THE PEOPLE'S RECORDER

EPISODE 1: A GIANT LISTENING PROJECT

HOST: In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, when many said America was at her lowest point, something truly weird and amazing happened. We started to listen. As a nation, I mean.

[Archival Clip from the Library of Congress]

WPA INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *What is your name?*

JAMES GRIFFIN (ARCHIVAL): *James Griffin.*

WPA INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *How old are you, James?*

JAMES GRIFFIN (ARCHIVAL): *Twenty-one*

WPA INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *Where were you born?*

JAMES GRIFFIN (ARCHIVAL): *Tennessee.*

WPA INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *How long you been in Florida?*

JAMES GRIFFIN (ARCHIVAL): *I've been in Florida ever since I was 10 years of age.*

HOST: The U.S government hired out-of-work writers and journalists and literally sent them out to record the stories of Americans. All kinds of Americans. It was basically a giant "listening project." This had never been done before, and on this scale, it has not been done since.

DAVID BRADLEY: *When you look at it in historical, cultural terms, this was revolutionary. It shook things up. And things needed shaking up.*

[Theme music starts]

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

I'm your host, Chris Haley. I'm an archivist, actor and writer. I've been passionate about history since I was a kid when I was inspired by my uncle Alex Haley, who wrote a book about finding family roots, which was called…well, Roots. You may have heard of it. But even with everything I've learned over the years, it feels like we have only just scratched the surface. We need to keep uncovering our national story to make sure our collective history isn't erased, important work started by folks on the Federal Writers' Project.

The journey of the writers on that project starts in the darkest days of the Great Depression.

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT March 4, 1933 (ARCHIVAL): *A host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little return, and only a foolish optimist can deny the dark reality of the moment.*

HOST: The Depression is still the worst economic disaster in America's history, shaking a third of the country into poverty that lasted for years. In cities like Chicago, half of all adults lost their jobs. There, we meet a young man named Studs Terkel. Studs would go onto become one of our most celebrated oral historians, but in the 1930s he was broke just like everyone else.

STUDS TERKEL: *There was a feeling. What was going to happen to the country? And millions unemployed and private industry was on its bottom. You see, this is a certain key moment in the history of this country. The Great American Depression. Arthur Miller called it the most traumatic moment of history since the Civil War.*

HOST: President Franklin Roosevelt, elected in 1932 to fix the economy, made it a top priority to get the American people working again, even if it meant the government itself had to hire them.

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT March 4, 1933 (ARCHIVAL): *…Our greatest primary task is to put people to work. This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously. It can be accomplished by direct recruiting by the government itself…This nation is asking for action, and action now.*

HOST: In the summer of 1935, with an election looming amid massive unemployment, Roosevelt knew he had to go even bigger. His first measures failed to launch a recovery. In fact, after a slight initial improvement, things just seemed to be getting worse.

A *Fortune* magazine survey in 1935 asked the question, "Do you believe that the government should see to it that every man who wants to work has a job?" Over three-fourths of Americans polled answered yes. That same summer Roosevelt unveiled the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, a big new government agency with a mandate to put people back to work.

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT Oct 31, 1936 (ARCHIVAL): *Of course, we will provide useful work for the needy unemployed, because we prefer useful work to the pauperism of a dole. And here and now I want to make myself clear about those who disparage their fellow citizens on the relief rolls. They say that those on relief are not merely jobless—they say that they are worthless.*

HOST: At that time the idea of government providing jobs relief was radically new. Most Americans considered the notion suspicious. It seemed to go against the American myth of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Instead, Roosevelt's New Deal recognized that many Americans needed a hand up to get off the ground.

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY: *It was an inclusiveness to Roosevelt's policies that really psychologically started stirring people, at least to start moving out of the mire of the Great Depression.*

HOST: That's Presidential Historian Douglas Brinkley, who has written a lot about Roosevelt and the New Deal.

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY: *The idea behind all of Roosevelt's New Deal is that people have talent. You may be poor, you may be broke, you may be really down on your luck but there's some talent in you. We need you, and we will pay you and we will help you if you kind of pitch in.*

[Archival Clip from WPA video produced by the government.]

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *In all parts of the country, the letters WPA are a symbol of progress and improvement. Many thousands of jobs such as these dot the map of the United States, giving work and hope to people who can't find jobs, and permanent improvements to a host of communities for the years to come.*

HOST: The WPA initially focused on public works that people could <u>see</u> – building roads, schools, parks and dams to power a rapidly modernizing America. But publishers and newspapers kept laying off more workers, and <u>those</u> workers took to the streets in protest. <u>They</u> needed jobs, too. So a small fraction of the WPA budget was allocated for creative programs – art, music, theater, and what we'll be delving into with this podcast – the Federal Writer's Project.

Enter Henry Alsberg, a New York journalist with experience managing humanitarian aid. In the Summer of 1935, he was working in the WPA office in Washington. Alsberg wasn't your typical government bureaucrat – he'd been an overseas correspondent and a playwright. He looked bearish and firsthand accounts describe him as having rather sad eyes. And although this is debated in recent scholarship, some at the time claimed Alsberg was wildly disorganized. But he was a strong editor and got the job of leading the Writers' Project.

Alsberg reported directly to a practical politician from Iowa named Harry Hopkins. Hopkins was one of Roosevelt's closest advisors and the director of the WPA. Weeks into the new WPA initiative, Hopkins met with his new group of managers, many of them overwhelmed by the task ahead. They had complaints about all the bureaucratic red tape, and the logistical headaches of getting the WPA started. Alsberg had been quiet. Hopkins turned to him and asked, "What about you, Henry? What's your gripe?"

Alsberg said that he had no complaints. He joked grimly, "I haven't had as much fun since I had the measles."

Despite the bureaucratic headaches, Alsberg saw great potential for his little agency, and had big dreams for it. As he would tell anyone who would listen, the Federal Writers' Project would take on a mission to reflect the state of America and its people.

That mirror would take shape as a long shelf of books about the states—the American Guides. Each book would be a mashup of a state encyclopedia and travel guide, with driving tour routes pointing out local highlights. As Alsberg himself put it, here read by an actor:

HENRY ALSBERG (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *The purpose of the American Guide is to put it into the hands of people who don't realize wonders exist at their own door.*

HOST: But as journalist and author David Kipen notes, what Alsberg called the American Guides – what we now call the WPA Guides – marked a bigger idea than just travel:

DAVID KIPEN: *The Writers Project was an attempt to introduce America to itself. In the 1930s, I'm not sure America and itself had ever been properly introduced in the first place. America was still a much more decentralized, regionalist country. The guides, I think, were instrumental in helping to acquaint Americans with Americans.*

HOST: With that mission in mind, Alsberg's agency would become the biggest cultural experiment in America's history. When it ramped up, it had a staff of nearly 7,000 writers, from New York to California, and from Alaska to Puerto Rico. Its budget was less than one percent of the total WPA budget. But the Writers' Project produced more than sixty state and city guides, plus hundreds of other books.

The Pulitzer-prize-winning poet W.H. Auden would later call it the most noble and absurd undertaking any government had ever attempted.

Alsberg's vision of motivating people to produce a lively national portrait clashed with the dreary reality of government bureaucracy. Applicants had to prove they <u>needed</u> the job. You had to <u>certify</u> you were destitute. Basically, you had to prove you were failing in the American dream.

Presidential historian Douglas Brinkley.

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY: *It wasn't like glamorous to say, "Hey, I'm working for the Federal Writers Project." It basically meant you were broke and failing as a writer. The federal government was just giving them some money. It was just a notch up from being unemployed and it was hurting their sense of pride. It was embarrassing.*

HOST: Dena Epstein in Chicago recalled how her mother, Hilda Polachek, got a job with the Project. Her mother told her how humiliating that application process was.

DENA EPSTEIN: *The process of being certified, she found very painful, and she said you sat on a bench in a dirty room for hours waiting to be interviewed and given forms to fill out. And then when you had satisfied the interviewer that you really were a pauper, you could be appointed to the Writers Project. She felt that the certification procedure was very demeaning. And that the people who were working on the project deserved better than that.*

HOST: So thousands of laid-off journalists and writers took this work mainly to survive their <u>own</u> financial crisis. But many embraced the assignment to gather a detailed picture of the American experience. They would accomplish that by going out and interviewing ALL kinds of Americans, including people from backgrounds that had long been overlooked or deliberately

ignored. The agency recorded them in migrant camps, reservations, schoolyards, prisons, wherever people would talk with them.

To folklorists and others, these cultures needed to be documented before they went extinct. These interviews dig into questions of representation, authenticity, and the gaps then and now.

For me, that hits close to home. One of the most treasured items in my personal collection is a photograph I have of some of my ancestors, a picture of four children. I think one is my great-grandmother, I think that one is her sister, my great aunt. But it breaks my heart that I don't know who they are, and I may never know.

When memories or family stories are lost like that, I feel a queasiness in my stomach. It's a reminder that not everything gets preserved, despite efforts like the Writers Project. I would love to spare future generations the heartbreak I feel when I look at that photo. What do any of us have today that if we don't preserve, the next generation may never know about?

SCOTT BORCHERT: *There was a real sense of urgency on the Project where they wanted to get out there and record these people's stories before it was too late.*

HOST: That's Scott Borchert. In 2021, he wrote a book about the WPA writers and their work called *Republic of Detours*.

SCOTT BORCHERT: *The Project was creating this snapshot of a country in the Depression and if it had happened later, say, during the war, or immediately after, it would give you a very different picture of what was happening. When I started looking into the Project, I was immediately entranced by the depth of the history and the kinds of people who were involved with it.*

[Archival clip of Zora Neale Hurston from the Library of Congress]

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *My name is Zora Neale Hurston. And I'm gonna sing a gambling song that I collected at Bolsett, Florida. Turpentine still there. And the men are playing a game called Georgia Skin….*

HOST: Zora Neale Hurston was a celebrated novelist who emerged from the Harlem Renaissance and was drawn to this mission of documenting communities before they disappeared. Hurston was a trained anthropologist who had studied with a national expert, Franz Boas at Columbia University. But in the Depression, she was also looking for work and took her skills to the Writers' Project, conducting interviews in Florida.

Hurston's remarkable recordings are now preserved at the Library of Congress, a priceless audio history, including this account of how <u>she</u> gathered people's stories and songs.

[Archival clip of Zora Neale Hurston from the Library of Congress]

WPA INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *You said you learn in a crowd. How do you learn most of your songs?*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (ARCHIVAL): *I learn 'em, I just get in a crowd of people if they singing and I listen as best I can and I start joining in with a phrase or two and finally I get so I can sing a verse. Then I keep on until I learn all the verses. Then I sing them back to the people until they tell me I can sing 'em just like them.*

HOST: With the Writers' Project, Hurston's approach took on the feel of a movement. It certainly imprinted on Studs Terkel, that young man in Chicago. After landing a job with the Writers' Project, Studs felt the importance of documenting people's stories.

STUDS TERKEL: *It was called oral history. Interviewing people who were not heard from ordinarily. Their thoughts and feelings. Zora Neale Hurston in Florida, part of the Florida Writers Project, interviewing ex slaves, who remembered what it was, who spoke of a past, you see.*

HOST: Dr. Tameka Hobbs is an oral historian who spent years interviewing people in the same rural areas in Florida where Hurston did her work in the 1930s. Today, Dr. Hobbs is extending the Project's legacy as the Regional Manager of the African American Research Library and Cultural Center in Broward County, Florida.

TAMEKA HOBBS: *There were so many good things that came out of the Federal Writers Project in terms of our ability to know and document items from the past. That's an opportunity for oral historians to be intentional about making sure that we are capturing people's stories of survival. That is still echoing out, and that's what we always count on folks in the humanities for, as historians, as oral historians especially. To have that type of mindset, to have that type of reflection and to do the work of collection. So, I think that's a real opportunity that remains.*

HOST: Here, actors recite a few quotes from these oral histories that give a sense of the range of the voices documented: a rodeo clown in Oklahoma, an unemployed man in New York and a sex worker in Chicago.

[Excerpts from WPA Life Histories, voiced by actors]

SEX WORKER (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I've walked this corner summer and winter, sick and well, blind drunk and stone sober. When you live like I done, people give you a line all the time, all day long. So, you got to be careful. What you say to yourself even more than what you say to cops and doctors.*

RODEO CLOWN (VOICED BY ACTOR): *The idea of a rodeo clown isn't only to make folks laugh, but to get the attention of the steer after the rider has been thrown. The first steer I ever rode was in Texas. I was a yard clerk for the railroad. I was sitting, watching the steer riding and the others egged me on. A steer knows how to use his horns. It's the God's truth. A steer can scrape the ground so close he can scratch up a cigarette paper.*

UNEMPLOYED MAN (VOICED BY ACTOR): *I'm among the world of missing men. I'm so insignificant if they sent out a radio call for me in a hundred years nobody would find me. Economically I'm collapsed. I could write my whole will on a postage stamp. Tell me, then, why should I sing My Country 'Tis of Thee?*

HOST: Reports such as these were pouring into Project offices across the country. To give a sense of the scale – by 1937, these interviewers and researchers had collected thousands of written and audio disc recordings with everyday Americans.

Among those discs are some of the most iconic folklife recordings ever made, by the father-son folklorist team of John and Alan Lomax. Their recordings reached into hidden spaces of America. This recording, for example, revealed the voices of Black men detained at a prison farm in Mississippi.

[Excerpt from Lomax recording, from the Library of Congress]

HOST: Other recordings echoed the politics of the day, like this song performed by a white union worker in rural Kentucky:

[Excerpt from Lomax recording, from the Library of Congress]

HOST: One thing that comes up when you look at <u>all</u> the thousands of oral histories from people across the country – is that we have a history that we share. But you also hear the divisions. Just like today, America in the 1930s was polarized and the divides were widening. Americans were losing patience with the Depression. Voters were losing patience with the government. And the 1938 mid-term elections would see FDR's Democrats lose seats in Congress. America was split right down the middle.

More ominously, the label "Un-American" was getting tossed around by people on both sides. With the WPA writers trying to hold a mirror up to America, the question of what that mirror would show was bound to stir controversy.

[Archival – remix of Pete Seeger's Which Side Are You On and speeches by Martin Dies.]

The Writers' Project was forcing questions of what history gets told, and who gets to tell it – a debate that still rages in our classrooms and public forums today. I think the importance of these narratives is summed up by another one of my favorite writers, Ralph Ellison. You know him as the author of Invisible Man, but in 1937, Ellison was an unrooted young writer whose family was scattered by hardship. He spent his first nights in New York on a park bench, then a friend got him a job on the Writers' Project. Later in life, he spoke publicly about what the Writers' Project meant to him and to seeing people like him in history.

RALPH ELLISON (ARCHIVAL): *I just wanted to say a word in favor of the collections of regional and ethnic histories, folk sayings and so on which were published during WPA. Let's face it, there is something called official history. But you couldn't find the truth about <u>my</u> background in that history. You could not find the truth about other ethnic groups. You didn't even have the truth about white Southern history.*

HOST: Despite the fact that it was a make-work program for the unemployed, the list of creatives who came out of the Writers' Project later included filmmakers, winners of the National Book Award, national poet laureates, and even a Nobel prize winner. Many more would go on to become reporters, civil servants, and local historians.

The Project changed how we as a country looked at history itself. How we see our communities. But it was also deeply personal.

Here's how novelist, David Bradley, sums it up.

DAVID BRADLEY: *When a local person picks up a book, I don't care if it's only two paragraphs in 400 pages, and sees themselves represented in print, I think it has a profound effect on their beliefs and the way they see themselves in the world.*

HOST: Studs Terkel

STUDS TERKEL: *What state are you originally from? Pick up a copy of the state guide. Just look through that Guide and you'll find the answer. It was a glowing point, but also what it meant to the people, at least to this person. What it meant to me. The Writers' Project changed everything for me, I think.*

HOST: All from an unorthodox agency assembled on the fly during a national emergency.

The Writers' Project lasted for less than a decade, but in the thick of another national emergency – a global pandemic – people's interest in that 1930s experiment spiked once again. Could the Writers' Project offer a key to capturing important history now? And preserve voices that hold truths that we cannot afford to forget? It also makes me wonder, whose voices are still being left out of our shared narrative?

HOST: Here's writer and professor David Kipen.

DAVID KIPEN: *I think a new Federal Writers' Project could potentially get people talking to each other again, listening to each other again, reading again, writing again.*

Next time on the People's Recorder, we head to Virginia, where researchers went behind the lines of Jim Crow America to gather the first full picture of African American history, with testimony from the last survivors of slavery. What the Writers' Project uncovered – about freedom and inequality – still applies today as we continue to grapple with the legacy of slavery.

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You can follow us on social media at @peoplesrecorder. This is Chris Haley. Thanks for listening.