

THE PEOPLE'S RECORDER

EPISODE 8: OUTSIDERS REMAKING HISTORY

[Archival from Plow That Broke the Plains]

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *A country without rivers, without streams, with little rain... Nothing to stay for, nothing to hope for. Homeless, penniless and bewildered, they joined the great army of the highway.*

HOST: During the worst of the Great Depression, years of over-planting and drought turned the Great Plains from America's Bread Basket into the Dust Bowl. Families by the thousands were forced to move away or starve...

A young woman from Nebraska named Tillie Lerner heads west, one of nearly a half million people taking to the road. A hobo named Harry Partch, one among the thousands riding freight trains desperate to find work, avoids the railyard police, called "bulls," who patrol trainyards wielding billyclubs to discourage free-riders.

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *Baked out, blown out and broke. Their homes were nightmares of swirling dust, night and day...All they ask is a chance to start over. And a chance for their children to eat, to have medical care, to have homes again.*

HOST: Lerner and Partch were just two among many making their way across the country back then. A lot of folks were drawn to California, chasing new opportunities, fresh starts, and a chance to reinvent themselves—outsiders determined to remake their lives.

California is famous for that. You could argue that in the 1930s, with America at rock bottom, California helped the country re-make itself. During this wave of unprecedented migration, California became the place where mainstream America finally came face to face with the "other" America—those groups that had been pushed to the margins for way too long.

In these next two episodes, we'll hear stories of four WPA artists, including Lerner and Partch, all outsiders who would call California home, and reclaim their stories from the sidelines to make their mark on who we are as a nation.

[Theme music starts]

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

Across the nation, the people on the Federal Writers' Project were taking a snapshot of American life for a series of guidebooks. This was during an intense time of disruption when millions were uprooted by hardship, leaving homes where they had no future.

What did the Writers' Project hope to capture during such a challenging time for the country? And what could these state travel guidebooks really accomplish? With America's car culture just beginning to rev up, there was nothing else like a set of books to guide travelers across the country, state by state.

Here's Los Angeles-based writer and professor David Kipen.

DAVID KIPEN: *In the 1930s... America was still a much more decentralized, regionalist country. Even within a single state in a state guide, you would have somebody where I am, in Los Angeles, learning things about, I don't know, Siskiyou County... And the guides were instrumental in helping to acquaint Americans with Americans.*

HOST: The blueprint for the WPA Guides came from Washington, and the Project's director, Henry Alsberg.

DAVID KIPEN: *At the top of the project in Washington, you had this guy, Henry Alsberg. And he delegated to state directors all around the country the responsibility to edit these guides. In the case of California, top of the list would be a guy named Hugh Harlan...*

HOST: Hugh Harlan was a newspaper reporter in Los Angeles. Before the WPA was formed, he had started a local relief agency for colleagues who had lost their jobs.

DAVID KIPEN: *So, this guy Hugh Harlan was running something in southern California that was like a journalistic sweatshop if you like. He was commissioning articles about everything in Southern California under the sun as sort of supplemental features for local newspapers...*

After the whole operation got going and turned out to be such a success, he wrote to his friend and said, "I think we got a tiger by the tail here. Let's try and do this on a national scale."

HOST: That friend was Harry Hopkins, an old college classmate who had just been appointed the head of the new WPA. Harlan's letter got noticed, and later that year, Harlan got his wish when the Federal Writers' Project started with a mandate to document America coast to coast. Harlan himself was appointed the head of the Los Angeles office of the Project.

As a district supervisor, Harlan's desk was flooded with letters and applications. Harlan also kept on his desk another item: A press clipping about the Writers Project office in New York. The headline, from the New York Times, stated "Reds Rule WPA Writers." The article alleged that communists had taken over the Manhattan office, saying quote, "Members of the Communist movement and the left-wing Workers Alliance controlled the personnel and supervision of the Federal Writers and Theatre projects." Unquote.

Harlan kept the clipping as a warning. He feared any suspicion of reds tainting his office. He would keep a close eye on his staff as they dug in on creating a Guidebook to the state unlike any other.

David Kipen:

DAVID KIPEN: *They ventured out into neighborhoods that, then as now, the tourist guides invariably miss or deliberately ignore. As unrepresentative as the Writers' Project could be at times—these men and women did their damndest to represent the full breadth of California. And so, what resulted for all the country to see and read was a picture of the state in all of its multifarious diversity and astonishment.*

HOST: Some of the WPA writers came from among the millions of people who were moving around the country then, searching for jobs amid the wreckage of the American economy.

Our story in California is about four of those people, all outsiders, creatives working for the WPA. They each found their voice during that time of crisis.

But before we dig into these stories, I just want to say that each of these artists is worthy of their own episode. We're just giving you a taste of their stories and their work. I encourage you to go out and learn more about them.

The first of this bunch was a young theatre usher named Harry Partch. Partch had bounced around the Southwest and up the length of California, stopping for occasional work. You wouldn't know he was destined to become one of the most influential avant-garde American composers of the century.

Andrew Granade, a musicologist, wrote a biography of Partch.

ANDREW GRANADE: *Harry Partch is one of these figures that if you're a musicologist like myself, he shows up in all the music history textbooks as like, "here's this guy with his weird instruments."*

HARRY PARTCH (ARCHIVAL): *Five different sounds are heard on the instruments that I call the Spoils of War. The first two are produced on brass artillery casings and large Pyrex bowls. The third is a high block tone. The fourth a deep tone. And the fifth is made on a piece of spring steel.*

ANDREW GRANADE: *So, I knew him that way. And then when I was in graduate school, the music library had a case out and they had all of these materials and it included a shirt and a cigar box and I went up to the music librarian and said, "What is all this about?" And she said, "Oh, we have Harry Partch's archives. They're upstairs. Would you like to look?" And so that became kind of the invitation, like opening the wardrobe for getting into Narnia.*

HOST: Beyond the music, Granade was fascinated by Partch's story, from its very beginning.

ANDREW GRANADE: *Partch was born in 1901. And his parents had been missionaries in China and came back to the United States, and he always said that he was born on the sea coming over from China. But he was actually born in California.*

HOST: Growing up, Partch loved all kinds of music, and studied in Los Angeles. As a teenager he worked in movie theatres playing the organ to accompany silent films. It was difficult at times for him, but he was already using his musical skills to his advantage.

ANDREW GRANADE: *We just know that he used it to save himself from being bullied when he was in high school. He would say, "Don't hit me. You hurt the hands; you don't get music at the movie." <laugh>.*

HOST: A young gay man living in a repressive time, Partch was quiet about his sexuality.

ANDREW GRANADE: *Partch is of a generation where he did not talk very openly about his sexuality. But it very much, I think, informed the life that he chose to live. In the 1920s, he was very much in the gay scene in California. We know that he had a relationship with the actor Ramon Novarro when they were both down-on-their-luck young men, living in L.A.*

HOST: They worked together as theatre ushers. Then the actor got his big break. Novarro became a Hollywood leading man, starring in classics like 1925's Ben Hur. Once he became Hollywood elite, Novarro never looked back.

ANDREW GRANADE: *As soon as Ramon Novarro got the contract to be in the film, he had to cut off those earlier acquaintances. Partch very much took it as a rejection of himself. I wish I had something where he talked about the experience of seeing him on the screen then, but I've never read anything about that, because that would have been fascinating. I'm sure it would have been very difficult for him if he went to the movies and saw him on screen.*

HOST: Partch started traveling widely in hopes of launching his music career, but by 1935 was riding the rails looking for work like so many others in the Depression.

ANDREW GRANADE: *The best way I can describe who they are is, if anyone's read The Grapes of Wrath -- that's the people that he's moving amongst, the migrants who have come out to California who are trying to make a living during the Great Depression.*

HOST: In one very personal way, Partch was surprised by this new community he traveled with.

ANDREW GRANADE: *His sexuality was in many ways persecuted by the culture at large. And that also informs his outsider perspective. But when he goes on the road, he discovers a culture where he actually is accepted. We have very affectionate letters that he wrote to other hobos and other migrants with whom he had relationships. So, he was able to live in a much freer way during that time period than really almost any other point in his life.*

HOST: Partch was living in the middle of a time of social disruption and mass movements. With all that, public views of migrants became complicated by economics and reflected in the terms: 'vagrant', 'tramp' and 'hobo.'

ANDREW GRANADE: *I kind of divide it into three categories of the ways in which people saw them. At the bottom would be the Vagrant. Sometimes you'll see this called the Tramp, someone*

who was unemployed and not looking for employment. Then there's the Migrant, kind of a step up, someone who comes from outside who is looking for work and willing to work, but at the same time was not accepted by the community. And then finally there's the Hobo, which originally had been seen as a Vagrant or Tramp kind of image. But by the time you get to the 1930s and 40s, is slowly becoming something of a folk hero, which is kind of an interesting shift in American perceptions of that character.

Partch very much sees himself in the beginning as a migrant, as someone who is moving to work, but slowly comes to recognize that really, he's a hobo. He's riding the rails and never staying in one place too long.

HOST: Partch wrote about this in his journal, here read by an actor.

HARRY PARTCH (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Hobos are extraordinarily individualistic people. That's why they're hobos. They cannot conform to the society. Their whole lives are a continual escape – escape their boredom in trivial arguments, they try to escape their impotence in alcohol, they try to escape the necessity of continual effort in crime, in begging, and they try to escape reality itself in a crazy dreamworld. I am myself almost exactly like them. I am escaping the meaningless, the stupid, the banal, in conventions, art, music, in a fantastic order of my own creation.*

HOST: Partch was a keen observer of human nature, often scribbling notes of what he saw and heard, and soaking up the soundscapes of that world.

ANDREW GRANADE: *He carries a small brown notebook, and we still have the notebook. It's about two inches by four inches, and he carries it in his back pocket. And as he's listening to the words of these people, he's jotting down what the migrants – the hoboes – were saying. Literally word for word.*

HOST: Partch wrote down the hobos' speech in an unusual way, representing the words with notes like in musical notation, but adapted in his own style.

Here's another entry in his journal from that summer of 1935:

HARRY PARTCH (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *It is three years since I have done any undirected wandering – September 1932, the date of my escorted exit from the San Luis Obispo jail, where I was an overnight guest.*

“Bed tonight and breakfast tomorrow is all we can give you,” he says. I am sent through a door to a dressing room. I have only the clothes on me. “Take ‘em off – they gotta be deloused.”

HOST: When he needed a break from life on the road, Partch had writing and editing skills that he could parlay into cash for a roof over his head and some hot meals.

ANDREW GRANADE: *Newspapers always need good editors and proofreaders, who can come in and make sure that everything looks right before the copy is printed. I know he was*

attracted to the work because unlike picking fruit or washing dishes or any of the other kinds of menial labor that he worked on, it wasn't something that was physically taxing for him. And he felt like it was something that would not detract from his time composing, which I think was the appeal.

It's interesting that he actually found more success as a writer during this time period than as a composer. He was writing during this entire period. And it's very engaging and delightfully written. I mean, he really was a fabulous writer.

HARRY PARTCH (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *This twilight I have dropped my pack a little way beyond camp. These mountains drop suddenly into the sea. Consequently, there are many sheer cliffs and wide horizons everywhere. The bleak unbroken Pacific is on one side, and on the other are these down-coming mountains. As we sit gazing high above the twilight sea, the Hoodlum offers the story of his life.*

HOST: Some of Partch's journal entries sound like the oral-history style interviews being conducted by the staff of the Federal Writers' Project. Like these notes on another traveler.

HARRY PARTCH (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *He is from the home state of Abe Lincoln. Kain-tuck, the fellows call him. He is six feet plus, angular, and uncontrollably playful. His mother abandoned him and his father when he was less than a year old. At seven he was farmed out to work for his keep. A year later he ran away. From when he was thirteen to the present—nine years—he has surveyed the world from jails coast to coast, jungles, and chain gangs.*

On the credit side he has these: wit, a smile, a frank way, and evidences of loyalty.

HOST: Partch's eagerness to capture the sounds of America's migrants made him a good fit for the Federal Writers' Project, which was recording migrants in work camps. By 1936 he was working in Phoenix, helping to rewrite the WPA Guide to Arizona. The next year, he moved again, to Los Angeles, and became an editor on the WPA Guide to California. There, he was able to apply his impulse for portrayals of California life.

Partch had seen the Depression from both sides – as a hobo, and as a settled citizen, one who could hold a job at least for a while. He certainly brought a different viewpoint. As one Project editor put it, in a letter to Partch: “Your essay style, combining color with detachment, is a rarity. An outsider might consider you maladjusted; that's the penalty of looking clearly at a maladjusted world.”

There's a photo of Harry Partch in the L.A. office of the Writers' Project. Awkwardly staged, he's the rail-thin editor with unruly hair, pointing to a page of text. His broad curiosity echoes in the California guidebook, like this passage, voiced by an actor.

EXCERPT FROM THE WPA GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *The San Francisco of the old vice-ridden Barbary Coast days is gone, but San Francisco has always cherished its eccentrics. It has been inclined to regard graft with a tolerant eye; it has*

always prided itself on the international flavor of its food and drink, and its cosmopolitan tastes. It has always been a good town for the actor and the musician.

HOST: Partch's writing voice sounds clear in the California guide's section on music, and the role of Native Americans in the state's music history. He had heard that range of music from an early age, and it drew him to sounds and instruments beyond the Western tradition.

Here's an excerpt from the WPA Guide to California.

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

Centuries ago, California Indians were acting out music drama... Drums of different timbre, flutes, rattles made from gourds to turtle shells, and bone whistles from the forelegs of deer were among their important instruments. Their ritual chants dealt with birth and death, the succession of the seasons, and invoking the spirits...

HOST: This sounds like Partch's writing, though we don't exactly know. The guidebook writers and editors generally didn't get credited.

Andrew Granade.

ANDREW GRANADE: *It's hard to track down what exactly he was writing for those guides they produced. We just have the comments that he has back and forth between the editors. I was trying to figure out what he would've written. <laugh> Trying to see if I could figure out his writing style. What part of this is Partch?*

HOST: Here's another excerpt from the WPA Guide to California, voiced by an actor.

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

Troubadours from Monterey and Santa Barbara used to wander northward to visit the great hospitable ranchos around the village of Yerba Buena. Their songs were long popular, and their descendants today in many places still delight in the tradition. The picturesque fiestas held annually in Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, Monterey, and other towns are popular reminders of this period.

HOST: For the WPA guide and for himself, Harry Partch was searching for a language he heard, one that conveyed the reality of his nomad community. Because Harry Partch nursed an audacious dream: As a musician he wanted to portray the American voice in music through the language of migrants and hoboes.

ANDREW GRANADE: Partch very much felt like music should not be divorced from human speech and from human storytelling. And so, if you look at his entire life, that's kind of the arc of what he does...

HARRY PARTCH (ARCHIVAL): *It is my aim to hold an audience just as any playwright wants to hold his audience, just as Euripides wanted to hold his audience.*

ANDREW GRANADE: *He wanted music to be concrete and to be emotional and to be emotionally connecting to an audience. And so, he was very much about music as a narrative. A lot of times his music had a documentation effect of, I'm going to tell you what it was like to be a hobo in 1941. How can I musically tell you what that was like?*

HOST: This personal ambition was on his mind in early 1941, when Partch finished his work on the Writers' Project. It was time to hit the road again. He was heading east to make his way as a musician. He caught a ride out of L.A. to a desert crossroads.

ANDREW GRANADE: *He's outside Barstow actually, and you can imagine him. He's got his thumb out. Cars are passing, and while he's waiting there, he's trying to fill the time somehow. He looks down on the highway railing, and he sees this conversation from all of these inscriptions of basically hitchhikers, who trying to pass the time are just kind of saying, you can kinda think of it as, "I was here."*

HARRY PARTCH (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Just outside the Mojave Desert junction of Barstow. I am walking along the highway and sit down on the railing to rest. I have noticed the scratches where I happen to drop. I have seen many hitchhikers' writings. They are usually just names and addresses. But this—why, it's music. It's both weak and strong, like unedited human expressions always are. It's eloquent in what it fails to express in words. And it's epic. Definitely, it is music.*

EXCERPT FROM BARSTOW, BY HARRY PARTCH: *Age nineteen. Five feet ten inches, Black hair, Brown eyes. Going home to Boston, Massachusetts. It's four, and I'm hungry and broke. I wish I was dead. But today I am a man...*

ANDREW GRANADE: *It becomes, in some cases, this back and forth where someone writes an inscription, and the next person comes along and comments on that inscription and adds to it and then someone else comes along and comments.*

HOST: Partch saw these inscriptions as creative material laid out before him. They would inspire probably his most famous composition, Barstow.

ANDREW GRANADE: *He doesn't know personally any of these people. He's never encountered these people in his life. But he has enough experience listening to the way these migrants speak, that he can imagine pretty well what that experience would've been like.*

EXCERPT FROM BARSTOW, BY HARRY PARTCH: *I'm going home to Boston, uh huh, Massachusetts.*

ANDREW GRANADE: *There's a great story that after Partch passed away in 1974... they performed the work. And afterwards, someone came up to them, tears in his eyes, had been crying, listening to these pieces and said, "That was my experience. I was there, I knew what was going on." He had been transported kind of immediately back 40, 50 years to his experiences during the Great Depression, living as a hobo and having these migrant, migratory experiences.*

HOST: Harry Partch never completely left his life as a nomad. He embellished it, adapted it, and became a musical pioneer. A unique American voice.

More after the break.

Our next outsider story involves another young artist on the move during the Depression. We know her now as the author Tillie Olsen. But she was born Tillie Lerner, the daughter of Jewish immigrants living in a poor section of Omaha, Nebraska. A free spirit, she dropped out of high school and headed west to make herself anew.

She got a job with a New Deal relief agency called the Civil Works Administration, a short-lived precursor to the WPA. On her own time, she began reporting on the labor movement, and working as a union organizer.

In July 1934, she was jailed alongside her future husband Jack Olsen for her role in a longshoremen's strike in San Francisco. It was a pivotal moment for her and for U.S. labor history. The WPA Guide to California would describe that same waterfront strike in these terms.

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

The killing of two waterfront picketers and the clubbing and gassing of a hundred others by police on Thursday, July 5, 1934—afterwards known as 'Bloody Thursday'—was the incident that swept nearly every union in the Bay area into the second important general strike in the Nation's history. Stores closed, shops and factories shut down, and trucks and streetcars stopped running in San Francisco as 127,000 workers left their jobs. The strike aroused the emphatic opposition of many newspapers.

HOST: That sounds very different from the way Tillie Olsen recalled the same event, writing for Partisan Review Magazine, read here by an actor.

TILLIE OLSEN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Do not ask me to write of the strike and the terror. I am on a battlefield, and the increasing stench and smoke sting the eyes so it is impossible to turn them back into the past. If I could go away for a while, if there were time and quiet, perhaps I could stumble back into the past so that the beauty and heroism, the terror and significance of those days, would enter your heart and sear it forever.*

HOST: In this account, her passion comes through in her visceral writing, and she doesn't hide her struggles.

TILLIE OLSEN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Bloody Thursday – our day we write on the pages of history with letters of blood and hate. Our day we fling like a banner to march with the other bloody days when guns spat death at us that a few dollars might be saved to fat bellies.*

HOST: As writer William Saroyan once said of Olsen, "She hates rather beautifully."

Her passionate voice had an impact on a later generation of younger writers, including best-selling novelist Mary Gordon. What amazes Gordon is that Olsen was even able to find the time to write. In the 1930s, women faced huge challenges just to get words on the page.

[From Library of Congress archival about women working in the 1930s and 1940s]

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *Here's to the ladies, the fair and the weak. This frail creature strikes her typewriter keys about 40,000 times a day. Any way you look at it, women's work is not for sissies.*

MARY GORDON: *I don't know how she had time to brush her teeth. She was a single mother for part of the time and if the kid has an earache, it doesn't really matter if you're writing War and Peace or not. If you're the only one there, you have to deal with it. And their needs don't go away because you have a creative urge. Then she had a very active political life, too. She must have been just exhausted and worn out all the time.*

HOST: Despite all the competing demands, Olsen often found herself in the thick of the action... In 1935, she traveled to support a miners' strike in New Mexico. Then she continued on to Chicago for a National Congress of Writers. There she met other young people who would soon join the Writers' Project. They included midwestern firebrands Nelson Algren and Meridel LeSueur. Both were up-and-coming novelists dedicated to the stories of working people.

Olsen particularly warmed to LeSueur, who was from Minnesota, and writing a wild heist novel based on her interviews with working class women about their lives during the Depression. Olsen already was fired up about documenting the lives of working men and women. Through people like LeSueur, she started to see a network that would help finetune her own voice to tell these stories.

MARY GORDON: *I think she felt connected to Meridel LeSueur, definitely. She kind of had to grow into her own voice, I think. And she never lost the political passion, but she had to create a vessel for it.*

HOST: Olsen returned to California and in 1936 was writing for the Communist Party newspaper. She also raised funds for American volunteers who joined the fight against fascism in Spain. She was inventing Tillie Olsen. And California is where she wanted to do it.

MARY GORDON: *I think that's what California was for her – a place for invention and reinvention. You could really be a different person than your roots would've suggested. You could take what you needed from that, but you could leave behind really a lot, in a way that you even couldn't in the East.*

HOST: Tillie Olsen hitched five-hour-long rides between Los Angeles and Fresno for work. She was documenting migration and the experiences of California's marginalized groups.

MARY GORDON: *I think that sense of loss and displacement and hopes that get dashed, but not quite extinguished, which I think that it was a very important subject to her. She does it with*

the African American community. She does it with the Asian community, and certainly she does it with the Eastern European Jewish community. The immigrant experience, I think is a very important theme for her.

TILLIE OLSEN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Maria Vasquez, spinster, for 15 cents a dozen, stitches garments for children she has never had. I want you women up north to know how those dainty children's dresses you buy at Macy's, Gimbals, Marshall Fields, are dyed in blood, are stitched in wasting flesh down in San Antonio, "where sunshine spends the winter." From the Partisan Review, 1934.*

HOST: One group Tillie Olsen was dedicated to retrieving from the margins was women. Women's lives had been overlooked as "other," as not relevant. Olsen championed many forgotten women writers, including one from the previous generation named Rebecca Harding Davis.

TILLIE OLSEN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *I first read her essay on Life in the Iron Mills in one of three water-stained volumes of the Atlantic Monthly I bought for ten cents each in an Omaha junkshop. I was fifteen. Rebecca Davis wrote "Literature can be made out of the lives of despised people," and "You too must write."*

HOST: It was not until years later that Olsen learned anything about Davis. In the reference room of the San Francisco Public Library, where she spent her lunch hours reading, Olsen found a short bio of the writer. In her time, Davis had been prolific, publishing a dozen books and many short stories and essays, but her work was largely forgotten.

TILLIE OLSEN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *It did not surprise me that the author was a woman. At once, I eagerly looked for other works by her - but there was no Rebecca Harding Davis in the card catalogue.*

HOST: And Davis was just one example. It was clear to Tillie Olsen that women's voices had always been sidelined or ignored. She believed that had to change.

Tillie Olsen's writing—whether she was reporting on real events or writing fiction—could not be separated from her activism. For Olsen, working on the Writers' Project could let her go deeper. The Project's goal to document all of America, warts-and-all, seemed right up her alley, and she was able to land a job with the program.

Olsen's work on the Writers' Project in Los Angeles was seen as a win by some in the Communist Party. She was an insider who would champion the stories of workers and others who were left out of histories.

Author David Kipen.

DAVID KIPEN: *They went into it with full hearts and empty notebooks and came back with the best stories they could find. You had attention paid to immigrants, you had attention paid to*

minorities. And what resulted was, I think, a richer picture of Americans, both immigrant and native, both white and non-white.

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

In the Logan Heights District along the curved shore, sprawl San Diego's Mexican and Negro communities, with Mexican restaurants vending tamales and tacos, and with chicken palaces and big ovens where Negroes barbeque meat. About 10,000 Mexicans live in this district, employed mainly as day laborers and cannery workers. From the WPA Guide to California

HOST: With people like Tillie Olsen on the Project, you see the labor movement and the efforts to form unions enshrined in the WPA Guide to California, in a way they otherwise might not have been.

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

Salinas. In 1936 when lettuce workers struck for higher wages and better working conditions, Salinas burst into the nation's headlines as the scene of tear-gas battles between State Highway Patrol officers and strikers. The highlight of this strike was the mobilization which followed a report that a Communist advance on Salinas was underway. Red flags proving the statement were taken from the highway and rushed to Sacramento. Airplanes were sent up to reconnoiter. Embattled growers prepared to defend life and property. In the meantime, an indignant highway commission requested that the flags placed as markers on roadsides by its workmen be returned to serve their purpose of warning motorists.

HOST: (short laugh) The write-up on the strike in Salinas sure seems like it could have been influenced by Olsen.

While Olsen was sharpening her narrative skills, she was also shaking things up at the Project in L.A. A clash of ideologies was inevitable in that office, mirroring the political tensions brewing across America in the 1930s. Tad quiet.

[Archival: How to Spot a Communist?]

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *In recognizing a Communist, physical appearance counts for nothing. If he openly declares himself to be a Communist, we take his word for it. But there are other Communists who don't show their real faces. Frightening, isn't it? Tad quiet.*

HOST: Novelist David Bradley first learned about the Writers' Project from his college professor, who had worked on the Project's national staff. Bradley became fascinated by how the politics of that time played out in the WPA program.

DAVID BRADLEY: *Not just the Writers Project, but as a whole, the New Deal – it was welfare, it was socialist. The New Deal empowered a lot of people that some people in Washington did not want to see empowered.*

HOST: David Kipen.

DAVID KIPEN: *Conservatives were not totally off base to think that maybe a writer or two might have been a communist. And propaganda was always a risk. A tad quiet.*

HOST: Back then, communists were among the few groups actively advocating for equality for women and minorities. This ideology even influenced some staff members of the Writers' Project, who pushed for more diverse representation in the stories they were collecting.

However, the L.A. supervisor, Hugh Harlan, an anti-communist and the same journalist who helped launch the Writers' Project nationwide, began to regret some of the voices emerging from the California Project office.

Disgruntled staffers, including Tillie Olsen, were unhappy working under Harlan. They even bypassed him, sending their complaints directly to the national director, Henry Alsberg, in Washington, D.C., demanding that the national office step in.

Years later, this conflict resurfaced during the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, which were investigating suspected Communist ties. Rena Vale, a screenwriter and former Communist who turned government informant, testified about the incident. Here's her testimony, read by an actor.

RENA VALE (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Hugh Harlan was not sympathetic in any way with the Communist Party, and one of the main orders of business was to affect his removal. Every possible complaint was launched against him. Eventually Alsberg sent one of his field representatives to Los Angeles to investigate. Our Communist Party faction including Tillie Olsen and myself, called on him as representatives of the union. We proceeded to fill his ears with grievances against said Hugh Harlan. Our efforts were successful when Harlan was dismissed by the National office in the latter part of 1937, and he was replaced.*

HOST: In late October 1939, Harlan himself testified in an investigation of the role of communists in the Los Angeles office of the Writers' Project. A frustrated Harlan gave this testimony, here read by an actor.

HUGH HARLAN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *To my knowledge, the Federal Writers' Project both in northern and southern California, since its inception, has been rampant with Communists and radicals. I complained of communistic activities to national director Henry Alsberg and he replied there was no basis for the charges; that everything was all right and not to worry about it.*

HOST: By that point, the rumors of communists on the Writers' Project were attracting a lot of public attention. All the federal arts programs were now in the crosshairs of a Congressional investigation. The question being asked was, Were they Un-American?

These questions followed Tillie Olsen even after she moved on from the Writers' Project. Many editors turned against her style and subjects, and her past connection to the Communist Party cost her jobs, especially during the Red Scare in the 1950s. Much of her fiction did not get

published until the 1960s. Then her voice finally broke through on the national stage with books such as *Silences* and *Tell Me a Riddle*.

TILLIE OLSEN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron. "I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter. I'm sure you can help me understand her. She's a youngster who needs help and whom I'm deeply interested in helping." "Who needs help." You think because I am her mother I have a key? Or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me. From I Stand Here Ironing in Tell Me a Riddle.*

HOST: A new generation hailed Olsen's writing voice and her focus on working families – especially women – as a breakthrough. Best-selling novelist Mary Gordon recalls her first encounter reading Olsen in the 1960s.

MARY GORDON: *When I first read the stories in Tell Me a Riddle, it was like somebody broke a bone in the middle of my chest. Because we were being told explicitly that what we had to say was not important. If you look at who the writers who were prized – you know, it was Mailer, Bellow, Roth, Styron – it was all guys all the time. The bigger, the better. And I cannot emphasize strongly enough how important Tillie Olsen's work was to us in the seventies as feminists. I felt, "so, okay, this is what I wanna do. And if she can do it, maybe I can do it."*

HOST: For Gordon and others, Tillie Olsen expressed a truth that Americans had not heard before.

MARY GORDON: *Tillie Olsen's emphasis on the family, I think it made a lot of men really uncomfortable. And so that was very daring of her. And to say, "to write about motherhood is daring" sounds counterintuitive, but it really was. She's a very important part of what an American writer can be.*

TILLIE OLSEN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound. She loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures. She would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur. She was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old, I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or looked for work and for Emily's father, who "could no longer endure" (he wrote in his good-bye note) "sharing want with us."*

HOST: Even then in the 1990s, people in publishing still found Olsen's achievement too radical to reward. Mary Gordon, by then an accomplished novelist herself, saw that bias when she was on a panel to judge the prestigious REA literary prize. When Gordon got in that room with the other judges, she made it happen for Tillie.

MARY GORDON: *Oh, honey, I'm not even gonna tell you. It's just that I am relentless.*

I had to fight like a tiger to get past the prejudices, even in the nineties. The idea that their subjects, because they were female, that's minor. Those are just not the important subjects. You wouldn't believe how I had to fight.

HOST: The 1994 REA Award proclaimed: “Tillie Olsen radically widened the possibilities for American writers of fiction. She forced open the language of the short story, insisting that it include the domestic life of women, the passions and anguishes of maternity, the deep, gnarled roots of a long marriage, the hopes and frustrations of immigration. Her voice has both challenged and cleared the way for all those who come after her.”

HOST: In 1994, Newsweek chose Olsen as one of just two voices from the 1930s to represent the decade. For that article, she wrote:

TILLIE OLSEN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Sometimes the young—discouraged, overwhelmed—ask me incredulously: “You mean you still have hope?” And I have myself saying, yes, I still have hope: beleaguered, starved, battered-based hope.*

HOST: Next time on *The People's Recorder*: Two more New Deal artists in California turn Americanism inside out. We'll follow Eluard McDaniel and Miné Okubo, two outsiders who wrote their way into history.

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You can keep up with us on social media at @peoplesrecorder. I'm Chris Haley, and thanks so much for listening.

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