

FEDERAL AID PROJECTS IN MANHATTAN, KANSAS DURING THE
GREAT DEPRESSION

Julie Mundell

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One minute the country was thriving; people were happy and secure. The economy flew high after the surplus of jobs World War I production created. The next minute everything changed. Soon people were struggling to feed their families, struggling to find employment, struggling to survive. The stock market crash of 1929 set the country into a deep financial depression, thrusting thousands of Americans into poverty and unemployment.

Stuck in the financial rut for some time, the federal government decided that something needed to be done to help the American people. The government enacted several programs aimed to help the American people out of the financial disaster and get their lives back together. New Deal programs designed by the federal government to stimulate struggling economies benefited the city of Manhattan and the Kansas State College enough for them to survive the Great Depression. By looking at the national context, programs in Manhattan and programs for students and women, we can see how the New Deal programs helped struggling cities and what the long-term effects of these programs were.

Elected president in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt inherited a financial crisis that the country had not yet seen. His goal of presidency was a “New Deal for the American people,” essentially, a way to help in any way the federal government could.

Often referred to as the “Three R’s”, Roosevelt’s New Deal plan was for relief, recovery, and reform. Roosevelt wanted his New Deal program to relieve the pressures of financial difficulty, recover the economy from the devastating losses, and reform the stock market and financial system to discourage a repeat.¹

Over the course of the Great Depression, President Roosevelt pushed over thirty acts and organizations into effect. A number of programs designed specifically for relief and to help cope with the devastating losses of the stock market crash helped Americans find jobs. To stimulate job creation, some programs focused primarily on expansion and construction projects, hiring unemployed citizens to complete the work. This was a necessary action considering by 1932 more than twenty percent of the labor force was without work.² Relief programs included the Public Works Administration, started in 1933, the Works Progress Administration, implemented in 1935, and the National Youth Administration, which stemmed from the WPA in 1935.³

After Congress implemented the Works Progress Administration, local governments appointed administrators to act on behalf of the states. Clarence Nevins acted as the WPA director for Kansas. In July of 1935, he sent a letter to the local communities around the state, detailing exactly what the Works Progress Administration could do for their struggling towns. Nevins informed the state of the two main objectives of the WPA: to give people work who are in need, and that the

work would be useful public improvements or services.⁴ In order to accomplish the latter part of the goal, all projects would have to be created, planned, and requested at the local level. Each project would consist of mainly federal funds to be used mainly for labor and supplemented by local funds to pay for non-labor costs.

To be considered for employment through the Works Progress Administration, each individual would have to apply for eligibility through his or her local welfare agency. Eligibility was based on financial need and work qualifications or certifications. Those that had specialized training were more likely to get work than someone needing training was. The agency would then deem the person financially in need of income and physically able to work. Administrator Nevins had great hope for the projects that would be completed in Kansas. He hoped the Works Progress Administration programs would “salvage labor that would otherwise be wasted in idleness.”⁵

In order for work to be completed, local governments were required to submit project proposals to the state Works Progress Administration office. The state WPA would then review all of the project proposals and send them on to the national level. The national Works Progress Administration office either approved or denied funding based on availability and need. The small, quaint town of Manhattan, Kansas was just one of many cities begging the Works Progress Administration for funding and aid.

When the 1930s hit, Kansas was ready for help. Farm prices, personal income, and property value had plummeted. The government set numerous different taxes in order to control the deficit and generate any income they could. These taxes made the problem of paying off debts even worse for the individual. Retail sales taxes increased to two percent and levied a charge on practically anything a consumer would purchase, including food. A compensating tax imposed a fee on out-of-state purchases, hoping to stimulate demand within each state. Not that many states had much to worry about. It was too expensive to travel from state-to-state. Property taxes also skyrocketed.⁶ Tax payments eventually had to become non-existent. Few could pay. Wage cuts and rising unemployment forced people to choose between paying their taxes or feeding themselves and their families. Naturally, survival took precedent, and many property tax accounts were left delinquent.

Relief aid projects started after the inception of the Public Works Administration in 1933. The Public Works Administration did its part to send aid wherever they could. The PWA had a six billion dollar budget and worked on large-scale construction items. The Public Works Administration projects in Manhattan included the pavement of the City Park streets and cages at the Sunset Zoo.⁷ The Poyntz Avenue Public Works Administration project involved repaving the well-used road. Poyntz Avenue was the gateway to downtown Manhattan. People drove down the street, waving at others on the sidewalk, driving to their shopping destinations. The road had seen its fair share of

use. The project began by determining exactly which parts of the surrounding grass needed to be excavated. Workers began breaking up the tough concrete. Soon the road was nothing but rubble. By the end of February 1934, the entire existing pavement had been removed. Business owners along Poyntz Avenue were furious. The terrible economy had wreaked enough havoc on their businesses, they could not afford for their shops to become inaccessible. Piles of chopped up concrete sat waiting to be crushed down and reused in the cement mixtures. The bare road would need to be worked over and smoothed out before any pavement could be laid. With the road completely tore up, the perfect opportunity to improve the sewer system along Poyntz presented itself. Wood frames reinforced by rebar would support the large concrete tubes that would make up the new sewer lines. Once the new sewer lines were in place, concrete pavers poured the cement mixture onto the road, while workers smoothed the surface with large trowels. The Poyntz Avenue Project was completed by the end of March, three months from start to finish. The project employed fifteen to twenty men at any given time.

Unfortunately, the Public Works Administration did not have the budget the soon to come Works Progress Administration would have, and sometimes the PWA did not have enough resources to complete all that it aimed to do. A *Manhattan Mercury* article showed that the city commission did not feel that Manhattan had received a fair share of labor. The commission believed surrounding cities were given a larger

allowance for labor and petitioned the PWA for an additional allotment.⁸ In response, the PWA granted the city some additional funds for labor as well as funding for new projects, including repairs to city hall, grading ditches and streets, and planting trees.

The city commission also proposed Public Works Administration projects amounting to two million dollars. The commission submitted the plans to the state planning board for review and approval. The work included the construction of additional rooms and an auditorium in the Douglass School for Colored Children amounting to \$26,000, an underpass near Poyntz Avenue amounting to \$30,000, an auditorium for the Eugene Field School, amounting to \$25,000, and street drainage work totaling \$1,000. Other proposed projects with unknown expenditures included renovations to Sunset Park, additional renovations to City Hall, fire and police stations.⁹ The approval of these projects helped The Public Works Administration start the government aid and held the city afloat until the Works Progress Administration came along with their much larger budget and stronger support.

Months before Congress approved the creation of the Works Progress Administration, members of the Manhattan city commission started thinking of possible projects. Congress officially formed the Works Progress Administration through the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act on April 8, 1935. Congress initially approved of a four billion dollar budget. By the end of its life in 1939, the Works

Progress Administration would spend over thirteen billion dollars, the majority directly paying for workers' wages. The city commission created committees designed to draft ideas, plans, and projections for their projects. The city of Manhattan was eager to combat their unemployment problem. Although less than the national average, with Manhattan's unemployment average in 1935 at a staggering 12%, Manhattan was ready to put its men to work.¹⁰

The Works Progress Administration was extremely organized and well planned. Unlike the Public Works Administration, the WPA would include projects beyond the realm of construction, which meant it had the ability to employ more people and do different types of work. The WPA had regulations specifying the number of people that could be employed through the WPA at one time. Kansas was allotted sixty thousand, given that none of those sixty thousand were able to find work in the private sector. By the end of 1935, Kansas WPA employment numbers had reached fifty thousand. The allotted number of workers would work no more than 140 hours per month, averaging a thirty-five hour workweek.¹¹ Wages were based on experience. An unskilled worker would typically earn thirty-two dollars a month while a professional could earn up to eighty dollars per month. Employees with some certifications or training could earn any amount in between. Regulations also stipulated that only one member per family could be employed by the Works Progress Administration at one time. This rule was in place in order to be fair, as hundreds of families were in need of financial assistance.

Additionally, the WPA refused to employ anyone under the age of sixteen. The Works Progress Administration's sister program, the National Youth Foundation provided employment and aid for individuals under sixteen if necessary. Convicted felons were prohibited from employment as well as individuals who could not perform basic job functions. This is not to say the Works Progress Administration was discriminatory. Those unable to do physical labor were often given clerical work or other desk jobs.¹²

The Works Progress Administration provided several different types of work projects. While construction projects were still a large part of the WPA, having different types of projects allowed a larger demographic to be employed. Some of the other programs included feeding programs, clothing and other production, adult education, recreation, art, music, visual aid, writers projects, and public administration, and research assistance just to name a few. Women usually participated in feeding programs, clothing production, and adult education programs. Generally, men acted as supervisors in those types of situations. Those working in production programs constructed mattresses, household furniture, shoes, and shoe repairs.¹³

By the mid 1930's, the people of Manhattan were looking for something to smile about. They needed an outlet, somewhere they could relax, not worry about the day's issues. WPA workers built recreation centers for cities to house games, sports and other

social events. Other employees were then called in to operate the centers on a full-time basis. Ground in a southern part of the city was used for a recreational center in Manhattan. The federal Works Progress Administration office approved of stadium construction and improvements to the recreation park grounds in December of 1935.¹⁴ The park construction was completed in 1936. Total cost of the project amounted to \$15,874. After construction was completed, many people in Manhattan petitioned the county commission to name the new playground 'Griffith Field' in honor of the state Works Progress Administrator, Evan Griffith. The city also gave the park that name because of Evan Griffith's long history of support of city sports and his continued development of boys and girls in the town.¹⁵ Griffith Field allowed people to kick back and relax, not worry about the cares of the world, but focus on something they could enjoy. Evan Griffith was influential to the children of Manhattan, always encouraging them to play. Griffith Field allowed him, and others, to make that dream a reality.

Art, music, and writing programs became important parts of the Works Progress Administration. The government hired artists to create pieces of art for state or local governments. A skilled artist could earn up to seventy-five dollars a month until the job was completed, generally during a specified period.¹⁶ Nationally the federal art project employed over three million artists over the course of its life.¹⁷ The purpose of the art project was obviously to put skilled people to work, but also benefit society in a new way. Murals, sculptures and paintings began to pop up in cities and towns. Post offices,

courthouses, hospitals, and colleges all benefited from these art projects. Twenty-nine works completed in Kansas depicted rural scenes and local legends.¹⁸

The Kansas State Agricultural College became the home to one work of art. In 1934, artist David Hicks Overmyer painted four murals in the university library. Overmyer was a painter from Topeka, most recognized now for his murals in the Topeka Capitol building. He specialized in murals and would complete close to twelve murals throughout the course of the Depression. The library murals, titled "Agriculture," "Mechanics," "Art," and "Home," represent the four colleges of the university at the time.¹⁹ Artists provided a new kind of relief, almost a spiritual relief. People could step into the paintings and forget the world around them, becoming fully immersed in the paintings. It was therapeutic.

Skilled musicians earned seventy-two dollars to perform concerts and shows in towns for little to no cost to attendees. Other than employing a musician, these concerts had no other function besides a morale booster.²⁰ By going to a concert, people began to believe their lives were back to normal. They got the feeling they did not have to pinch every penny, or save every dime. For an hour or two, they simply got to relax and listen to music.

Writers served an important function during the Great Depression. The Works Progress Administration created a federal writers program to hire writers to record

local and state histories. These writers prepared material on social education and cultural subjects and other historical records. Unfortunately, Kansas had difficulty finding qualified personnel, and often resorted to hiring anyone that could write and needed the relief.²¹ Art, music, and writing programs were extremely important WPA programs during the Great Depression, not only for their employment benefits, but also for the stress relief they provided.

Public administration programs hired people for various different projects. Land use surveys conducted to collect, summarize, analyze and map agricultural data for planning purposes was one of the most popular projects. Child Accounting Projects were responsible for creating a uniform system of student personnel records. Another public administration program was topographical mapping. Similar to land use surveys, topographical mapping included locating landmarks to assist in planning future projects and city designs.²² Because most of the public administration programs involved a substantial amount clerical work, many physically handicapped WPA employees found work in this sector.

Similar to public administration, research assistance programs were mainly clerically based. The Body Measurement Project sent workers to take proportional measurements of different ages of children to provide measurements to be used in sewing centers to create clothes for needy families. Seamstresses would use these

measurements to create multiple sets of clothing. Other research programs included farm records surveying, public works inventory, and a survey of state institutions.²³ Surveys were also conducted to analyze properties, tax situations, cost of city and state governments as well as a general survey of recreational facilities. Public administration and research assistance programs were not the most prosperous out of the Works Progress Administration projects, but they did serve their purpose in employing those that might not otherwise be employed.

All of the other projects were important for the Works Progress Administration, but the largest section of WPA programs were construction based. Estimates suggest that nearly eighty percent of all WPA projects involved construction in some way.²⁴ Road construction, sewer systems, and public buildings were among the most popular construction projects. Manhattan, Kansas decided to take advantage of the construction relief, proposing multiple projects related to construction of roads, sewer systems, and public building improvements.

The first Works Progress Administration project began in August. The city commission approved of the sanitary sewer-cleaning project along Manhattan Avenue as well as a road-surfacing project. The WPA accepted their proposal and work began August 10, 1935. The project came at a total cost of \$8,990.40, employing sixty-eight men

for three months.²⁵ The Manhattan Works Progress Administration was off to a good start.

Project proposals came pouring in after that. For simplification, the city petitioned the state WPA office for aid under a blanket program. Essentially, the city asked to employ two hundred workers for one year on unspecified projects. Estimated labor was set at one million dollars. The city proposal was granted under the caveat that before any work was to be completed, the state administrator would inform the federal director the specifics of each project.²⁶ Work completed under the blanket program included road reconstructions, sewer renovations, and road pavements which employed 126 people.²⁷ In addition, the blanket program allowed fourteen men employment removing old trees and planting 514 new trees in the park. The city would cover the cost of the trees, amounting to \$1,878.²⁸ Other WPA construction projects in Manhattan included additional renovations to Sunset Zoo, expansion of the Douglass School, and pavement and construction of airport hangars.

Over the course of the year in 1935, the state of Kansas would propose over nine hundred WPA projects. Manhattan would propose seventeen.²⁹ Unfortunately, the Works Progress Administration was unable to accept all proposals it received. More often than not, projects were rejected, usually due to insufficient funds or the belief that funds could be better used elsewhere. Manhattan was fortunate. Of its seventeen

proposed projects, the Works Progress Administration approved nine in 1935.³⁰ Just because the government was willing to help did not always indicate they had an absolute ability.

A majority of the federal aid projects restricted employment only to men. Women were discouraged from applying for a number of government jobs because that meant they would be taking a job from a man trying to provide for his family. Generally, women were only allowed employment if they were the sole breadwinners for their family. Single women were discouraged entirely from applying for federal employment. Nevertheless, some single women did apply for federal aid and some received it.

However, this did not necessarily mean that all women were excluded from work. Some New Deal projects put in place specifically for women, one of them being sewing centers. The clothing production program produced sewing centers that would employ over 150 people. Positions included a unit supervisor, a foreman, clothes layers, cloth cutters, garment inspectors, pressers, and power machine operators. Men generally held the positions of supervisor and foreman, but women occupied the other positions. Sewing centers is where single women generally found employment. Payment for employment at a sewing center amounted to sixty dollars a month. The shops were used to produce, repair and renovate garments.³¹ Often the clothes

produced would be sent to families unable to purchase clothing or families that were not eligible for federal employment.

Women also worked as housekeepers. The feeding programs placed female workers in low-income houses where the mother is incapacitated and unable to do general housework. The feeding programs of the Works Progress Administration paid women to do general housework and cook for the families in need. All of the women employed were technically trained; some even had their registered nursing certificates.³² The Works Progress Administration felt this program was especially noteworthy because it taught workers the importance of a clean house, how to cook a balanced meal, and how to keep a family budget, an important concept considering the state of the economy.

The native citizens of Manhattan were not the only ones struggling through the Depression. The Kansas State Agricultural College was an integral part of the economy in Manhattan. The students also suffered the effects of the Great Depression and looked for financial assistance wherever they could. The National Youth Administration stemmed from the Works Progress Administration and was specifically designed to help individuals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. The NYA focused their efforts on high school and college students. The National Youth Administration hoped that by employing students, the students would be able to afford to pay for a college

education. Similar to the Works Progress Administration, the NYA had a list of projects the students were required to complete during their tenure of employment. In September of 1935, the National Youth Administration was able to give employment to twenty-nine high school students in Manhattan at a rate of six dollars a month.³³ Not only that, but the NYA also allotted money that they provided directly to universities. Universities, like the Kansas State Agricultural College, would use this money to hire students to accomplish tasks that otherwise would not be completed. College students received fifteen dollars a month for their labor.³⁴

Another example of a National Youth Administration program was a meal plan. Under this plan, students at the Kansas State College would work three hours a week in the school cafeteria. By working for the cafeteria, the students would receive a considerable discount on their meals, paying nine dollars for sixty-eight meals. Approximately three hundred students participated in this meal plan.³⁵

While the National Youth Administration programs were helpful to a large number of students, the budget was not sufficient to provide aid for all those who qualified. Of the five hundred students who applied for aid through the NYA, three hundred received help.³⁶ Even with sixty percent of the students taken care of, that still left two hundred without financial assistance. Dean R.A. Seaton, chairman of the student aid committee pressed the people of Manhattan to provide assistance to

students in any way they could. Citizens of Manhattan were known to house students in their homes, asking for nothing except help with household duties in exchange.

The Works Progress Administration and the National Youth Administration also teamed up to construct some of the buildings on campus. A group interested in housing programs proposed the building of a new dormitory, a plan which forty-five percent of the cost would be covered by the WPA. The group would issue bonds for the remaining fifty-five percent.³⁷ WPA employees would complete work as well as students employed by the NYA. In addition, the Works Progress Administration allowed the Kansas State College to build a new science hall. The college had wanted to build a physical science hall for some time, but lacked the funding to do so. The College Board refused to allocate funds for something they did not feel was completely necessary. The Kansas State College received an allowance of \$272,533.81 from the Works Progress Administration to build the new science hall, now known as Willard Hall (although now it houses the art department).³⁸

The Kansas State Agricultural College would be the pillar of the little town of Manhattan. It never failed to bring in a fresh population of students; students that would spend what little money they had in the Manhattan stores. Not only did the college bring in new groups of students each year, it also employed hundreds of people year-round. In a 1974 article in the *Manhattan Mercury*, a banker, Henry Otto, looked

back on the time of the Great Depression and said, "The College was the backbone of the down during the depression. It kept people employed."³⁹ The university was a great contributing factor to the success of Manhattan during the Great Depression.

Federal programs are never perfect. The New Deal projects helped in many ways, but the New Deal was not a fix-it-all solution. It was never intended to be. It had its own set of problems that had to be addressed in order for the programs to be successful. For one thing, it did not have unlimited funds. While this seems obvious, it made the process of obtaining approval for projects somewhat lengthy. Many different factors had to be considered and Manhattan was not the only town petitioning for money. Similarly, only so many projects could be going on at one time. It was often necessary to finish projects hastily so that others could start.⁴⁰ Not only that, but also most of the jobs were temporary. Being hired to complete one project did not guarantee an individual employment on a different project. Often the Works Progress Administration was unable to fully care for all of the individuals on its registry. Kansas had to apply for additional funds in September of 1935, citing that they would need an additional \$250,000 to care for all of the relief clients until more projects were approved.⁴¹ Towards the end of 1935, President Roosevelt hoped to make some of the Works Progress Administration jobs permanent, allowing people to work continuously.⁴² Eventually some jobs became permanent postings, but others did not. Manhattan had too many people, not enough jobs, and not enough money.

Additionally, it has been questioned whether or not the New Deal actually did any good. On September 20, 1935, the city commission reported that Manhattan was in debt \$744,998. The city estimated that by the time the debt would be fully paid off in 1952, the city would have spent an additional \$119,744.91 in interest.⁴³ Because the local governments are required to pay a portion of the cost of the Works Progress Administration projects, cities were falling deeper and deeper into debt. Individuals were benefiting from the employment, but the cities were sometimes taking a huge financial hit. Critics of the New Deal programs cited this factor as reasons to not support the New Deal programs. Most New Deal critics believed that the programs were nothing more than a crutch. They believed that by leaning too heavily on the New Deal, people would forget how to work for themselves and would stop looking for jobs in the private sector, content to live on the government's dime. However, because individuals were able to find government work, they became able to pay taxes and pay off personal debts. The city had a staggering amount of debt, but the amount would have been substantially higher if the New Deal had not taken place.

Supporters and critics of the New Deal programs still argue today about the repercussions of such a large program. Critics argue that the New Deal made the government too large and that President Roosevelt had no authority to create such programs that required such blatant government involvement. Most critics stick to the notion from the Constitution that any powers not delegated to the federal government

should be left up to the states. Supporters of the New Deal rebut by saying that the federal government had no choice. It is the job of the president to protect the American people, and the federal government has the authority to act in such situations. This debate has gone on ever since the implementation of the New Deal and will continue for many more years.

Overall, the New Deal was extremely successful throughout the Great Depression. Just in Kansas, 90,714 people found employment through the Works Progress Administration in 1935. Twenty-five percent aged sixteen to twenty-four worked for the WPA or NYA. Fifty percent were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four. Thirty percent lay within the forty-five to sixty-four range. Over one million women received assistance through the Works Progress Administration. Manhattan WPA programs alone provided work for 1,087 people.⁴⁴ Not only that, but working for wages gave people the impression that they were not receiving a government handout, and provided a significant morale booster during a time when there did not seem to be hope.⁴⁵

Evidence also exists that the New Deal stimulated the economy back to a growth period. Of the 1,087 people employed by the WPA in Kansas, by the end of 1935, 316 had dropped from the program because they found employment from private sources.⁴⁶ Clearly, the private sector was beginning to blossom again. Similarly, the Manhattan

economy began to improve overall. The amount of building permits issued rose significantly as well as the amount of loans and deposits being made from and into the banks.⁴⁷ People were beginning to trust the banks again and were beginning to feel more secure about their financial situations.

In a time of deep financial crisis, the federal government stepped in to protect its citizens. Billions of dollars were spent to ensure that the American people could continue their lives as smoothly as possible. It took a while for serious help to come, but essentially, the federal government made sure that the American citizens had their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness through work projects and programs designed to stimulate employment and income in a desperate economy.

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- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 200.
- ²⁵ "City and County Start Projects," *Morning Chronicle*, August 10, 1935.
- ²⁶ "WPA Projects Total Million," *Morning Chronicle*, September 5, 1935.
- ²⁷ "To Work Under WPA This Week," *Morning Chronicle*, September 25, 1935.
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- ³⁰ Peter Fearon, "Public Finance in Kansas During the Great Depression." *Kansas History*, 28 (Autumn-Winter 2005), 230-243.
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