

THE PEOPLE'S RECORDER

EPISODE 10: A CREATIVE INCUBATOR

HOST: This is Chris Haley. This episode makes reference to suicide. Please be advised.

[Archival 1940s radio game show]

GAMESHOW HOST (ARCHIVAL): *Presenting Doctor IQ!*

HOST: Let's imagine it's the 1930s, and you're testing this wild idea: can you create an incubator for creativity? Where would you decide to try it? Maybe in a region hit hard by the Great Depression. Would Lincoln, Nebraska, be your first choice? Probably not. But that's exactly where it happened.

Now listen to prize-winning author Mari Sandoz describe her time in Lincoln during those years. She had come to Lincoln from the dirt-poor farm where she grew up in western Nebraska.

[Archival of Mari Sandoz Interview]

MARI SANDOZ (ARCHIVAL): *Any time I got fifty dollars in the bank, I'd quit any job I had and write awhile.*

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *I've been reading about you all week. And the happiest time, it seems to me, is the time you were in Lincoln, when you didn't have any money. And you called it your 'Greenwich Village' time.*

MARI SANDOZ (ARCHIVAL): *It was a nice time because I had just enough to pay that eight dollar a month room. And there were an awful lot of other creative young people around, in music and several poets and short story writers. And we did all the usual things. We carried the American Mercury around under our arms. And we sneaked Ulysses and read Ulysses, things of that kind.*

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *And you finally gave up your job, didn't you... (Trails off)*

HOST: Lincoln, just a few years before the Depression, was a place where movie theaters could not show movies on Sundays, for religious reasons. And as Sandoz recalled, carrying a copy of James Joyce's Ulysses – a book banned as obscene – was enough to raise eyebrows.

Yet, by 1935, Lincoln was home to a budding creative community. That's when the Federal Writers' Project came to town, determined to turn over every rock to find the real Nebraska. The Nebraska Writers' Project would bring together an unexpected mix – a hobo novelist, a poet, a nurse-turned-interviewer, and a handful of salesmen and schoolteachers. With a little guidance from a local professor, this unlikely group would come together to create something surprising and truly transformative.

And Mari Sandoz, the no-nonsense, published author, would become its truth telling godmother, a mentor to the Project's young writers.

[Archival of Mari Sandoz Interview]

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *This is part of your philosophy of writing, isn't it? That you should write the truth whether it shocks or--?*

MARI SANDOZ (ARCHIVAL): *Oh, definitely. Yes, you have no right to falsify life, ever. No. Never. That's the cardinal sin of the writer. That's the thing that you cannot face yourself afterward, I don't think.*

HOST: This is The People's Recorder, and I'm your host Chris Haley. This podcast explores the work of the Federal Writers' Project, a 1930s government agency that set out to document the lives of everyday Americans. The Project ended up raising just as many questions as it answered in its quest to hold up a mirror to America - questions that we still ask ourselves today.

During the Great Depression, no place was more hard-hit than Nebraska. Unemployment was high – 17 percent of Nebraskans relied on emergency relief. And that figure was low: it did not include everyone who needed help. Many Nebraskans refused to sign up for government aid because they saw it as charity. It ran against everything they cherished about the pioneer spirit. Across the state, crops failed, and farms went under, and the city of Lincoln became a magnet for children of farm families who dreamed of escaping poverty.

One big draw was the University of Nebraska, which was starting to get a lot of attention because of a literature professor named Lowry Wimberly. He had an eye for spotting talent and he nurtured his students' budding careers, providing a space where they could support each other's creative work.

Here's Nebraska historian Stephen Cloyd:

STEPHEN CLOYD: *Wimberly was really interested in anybody that he thought could do any writing.*

HOST: The professor gave support in the way that good mentors do: by sharing a passion for their subject. Wimberly edited a magazine called *Prairie Schooner*. The name referred to the big, canvas-topped wagons of the Old West.

Wimberly's magazine became famous as a publisher of the best fiction, nonfiction and poetry from and about America's heartland.

STEPHEN CLOYD: *These people were trying very hard to do justice to the world that they actually knew – the language, the places and the people that were actually part of their experience. There were some lovely descriptions of driving across Nebraska and seeing the prairie and the wild roses and everything, and just floating through that, along the Oregon Trail.*

PRAIRIE SCHOONER EXCERPT (VOICED BY ACTOR): *The early tales of overland journeys to the Pacific often speak of the monotony of the prairies. The violets among the prairie grass stood up sturdily. The wild roses grew close to the ground. There were wild grapes and wild plums here and there along the streams. When autumn came, the long days of golden sunshine and sapphire skies made up only a little for the mere brownness beneath them. Sunshine and wide skies and glowing sunsets - these were the coins the prairies offered in exchange for all they lacked.*

Published in Prairie Schooner, 1927.

HOST: The magazine captured the region's flavor so well that national publishers took notice. Prairie Schooner appeared on a list of best American literary magazines. Nobody in the New York publishing world expected this from the Great Plains.

STEPHEN CLOYD: *It's hard to think about Lincoln this way, but Mari Sandoz said that what Wimberly had created in Lincoln, in those years, was kind of a bohemian atmosphere in which there was somebody writing in every cafe in town. There was this excitement about writing that she never remembered before and certainly not since. And Wimberly was kind of the author of that excitement.*

HOST: One of Professor Wimberly's more dedicated students was a young farmhand named Rudolph Umland. Umland loved the writing classes. As he later recalled, read here by an actor.

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *Wimberly made the putting of words on paper the most exciting thing a person could do. He and I both shared the same birthday, had slept in jail, and we both liked Chaucer. We both hoped to write a novel that would shock the world.*

HOST: Stephen Cloyd sees Rudolph Umland as a kind of salt-of-the-earth type.

STEPHEN CLOYD: *He grew up in Eagle, Nebraska, which is right outside Lincoln... Umland was kind of a short blonde guy, well built, you know, he'd grown up doing labor on the farm. He just had a magnetic personality. He was able to talk to anyone. He started at the University of Nebraska, but things began to go really downhill in the Depression.*

HOST: As the Depression set in, hard times forced Umland to leave the university. His departure was a disappointment for Professor Wimberly.

STEPHEN CLOYD: *First, he went back to the farm and then he started hopping trains.*

HOST: Umland joined nearly a half million other young Americans who hopped freight trains during the Great Depression, looking for work anywhere. He criss-crossed the country for several years, working as a farmhand, dishwasher, fruit-picker, construction worker, whatever job he could land.

But in 1935, after years of riding the rails in search of a job, Umland returned to his family farm just outside of Lincoln. Wimberly tried to reignite Umland's dream of becoming a writer, publishing some of his stories in the *Prairie Schooner*. But the Depression wore on, and the farm was doing worse.

STEPHEN CLOYD: *Umland was farming with his brother, and he was getting to feel that there wasn't enough work for him, that he was a drag on the family. And so, he proposed to restart his life as a hobo and catch a train and see what he could come up with along the line. And he stopped in at Wimberly's office to say goodbye to him. And Wimberly said there was this government program – this Writers' Project that was just getting started.*

HOST: In the Nebraska Writers' Project, Wimberly saw a chance to expand his incubator in Lincoln and thought the Project would be a good fit for Umland. Besides, as the professor told Umland, "It's too damn cold to ride in a freight."

STEPHEN CLOYD: *And Wimberly took him over there and they hired him on right away. So that's kind of how he got started on the Federal Writers' Project.*

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *They immediately hired me. I had never done any editorial work, but it was apparent that the director was even less qualified.*

HOST: Federal Writers' Project in Nebraska was marked by troubles. For a program aimed at putting unemployed writers to work, recruiting those writers turned out to be a slow process. And the challenges started right at the top, with the state's first director – who had been hired more for her political connections than for any particular qualifications.

MARILYN HOLT: *Just like so many of the state projects, the one in Nebraska got off to a really shaky start.*

HOST: Marilyn Holt is a historian and author of the book, *Nebraska During the New Deal*, about the Federal Writers' Project in the state.

MARILYN HOLT: *The first person who was hired as director, she was kind of a disaster. She did not know how to organize people, which was surprising because at one time she had been a schoolteacher, and you would think that a schoolteacher would know how to get people to work together.*

STEPHEN CLOYD: *What I remember is the director was so suspicious that other people in the Project were trying to take her job away from her. And she was really attracted to flowery writing at a time when that was really passé.*

HOST: A lot of that bad writing landed on Umland's desk as a staff editor. One day the director shared an essay with a note praising its "beautiful, beautiful writing." Umland found the essay, about an early pioneer, almost too terrible to read.

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *The traveler reported on setting out to return to his camp in a storm. Quote “he fell into a ravine; he became lost; he saw wolves. He came upon a hidden glen where were many buffalo bones piled high, a fearful sight. He sang snatches from grand opera to pass the night. During the time, he knew no hunger; he had eaten mushrooms and other wild growths. He had great strength, probably aroused by the great strain of fear and hunger. In fact, he wanted to fight a wolf, but the wolf would not come out of his den.” When I finished reading, I was ready to fight several wolves myself.*

HOST: It was clear the state director did not have the editorial chops for the job, and Umland, a twenty-something hobo, was the most responsible adult in the room.

The staffing problems and rumors swirled through the tightknit city of Lincoln. It was particularly upsetting to Mari Sandoz, who as a leading author in town, wanted to see the new agency get Nebraska history right. Yet getting rid of an under-performing manager proved even harder than hiring.

MARILYN HOLT: *Mari Sandoz, she's like Wimberly, she's not a paid member of the Project, but she's there at the beginning as a consultant. She's upset to a certain degree that the first director is not doing a very good job, and she does talk to the man who has given this political appointment and said, “you know, you really need to rethink this. This can't go on this way.”*

STEPHEN CLOYD: *They weren't being very productive and when they tried to get rid of her, the word came from Washington in a letter that said that as long as the Nebraska Federal Writers Project was gonna exist, she was gonna have her desk. So, their solution to that problem was, they moved her desk to her apartment...*

HOST: Yes, the local staff picked up the state director's desk and literally hauled it out of the office, to her home. That cleared the way for a replacement."

STEPHEN CLOYD: *She kept her title, and then they just continued to pay her and appointed new people.*

HOST: After a full year at work, the Nebraska Writers' Project had published very little. The removal of its first state director had left a power vacuum, and the office was still disorganized. What comes across in accounts of the Writers Project beginning in Nebraska is chaos, and young people picking up the pieces. At age twenty-eight, Rudolph Umland, who had until recently planned to resume hobo-ing, suddenly found himself one of the most experienced people on the Project staff. During his travels, he had worked all sorts of jobs, but he had never managed this type of operation. Umland sought advice from his old professor at the University of Nebraska Lowry Wimberly. 13:20

MARILYN HOLT: *Wimberly was not a member of the Writers Project, but very well respected. He was really supportive and very helpful to the whole process. And I think Umland along with Wimberly, really were the driving force. They really kept it together.*

HOST: Wimberly gave Umland helpful advice, and he continued to send over talented writers to work on the Project.

In 1936, another Wimberly protégé who had editing experience became the supervisor of the Project in Nebraska and The Writers' Project started to emerge from turmoil.

STEPHEN CLOYD: *They got down to a core that could do the work, and I think that's what really kind of saved the thing going forward.*

HOST: Here is Rudolph Umland's account, read by an actor.

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *The project gradually – with the transfer of a few of its lesser wits to other WPA projects – developed into something like it was designed to be. Good copy started to come into the state office. An editorial board was set up, with the more capable workers and a definite flow of material, as in a newspaper office. There were several re-write editors, a tour editor, a cities editor, and essays editor, and a managing editor. Each editor contributed his two-cents worth to the volume.*

HOST: Another writer sent to the Project by Professor Wimberly was a young poet from southeastern Nebraska named Weldon Kees. The eccentric Kees would bring a poet's touch to the Project.

JAMES REIDEL: *What Kees was looking for was people who were really committed, authentic as he was. Wimberly probably saw that and thought he would be a good part of the DNA of the Writers Project.*

HOST: We spoke with author James Reidel, who wrote a definitive biography on Kees, about the poet and his work.

JAMES REIDEL: *The father owned a company, and the family had had this business for years and was basically one of the first industries in Beatrice, Nebraska. The parents were not well to do, but by small town standards, they probably were. But when the Depression came along and the parents' fortunes declined a bit, that sense of being cheated out of something better started to well up in him, I believe, and disappointment and impatience became sort of key features in his persona.*

Kees wanted to write poems with irony, with secrets, with allusions, in that kind of self-deprecating way. I was stricken. I was like hypnotized by him.

HOST: *Here's a recording of Kees, reading his acclaimed poem, "1926"*

[Archival of Weldon Kees reading his poem “1926”]

WELDON KEES (ARCHIVAL):

1926

*The porchlight coming on again,
Early November, the dead leaves
Raked in piles, the wicker swing
Creaking. Across the lots
A phonograph is playing Ja-Da.*

*An orange moon. I see the lives
Of neighbors, mapped and marred
Like all the wars ahead, and R.
Insane, B. with his throat cut,
Fifteen years from now, in Omaha.*

*I did not know them then.
My airedale scratches at the door.
And I am back from seeing Milton Sills
And Doris Kenyon. Twelve years old.
The porchlight coming on again.*

HOST: Kees was only twenty-three years old when he arrived in Lincoln to study writing but had already lived an interesting life. He traveled widely trying to find himself and his artistic voice. He even tried acting in Hollywood at one point. Professor Wimberly saw in him a diamond in the rough.

Stephen Cloyd:

STEPHEN CLOYD: *Wimberly had these tremendous ambitions. And he said that he brought Kees over to the Nebraska Writers Project to kind of try and nail him down a little bit.*

JAMES REIDEL: *What was important for Wimberly was a writing community in Lincoln that was like the writing communities in any of the larger cities because younger writers would thrive in that sort of environment. Kees was definitely an asset because even though he probably looked down on the work that Umland was doing, they were all aspiring writers who needed a place for them to develop a certain degree of camaraderie and to share ideas, to have sort of a writing community.*

HOST: Umland had now become managing editor. He still often consulted his mentors for advice. Especially the wise Mari Sandoz, who had worked with editors at the highest levels. Sandoz saw the potential for Umland – and the WPA writers – to portray Nebraska with honesty.

STEPHEN CLOYD: *Wimberly and Sandoz were always kind of behind the scenes. And of course, Umland was always talking to them. The Federal Writers are going over to Mari Sandoz's apartment on weekends when she was willing to have 'em. They were occasions on which people would talk about writing and personal things. And this is when people learned that Mari knew how to do all these Polish dances and stuff like that. It was a functioning social circle. The writers here were a real community.*

HOST: The experience was doing more than just documenting Nebraska—it was forging deep connections among people from diverse backgrounds. As Umland put it:

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *Lord, we had laughter in those years of economic depression! It was not uncommon to see Weldon Kees or another staffer doubled over with guffaws.*

HOST: Umland later recalled long walks through the city with Kees, who was sometimes mooning over a girl. One night they sat for hours on a front lawn, talking.

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *It was a starry spring night. He talked about girls, playing in dance bands, stories he had written, and books he had read. About 3 a.m. I left him there on the grass...*

HOST: In Lincoln, a dynamic writing community was blossoming – a collective of creatives who found support and inspiration from one another, nurtured and guided by the vision and mentorship of Sandoz and Wimberly.

Their task was ambitious: to capture the essence of Nebraska through interviews and gathered histories and weaving it into the fabric of a guidebook about the state. Using guidelines from Washington, the project writers started to interview everyday citizens about their lives. Some experts were skeptical of what these citizen writers would produce.

MARILYN HOLT: *The people who had the academic background, either in doing oral histories or collecting folklore, they really had their doubts that these amateurs would be able to collect anything. One of the things that drew me to this particular group were the people. Sometimes it's really apparent that a person was chosen because they had a specific skill or a specific background. I love one of the stories where the woman's father had a band and he also called the dances. And she's talking about when they would go to a barn raising. And the band might sit up in the hayloft to give people more room to dance.*

HOST: Here's an excerpt from that interview, read by an actor.

MRS. CHARLIE HUYCK (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *A big dance was a way of dedicating a new barn and they were big affairs. The hayloft would be lighted with lanterns or hanging lamps. The crowd was full of life, and they sure could dance. In one set, sometimes would be an elegantly dressed lady, bustle and all, a calico-clad country girl, even a lady from town with a wide hooped skirt. One man might be dressed in overalls, another with a swallow-tail coat. It was a sight, all in one set, circling, bowing, and promenading.*

HOST: As a group, the life history interviews, as they were called, were not perfect. The staff didn't get much training. They tended to focus less on inclusive history and more on the pioneer stories of white settlers heading West to make new lives for themselves.

But there were exceptions, such as a series of pamphlets about local and ethnic histories. One traced the story of African American pioneer settlements for a book called *Negroes of Nebraska*.

MARILYN HOLT: *They're homesteaders. A lot of the former slaves come to the state and one of the things that you read in the *Negroes in Nebraska* is, the people who are writing this know that there were lots of small black towns that were organized around where black homesteaders had taken up land.*

HOST: The *Negroes of Nebraska* pamphlet has language and attitudes that belong in the past. But that pamphlet marked a first attempt to document a story that is still little known.

MARILYN HOLT: *Yes, people would, I think, be surprised to know that there were black homesteaders, black town builders that came to the state after the Civil War. But by the 1930s, almost all these towns are gone. Most of them had either left the state or gone to Lincoln and Omaha, where social and economic opportunities are greater.*

HOST: Here's an excerpt from “*Negroes of Nebraska*” about one vanished town:

NEGROES OF NEBRASKA EXCERPT (VOICED BY ACTOR):

Negro immigrants appeared in Franklin County as early as 1867. They laid plans for a Negro colony and village. They took up homestead claims and gave the stream which flowed through their land the name of Lovely Creek, the name by which it is still called. They laid out their proposed town, the city of Grant, and plans included the construction of a courthouse.

HOST: When it comes to the West, we have all heard about Black cowboys or Buffalo soldiers. But the experiences of Black homesteaders building their own towns in Nebraska – that is a little nugget of history that I had no idea about.

But it is fascinating to learn about people who wound up making Nebraska their home.

MARILYN HOLT: *The individual Homesteader experiences can be quite different... And, of course, in Nebraska, you have lots and lots of immigrant groups. Germans, Italians, Polish, Czech. So, you have all these people who have different immigrant experiences, and they are living in communities that may still be largely practicing their own traditions, their own customs, their own food, certainly a lot of them using still their native languages. So, it's kind of a continual reminder of “This is who we are. We may be part of this bigger group, but this is also who we are.”*

HOST: No one did more interviews in Nebraska than Ruby Wilson, a nurse in the town of North Platte. After her husband lost his job, she was able to find work with the Writers Project. She set about interviewing people in North Platte, like a Mexican farm worker, or the manager of a local café, whose family came from Japan, anyone who she could persuade to sit down and talk.

Here are a few quotes from those interviews, read by actors.

MISAO WADA (VOICED BY ACTOR): *We came to Nebraska when I was nine years old. If you were to see our oldest and youngest girl together, they were as different as day and night. The youngest looks like an American, her manners and all. The oldest girl likes the old-country Japanese. We want our girls to live the life of this country, as they are Americans.*

JOHN VALDEZ (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I came in about 1917 from Old Mexico to work in a coal mine in Texas. My family, we rent homes and some buy, just like other people. For weddings there is a big dinner and a big dance. I'm going to have a big, grand wedding when I get married.*

HOST: Ruby Wilson interviewed a cross-section of North Platte. She spoke with over one hundred and thirty of the town's 12,000 residents in different neighborhoods. She called their stories "marvelous."

MARILYN HOLT: *I think she did it on her own accord. Some of these interviewers were pretty independent in terms of deciding who they interviewed. I think they gave the writers a lot of leeway.*

HOST: Umland and his staff were doing what the national office wanted all the states to do – interview long-time residents to find the best stories of Nebraska's past for the state and local guidebooks. The efforts for local guidebooks centered on Omaha and Lincoln.

MARILYN HOLT: *Wild towns that had to be civilized. Just lots and lots of stories about the good ol' cowboy days and the brothels and saloons. Some real rootin' tootin'; good times there. That's something I think some of them really thought ought to be chronicled.*

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *Newspaper files searched for facts. I remember how shocked one worker was when she inadvertently discovered that a prominent churchwoman had once been involved in a scandal. We wanted to write a guide to the city that would be unbiased and entertaining.*

HOST: But not everybody wanted an "unbiased" book about their hometown. Omaha's history included race riots, lynchings, and labor conflict – and that was not the tourist-friendly image that some wanted to see in print.

MARILYN HOLT: *The Omaha Chamber of Commerce was supposed to help pay for publication because they wanted a big booster about just the good things in Omaha. Well, when they read the draft, they refused to fund it because there were lots of mentions of some of the less savory parts of what happened in early Omaha, and was still happening.*

HOST: But Umland and his team were pursuing honest histories and wouldn't budge to pressure from the Chamber of Commerce - and so no Omaha guidebook was ever published.

MARILYN HOLT: *The project deserves some credit for not bowing to the Omaha group just in order to have another publication.*

HOST: In Lincoln, also, they encountered resistance from the local group that had agreed to pay for printing that city guidebook.

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *After several of the members had read the manuscript, objections were made to the sparing use of adjectives glorifying the city.*

HOST: Instead, the State Historical Society stepped in and agreed to sponsor the Lincoln guidebook. When the book came out, something surprising happened. People bought up copies right and left. It sold 16,000 copies in the first year – about one copy for every four residents. One newspaper wrote, quote “My respect for the white-collar section of the WPA increases greatly as a result of this publication. It is a good piece of work.”

MARILYN HOLT: *The people in Lincoln seemed to kind of glory in anything that was said about it. And even when there are some disparaging remarks about Lincoln in the Guidebook, they didn't try to step in and censor...sort of like, “Okay, this is who we are.”*

EXCERPT FROM THE LINCOLN CITY GUIDE (VOICED BY AN ACTOR):
Although the downtown area possesses a certain metropolitan air, the city still smacks of the soil; its people are at heart farmer folk, and the talk of crops and weather is never-ending on the streets...Lincoln is unavoidably weather-minded, since all its business, even its schools, is dependent on the income of the farmers.

From the Lincoln City Guide

HOST: In the Spring of 1939, the citizen writers in Nebraska were readying the state guidebook to go to press. Some were already leaving Lincoln to seek other work. But Rudolph Umland was determined to see the book to completion. As publication loomed, Umland reflected on the passing seasons.

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I liked to go into a tavern, order a beer, and watch the other beer drinkers and speculate on them. Working on writing the WPA guidebooks, I became deeply conscious of local history, the drama played by Nebraska pioneers, and the passing of the generations of the old, bearded men. The tavern encompassed it all.*

HOST: Others were getting restless. Umland's friend Weldon Kees had less and less patience for Lincoln and their work. His attention was turning elsewhere. Tensions erupted. Kees pushed back against Umland's editorial demands with a dismissive, “Nonsense, Rudy!” Umland voiced his frustrations with Kees in an essay years later.

RUDOLPH UMLAND (VOICED BY ACTOR): *Sometime during his last months in Lincoln, I suspect he became convinced he was a rare genius and fell in love with himself.*

HOST: Stephen Cloyd

STEPHEN CLOYD: *There was always this friction between Umland and Kees. And at one time Umland said, I think Weldon Kees is an example of a new kind of person, a person who's only oriented towards the contemporary world and the future. There's no history for him. History means nothing to him.*

HOST: Kees soon left the Project and Lincoln. While he may have denied it, his experience on the WPA left its mark on him. He gained friends who supported his poetry as good editors. And he received a boost toward his dream of publishing.

Mari Sandoz advised him on how to deal with New York editors and helped him get an agent. Even Henry Alsberg, the national director, gave him a boost by selecting some of Kees' poems for an anthology of independent writing from project employees, called American Stuff.

Kees' experience on the Project also affected his writing itself. James Reidel.

JAMES REIDEL: *Kees was, in his poetry, writing his own guidebook. A very personal one. "Travels in North America," was a capstone to his own project. It covers the ground he traveled, going across country, listening to jazz music, and heading on to Route 66. It's an incredible poem and probably is a guide, a roadmap very much in keeping with the guidebook.*

HOST: *Travels in North America* seems to channel the WPA guidebook spirit, infused with Kees' own irreverence.

WELDON KEES (VOICED BY ACTOR):

*Here is San Luis Obispo. Here
Is Kansas City, and here is Rovere,
Kentucky. And here, a small black dot,
Unpronounceable*

*... You have forgotten singularities.
You have forgotten
Rooms that overlooked a park in Boston, rain against a skylight.
You have forgotten yellow lights in San Francisco coming on.*

*Journeys are ways of marking out a distance,
Or dealing with the past, however ineffectually,
Or ways of searching for some new enclosure in this space
Between the oceans.*

JAMES REIDEL: *What I think is so cool about the Writer's Project, and Kees' poetry is that both are preserving some moment in time that's unique and precious.*

HOST: The WPA Guide to Nebraska was published on July 1, 1939. It marked a milestone in the state's portrayal of itself. Like the Lincoln city guidebook, the state guide was a local bestseller. The Nebraska guidebook stands among the strongest entries of the American Guide series, or WPA guidebooks as we call them now. The reviews were glowing.

ACTOR READING HEADLINE: *The fruits of relief work for the unemployed are taking form in a series of stout, handsome books of permanent and immediate value. –From the St. Louis Post Dispatch*

HOST: Alsberg had a policy of not naming individual guidebook contributors, but Rudolph Umland's humor weaves through the text, the historic ironies and human foibles. And his hobo's sympathy appears in scenes rarely found in other guidebooks, like this one describing Jefferson Square in downtown Omaha:

EXCERPT FROM WPA GUIDE TO NEBRASKA (VOICED BY AN ACTOR):

Jefferson Square is the only park remaining of three originally platted in 1854. Attempts have been made to convert it into practically anything but a park. Now it is a rendezvous for the idle men who crowd its benches. The personnel changes from day to day, but the scene, with its air of frustration and despair, remains the same.

HOST: A Project editor in the Washington headquarters noted how the Nebraska office published dozens of books and pamphlets, surpassing all other states, in number of books published per capita.

It can be hard to gauge the impact of an incubator, but some saw the Writers' Project in Nebraska as a culmination of a literary flowering in Lincoln. It showed what incredible outcomes can emerge when a hub for writing is cultivated, showing that talent and creativity can thrive even during the most difficult of times.

JAMES REIDEL: *The genius of the Writers Project is that it allowed a lot of people to meet and come together.*

HOST: What the Writers' Project meant for the public lay primarily in that series of books and oral histories about their country. Still, the Project left holes that remained to be filled by others in the future.

The WPA writers in Nebraska lived out the legacy quietly. Ruby Wilson went on to research and write a book on local history, shaped as a dialogue.

Weldon Kees continued restlessly moving across the country. Eventually...Kees made his way to San Francisco. In 1955, Kees left his car parked near the Golden Gate Bridge. He disappeared without a trace. For years, his friends back in Nebraska puzzled over Kees' apparent death by suicide.

Rudolph Umland never wrote a novel that shocked the world. But he did publish articles and book reviews in Kansas City newspapers while working a civil service job. His daughter Yvonne

said that her father and Mari Sandoz stayed good friends for many years. Yvonne said that her father and Mari Sandoz stayed good friends for many years. Yvonne even traveled to New York City to meet the great Nebraskan author at her home in Greenwich Village. Sandoz was stylish, witty and welcoming. Almost family.

Sandoz continued to write award-winning novels and histories into the 1960s.

Lowry Wimberly dedicated himself to mentoring Nebraska writers and publishing *Prairie Schooner* until his retirement in 1956, laying the foundation for what would become one of the longest-running literary magazines in the United States. Now, after nearly a century of continuous publication, *Prairie Schooner* remains a testament to Wimberly's vision, offering a global stage for fiction, poetry and essays while staying true to its Nebraska roots.

For the people who lived it – the hobo, the nurse the poet – it meant something more. Beyond the life raft of a small paycheck, they found a shared community during an incredibly dark time. And it fueled their curiosity and gave them hope for America, showing that everyone's voice could contribute to a greater collective story.

The effect of working on the Writers' Project was felt by tens of thousands of people, young and old, across the country.

In 1939, one person expressed the meaning of that experience on national radio. In that time of deep uncertainty, a radio program called "America's Town Meeting of the Air" put up a question for debate: "Can we count on the youth to uphold the American Way?"

The panel they gathered included midwestern college students and one voice from the Writers' Project, 27-year-old Richard Wright. While on the Project, he had won a story prize, and in 1939 was drafting a big novel about race that would come out the next year, called *Native Son*.

That evening to a national audience, Richard Wright expressed the fear and hope that had fueled many young WPA writers.

[Archival from Town Meeting of the Air]

RICHARD WRIGHT (ARCHIVAL): *The Depression in 1929 caused a grave doubt to enter our hearts. We were horrified at the sudden and brutal way in which all that we hold dear in human life was swept into obscurity.*

We created cultural divisions of the WPA – art projects – to link the present with the past, and to link the both the past and the present with the future. These projects are trying to keep alive in the hearts of youth the dream of a free and equal mankind.

HOST: Dreams of freedom and equality.

The reflective work of the WPA writers—what some have called the "great listening project"—produced a lasting archive of collective history that still resonates and inspires us today.

Historian Douglas Brinkley:

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY: *The great writer Thomas Wolfe once said there are a billion forms of America. Nobody before these guidebooks thought they could bring all those subcultures together. The guidebooks tried. They had a lot of misfires, but I think that it has an enduring appeal as something that makes you proud of a certain moment in American history when artists and writers worked in unison with the Federal government. By celebrating Americanism in the fullest sense, it allowed different cultural strands to meet. Everything being included in the mix, which is what Americanism is.*

HOST: With those words, we wrap up this season of The People's Recorder. Join us next season as the divisions intensify, new stories unfold, and the WPA writers go head-to-head with powerful forces in Congress.

If you like what you've heard, please rate and review us, sign up for news, and share The Peoples Recorder with a friend. This episode was produced by Spark Media with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Nebraska Humanities.

This is Chris Haley. Thanks for listening.

If you are thinking about suicide or if you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 for confidential, free support.