blue.

JV: And black and white, there were no grays.

HP: No, well then, you see, he was wholly ill-equipped to deal with America as it even then was. He had . . . oh, I don't know what he would have done, but in any event his public position is one which is an either-or proposition, and I don't know any either-or propositions that I can think of. It is all unreal and the notion of being caught in this kind of web where you are confronted with an either-or proposition is just terrifying. There is just no soap manufactured that can make you feel clean again, somehow. You don't understand it. There just isn't any soap that is strong enough, particularly when you are faced with the necessity of explaining why you are dirty when you don't feel that way.

JV: That's right.

HP: It is terrible because . . . I don't know. Any group can get together, any group that I can think of and,

depending upon the imagination of the group and the kind of limits which it sets for itself, if it sets any limits at all, it's bound to run the gamut of all kinds of ideas. Take any one of them and rip it out of context, like a midnight note to the Nation on prisoners.

JV: Right.

HP: You know, it is something that will come up and, to the extent that it does come up, it is an idea that can be kicked around and maybe in the kicking around swords are sharpened, windows are opened, new fresh air, new insight, new illumination. Then, suddenly to have someone else with a deeper commitment into a black and white world and who had not only that kind of commitment, but the power to confront others with it, share it, and probably never thought about it in those terms. He did run riot on the American scene, Martin Dies. He did run riot. There was a lot in the Department of Justice, not the department of Justice Files, but there are a lot of files filled with stuff relevant to Martin Dies's own behavior, behavior in the sense of where he took a train, where he got off, what he spoke about, and who was sitting in the audience, a continuous kind of surveillance of this man. If it had been used in any way, it would have shown the less red, white and blue aspects of his speeches. You know, I wondered why the heck it wasn't used because, in any political campaign, they are able to find, ferret out, sufficient information in the event that my man is blackened, then, boy, here comes the ammunition. It is part of the game or at least -- it is part of the game, I guess.

JV: Sure, sure.

HP: And there is an agreement not to use it on both sides so that things walk off in a wholly different context, but with the Dies Committee confronting a program, it is one thing to reach it politically and say it is time to call a halt, tie up the strings, terminate it, and all we are interested in is how are we going to go about doing it. That is one thing. It is quite a different thing to brow-beat, coerce, closure on wholly different grounds that have nothing to do with the purpose with which the act originally set for. That is a matter of choice, and Dies will have to stand by his choices as far as I am concerned. I mean, they are pretty murky. It may have been . . . you know, I've often wondered whether it isn't, in a way. We were doing a lot of defining what it is we were. I mean, the writer's project was an effort, in a sense, to equate a current breathing with past possibilities and what those possibilities meant to a passing scene and what you're missing, what is in the given, why this rock or this view is what it is and what role in what context it played in history. This is an effort to relate ourselves, a kind of developmental process, but it is also a way of defining what it is we are. Once you define what it is you are, you eliminate other things which you are not supposed to be, and it is the Dies and that crowd that begin with that kind of shunting off. You've pointed out here, in another pamphlet which you found, like the Harmony society of Penn. American history is rife with these little groups who went off in their woods somewhere because they couldn't stand what was going on where they were, but there was sufficient freedom in the society to develop into more -- what is it? -- positive and fruitful way or create a new tyranny, even.

JV: Right.

HP: Like Roger Williams and Ann Hutchinson -- I mean this is the order of events, but . . . .

JV: There were a lot of lessons to be learned from it all, It is not . . . they should never be ignored, but be explored and as much learned about them as possible!

HP: But, it isn't all red, white and blue, or if it is all red, white and blue, the ramifications of what is the road to the blissful seat are so many that to define one is a mistake. This followed hard . . . it was just prior to wartime, when we not only had to define ourselves and look at the struggle between America First and the committee to defend America by aiding the allies. That is a death struggle. And it swept everything else off the front pages, virtually. Suddenly that was lost sight of by an attack at Pearl Harbor. It settled that bill.

JV: Just completely . . . .

HP: But, then as a nation we had to define ourselves to the rest of the world and, having done so, we had a crystal clear definition.

JV: Well, we are still trying to do it, if you ask me.

HP: No, but it allowed us to, in a communication way, writing, in a sort with Canada. A Canadian historian talked about a pendulum swinging and, if you can define yourself in one point where it no longer serves, and the whole thing moves over and you are settling over on the other side.

JV: Yes, yes.

HP: The shift in the scene and the changing purposes to which it was put made all the differences in the world, and under a wartime bit, what seemed perfectly innocent in the context of the Thirties was no longer innocent,

and later on it was butchered even beyond to the point where not only was it not innocent, but, in effect, seemed virtual traitors to the red, white and blue when had no part back in this context at all. So, the shifting scene does play a part.

JV: Do you . . . have you ever tried to figure it out in terms of semantics of, take the word "security?"

HP: Yes.

JV: Security meant one thing in the Thirties, and we had the social security laws passed and then wartime security meant what? Security from the enemy, I guess, in the military sense, and then we come along the end of the war; we begin to get security in the sense of security of information -- just a single word going through a whole permutation of meanings.

HP: Yes, then where the surrounding humus changes. The word doesn't change in its meaning. It is the purpose to which it is put. It is the power structure that is created about it that either makes it something to run and hide from, a fearful thing or a joyful thing. I can't imagine anyone getting upset about the exploration in the Thirties of the Harmony Society in Penn. or publishing in the Hinterland. You know, it is an expression of joy for me, effective labor, or imagine the thrill coming into Dubuque when a portion of a total over-all catalogue is supported by the local Chamber of Commerce to be published. Well, heck, this is all good, but you move that out into a wholly different context like the war and this ceases to be important.

JV: Sure.

HP: It is shoved aside and, to the extent that it is carried on, it becomes almost an enemy.

JV: Right, it becomes a burden on the economy generally.

HP: Yes, that's too bad. Well, change is the order of life. There's nothing that one can do. It is a shame that a lot of this work, as in this case, and as in the case of Hallie Flanagan, was subjected to what I would regard as a careful search with due regard for the niceties and the amenities in a society which puts a premium on an individual, but an effort to really ramrod something.

JV: Right.

HP: And to shape us in the light of my interest as distinct from the interest it had in its own content. So that the Lawyers Guild, for example, which did endless analyses of the Dies Committee approach, is to be praised. I don't care what the Lawyer's Guild was. They were taking the approach, and they were the only ones who were, so far as I am concerned, publicly, and they published bulletins defending what is the fair play inherent in the American dream. Now get this, the Lawyer's Guild, the Lawyer's Guild.

JV: Yes, yes.

HP: They were doing this.

JV: That is an organization that I know very little about. It has been vilified from time to time. They've labeled it Communist-inspired and all that sort of thing. I imagine, like any other of these projects, it probably has some Communists in it. I don't know.

HP: I don't have to reach that question. I think I can reach that the reason they got into trouble with the government is because they took a stand with reference to a major commitment in whatever America is, mainly you present a guy with some particulars and you let him go to court and quietly you decide this thing. You don't decide like a side show. The side show is alien to what it is. Well, they pointed this out. They pointed it out with chapter, page and verse. They pointed it out on the House Committee on -- what was that Virginia Senator? He was passing on the National Labor Relations Act and the National Labor Relations Board -- how the report came out. They ripped things out, distortion and so on. Well, distortion is the art of the Thirties. Yes, it is not merely this positive thing, that is the expression of individual views, or individual research, or individual discovery.

JV: Well, we were sort of a scared, frightened country, too, and I lay part of it to that. I mean, when people are scared and frightened, they see boogie men, and they are not always too rational. Sometimes it is simple for them to find the easy answers to all their problems. It must be the Communists, or it must be this, or it must be that.

HP: But, isn't it true that that kind of thinking is being born right now?

JV: Sure.

HP: Sure, so it is just a play of forces and this instant the seizure of a certain emptiness, a avoid, and filling it

with charges. It is our press who use this, not for purposes of education, but to sell newspapers.

JV: Sure.

HP: And that has nothing to do with whether what is being said is valid, or invalid, nothing. Well, there is no answer to all this except that it enlightened a critical public, and I think you get more enlightenment and criticism out of things like this and this than you will out of this.

JV: By the way, have you ever met our Commissioner here, Sid Wolner?

HP: No.

JV: Sid sent a notice around here today that if anybody came in here to visit us from Detroit to bring them up and say hello and perhaps you would like to meet him. Do you know of him or anything about him?

HP: No, but I'm not from Detroit.

JV: You're not?

HP: No.

JV: I see.

HP: I operate out of New York City although this is the Archives of American Art, situated in Detroit. We've run out of tape anyway.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... December 15, 2004