

Federal Writers' Project of the
Works Progress Administration,
1734 New York Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C.

P R O S P E C T U S

The American Guide

The chief undertaking before the Writers' Division, Professional and Service Projects Section of the Works Progress Administration, is the preparation of an encyclopedic publication entitled, "The American Guide". This Guide, which will be vastly more elaborate and detailed than any guide hitherto published by a firm or city, will occupy five volumes of 600 pages each.

No section of the United States will be neglected by the Guide. The writers, covering the country under the supervision of State Directors will submit their collected data to central offices, where the articles will be checked and edited. Afterwards, they will be sent to the State headquarters for assembly and completion. This project will take about 4,500 writers from the relief rolls.

Accuracy Featured

The writers will prepare their articles as painstakingly and as accurately as they would if they were writing their own books over their own signatures. Through the help of educational and commercial leaders in each city, the articles will be carefully checked, afterwards going to state and national editors who will reduce them to proportions allowable in the final make-up of the publication.

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Contents of The Guide

Naturally some communities or sections of the country are richer than others in scenic, historic, commercial or other resources; but such subjects of interest as are present in each community will be studied and discussed in the reports and all matter which the editors consider general in interest and value will be retained in the final version.

Among the subjects to be investigated by The Guide workers are:

- General topography
- Flora and fauna
- Historical settings and backgrounds
- Indian tribes and reservations
- Archeological remains
- Parks, national, state and city
- Army and Navy Posts, armories, etc.
- Monuments and landmarks
- Literature, art, music, drama
- Libraries and museums
- Educational facilities
- Societies and associations
- Neighborhood architecture--government buildings, churches, hotels, houses
- Ethnography -- races represented
- Folk customs and folklore
- Highways and by-ways for autoists or hikers
- Manufacturing and industries
- Power available - water and electric, nearness of coal mines
- Products -- exports and imports
- Market proximity
- Transportation -- railroads, waterways, bus and air lines
- Natural resources, developed and undeveloped

Material for Local Guides

The workers will do more than prepare articles for The American Guide. Original reports, maps and illustrations will be left

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with each city, county and state for use in preparing local guides. The local guides will supply a need that has not been adequately met by existing compilations even in the older communities, where much has been done to interest outsiders in scenic wonders and historic sights. All materials, filed for the preparation of local guides, will bear the stamp of authenticity placed on them by Federal experts. Their descriptions, as well as the less elaborate ones in The American Guide, will tell not only of well recognized matters, but will also frequently revive the memory of others which have been forgotten, or whose importance to outsiders is unappreciated by those to whom they have become commonplace. Even such cities as New York and Washington possess no thorough guides.

Lest We Forget

In the process of gathering information for the American Guide many odd facts will undoubtedly be discovered. An example of this arose a few years ago, when the agent of a chamber of commerce noted that the stone on the grave of Thomas Jefferson, at Monticello, Virginia, was not the one originally erected. He was informed that a committee of residents of Jefferson, Missouri, had purchased the original in 1841, while attending a celebration at Monticello. Inquiries in Jefferson showed that everybody had forgotten the whereabouts of the monument. It was only after days of persistent search that the old stone was located and a fitting memorial erected around it.

Not only monuments are lost sight of as the old-timers disappear. Research for The Guide will bring to light valuable manuscripts in foreign languages pertaining to early Spanish, French or other settlements and these will be translated and made available to the public.

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"Seeing America First"

The unsettled conditions in many foreign parts of the World and the expense of travel abroad have turned the attention of Americans to their own land as never before. The American Guide will enable the sightseer, whether bent on a day's excursion or an extended tour, to find fresh scenes to entertain him and to promote his knowledge of America as a whole.

Unchartered Seas

Scattered through the United States are hundreds of communities with distinctive cultural, historic or economic traditions, known only to a handful of people. Tourists miss them because they have no means of learning that they exist or where they are.

An interesting illustration is presented by the village of Cape May, New Jersey, for years a leading center in the manufacture of gilt-edged family albums. Except for the stamping factor, which supplies the gold leaf, all the stamping work is performed by hand. The natives are said to be as expert as Chinese in the manipulation of chop-sticks, as those are used to pick up the gold leaf and place it on the edges of the pages prior to the pounding operations which completes the gilding process.

In the West Virginia mountains, is a unique colony inhabited almost exclusively by descendants of a party of Swiss peasants. The original immigrants were skilled in the manufacture of Swiss cheese and their modern descendants carry on the cheese production in accordance with the methods which they brought with them to the new world.

Another social "pocket" is a fishing village on the coast of New Hampshire. The fishermen there have been so completely isolated from

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external influences for generations that they speak Seventeenth Century English. A comparable locality occurs in Montana. The original settlers were French Canadians who fled from Saskatchewan to the United States after an uprising against their British conquerors. Here they intermarried with the Indians. Although they have been given opportunities to learn English, they still speak Eighteenth Century French. Many people from nearby towns visit them every Christmas to observe their festivities. Other unusual settlements may be ferreted out in the mountains of Kentucky and on islands off the coast of the Carolinas.

The American Guide will also contain descriptions of sections of the United States that remain primitive wildernesses. One of these areas is in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which stretches from eastern Tennessee into western North Carolina. Most of the wilderness section lacks roads and even trails. Six lofty peaks tower above the surrounding country and form the highest mountain group east of the Mississippi River. The tourist would have to go to northern Canada to find another region like it.

Innumerable cases could be cited of fascinating spots in various states that are less inaccessible to local people than Great Smoky Mountains National Park and yet are not widely known. Few residents of the region around New York City, for instance, realize that within easy distance is a remarkable pond which hikers on the Cannonball Trail cross on foot. Here, an odd species of water plant has grown so thickly that it forms an almost solid mass of spongy moss above the surface of the water.

Colorful festivals are held yearly in several parts of the country. Many tourists have not seen them. Examples are: The Portland, Oregon, rose festival; the New Orleans, Louisiana, Mardi Gras; the Santa Fe, New Mexico, fiesta; the Bach Music Festival at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania;

and the Indian ceremonial dances.

Since 1926, Miami, Florida, has been celebrating Easter with an impressive interdenominational ceremony. Before dawn, often as many as 50,000 persons from the city and nearby towns assemble on the beach. Bands and choirs are grouped at one side. A giant cross, in the shallow water, can be seen dimly. Just as the sun appears behind the cross, the massed bands begin to play, the choirs burst into song and the crowd joins in the words.

Examples of localities with peculiar flavors of their own are: Woodstock, New York; Provincetown, Massachusetts; and Carmel, California. The influence of these centers through artists, playwrights and writers upon temporary American culture has been marked.

The bearing of racial groups on the life and customs of different communities will be traced in the Guide articles. Information will be provided on hunting and fishing. Biographical sketches will recall prominent persons, some now quite forgotten by the communities which they helped to found. Unique library and museum items will be listed. Attention will be directed to houses, churches and other public buildings where distinctive architectural and art work may be studied. Experimental theaters and schools will be pointed out and all manner of historical landmarks, local and national parks, mineral springs, geological wonders, irrigation projects, low-cost housing developments and model factories will be described. Natural history illustrations, such as colonies of beavers and prairie dogs, will be indicated on the maps to enable tourists and hikers to find them.

Reference Book for Everybody

It is evident from the foregoing analysis of subject matter

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how far The American Guide will go beyond merely furnishing information for tourists. Many times a month, each person would welcome the opportunity to look into some comprehensive work of ready-reference for the description of a town or locality which has been mentioned in casual conversation or which has suddenly become of importance at the office. Now, satisfactory information might not be found anywhere. The Guide, priced at a nominal sum and sold by the regional volume, or as a set, will place its wide variety of information at the disposal of a multitude. With its aid, looking up the description of a city or section will be as simple as looking for a topic in an encyclopedia. America is said to be the only important country in the world which lacks a substantial national guide.

Source Book for School Children

"I should like to get a set of those Guide books for my children," said a father in talking with a Guide representative. "Both my girl, who is in public school, and my boy, who is in college, constantly have questions on geography, history and sociology to look up and The Guide descriptions will undoubtedly provide them with just the information that they need. I find that it is impossible for me to answer many of these questions and they say that it is hard for them to discover many facts without spending on reference books a good deal of time which they need for other branches of their home-work.

"I should also be very glad to have a chance to look up such information for my own use. I often feel the need of a reference work like The Guide, when I talk with friends or with business contacts. I can very well understand that The Guide will prove of great service both to business men and to persons planning tours for week-ends or vacation periods."

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Alsberg Heads Division

Mr. Henry G. Alsberg, who heads the Writers' Division, has a background which qualifies him to select for The Guide matters which will both interest and educate the readers. For a number of years, he served as foreign correspondent for The New York Times, The New York World, The Nation and The New Freeman. In this capacity, he covered nearly every country of Europe, as well as Mexico on this side of the Atlantic. While abroad, he was for a time secretary to the American Ambassador to Turkey.

While director of the Provincetown Theater in the Greenwich Village section of New York City, he gained additional insight into the type of subjects which interest the public and this also will have its effect in lifting The Guide out of the category of mere "dry-as-dust" informative publications. He received considerable fame for his adaptation of "dybbuk", which proved to be one of the most successful plays of the last decade. For a year and a half, he has been supervisor of the reports and bulletins issued by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

Results Foreseen by Alsberg

In talking over results which he expects to grow out of the use of The Guide, Mr. Alsberg said recently:

"People do not need to motor long distances, buy steamship tickets, or expend large sums in railroad fares to enjoy new and interesting sights, but they do need to know what to look for and where to go.

"Right in your own backyard, relatively speaking, may be the beginning of a trail which ends on a mountain top; or, just across the

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road, may meander a small stream which would carry your canoe through canals and rivers to some inland sea or to the very ocean itself.

"Before we set forth on our excursion, however, we have a drawback to overcome -- ignorance of where the trail or waterway leads so that we can know what to prepare for. The desired information is usually not available. The American Guide will answer such questions for many prospective travelers by land or water.

"City-bound residents of moderate means are continually faced with the problem of getting away from their noisy environments on holidays and at week-ends. One cannot simply pick at random a trolley line or subway and expect to be carried into new and pleasing scenes. One must be guided in choosing his line of transportation.

"We do not intend to overlook the holiday throngs which, instead of being outward-bound from the cities, are inward-bound from the country districts in search of sights and pleasures. The Guide will reveal to the country people the treasures of the cities. In innumerable cases, we believe that residents of communities themselves will be made more conscious of the beauties and resources of their own localities through The Guide.

"In the depression years, this country, like many others, has seen a tremendous growth in the organization of hiking and nature-trail clubs. In many instances, they have been sponsored by schools, museums, newspaper feature departments, and such bodies as the Appalachian Trail Conference. Others have been formed about some leader who has made a fad of nature study, or perhaps about a retired professor of botany or geology. Reference to these organizations will appear in The Guide as well as much information to help the members in planning their excursions.

"Of course, we shall not neglect the traveler of means. Abundant information for motorists, as well as travelers by rail or air, will be included, giving the best routes of travel and telling of places worth seeing both along the popular highways and the roads which lead off from the beaten track."

Guide Will Aid Business

The stimulation which will be given the "See America First" movement through the publication of The American Guide and the local guides will have a favorable influence everywhere. Through the use of the guides, people will find new centers of interest in their towns and vicinities which they will want to visit for their own amusement and instruction or for the entertainment of guests. Americans are famous for their love of novelties and The Guide will outline tours of scenic and historic sights which will make access to communities easy and pleasurable for strangers. This does not mean that The Guide will in any way interfere with private publications. On the contrary, by revealing the interesting sights to be encountered along the highways and by-ways of the land, it should augment the use of the private publications.

The nation-wide quickening of interest in the sights and advantages which America has to offer Americans will develop traffic most noticeably in many sections now unappreciated, directing into their restaurants, hotels, boarding houses and commercial establishments transient customers from many other cities and states.

The increased acquaintance with America by Americans, it is expected, will go much further than merely increasing the temporary satisfaction of vacation-making. Families will wish to relocate amid new scenes where they will have pleasanter surroundings, or better educational advantages for their children, or where they can find more congenial forms of employment or outlets for their business enterprise.

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Helps for Foreign Visitors

According to a report recently published, the number of Europeans traveling in America is rapidly increasing. Descriptions in The Guide will give foreign sightseers new and stronger reasons for coming here. With their present limited facilities for obtaining knowledge of this country, most foreigners arrive with very limited conceptions of what they want to see and where they want to go. Of course, all desire to visit New York City and Washington, D. C.; they have all heard of Niagara Falls, the steel mills of Pittsburgh, the stockyards of Chicago and the automobile plants of Detroit. Unfortunately, the belief is current in some places abroad that the red-skins still haunt the primeval forests supposed to begin just north of Yonkers, and that the traveler in America is constantly exposed to the danger of being scalped.

Every community of the United States desires to assure foreigners that it is competent to protect visitors as well as to show them sights to interest and edify them. The Guide will unquestionably give smaller communities the best opportunity which they have ever had to gain the attention of foreigners as well as of native Americans.

The Guide as Period History

From the point of view of the student of history, The American Guide will be an epochal publication. The nations of old made the first essays in government-sponsored history writing. The inscriptions which they had cut on columns, pyramids, arches and the walls and sides of public buildings survive to give us many facts of antiquity which would have been buried in the rubbish of fallen cities, if their permanent recording had been left to private initiative. In The Guide, the Government will have

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prepared a period history of America and the American people which will far transcend in its variety of topics and accuracy of reporting the engraved records left by ancient races. Historians, generations hence, will look upon The American Guide as a mine of information from which to reconstruct the past and it will always, while civilization lasts, serve to assert and establish countless details which form the background of Twentieth Century culture.

Conservation Stimulated

The inspiration which localities will derive from having their notable features presented to the world through an authentic publication of the Government is expected to advance the efforts, now more or less sporadic, to preserve national literary and historic shrines, to exploit scenic wonders and to develop natural advantages such as mines and quarries. It is axiomatic that people often underrate their advantages and possessions until outsiders begin to take an interest in them, and the nation-wide discussion of the treasures and natural resources of the communities will reawaken, or perhaps awaken for the first time, in them a sense of local pride of possession. When we read the reports of archeologists and learn how the tombs of the ancients have been invaded and spoiled by the people living about them, we are wont to condemn the vandals as lacking all sense of responsibility as custodians of their racial heritages. But many American communities are now making little effort to preserve historic landmarks and literary shrines or to prevent relics of the past from crumbling into dust. If The Guide helps to check this waste of relics and neglect of historic buildings and scenes, its cultural influence will be immeasurable.

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Books with Local Settings

One feature of The American Guide will appeal alike to readers and to students of local history. It is not generally realized how many parts of the country have been used as settings for literary works. From childhood, most of us have been familiar with such books as Washington Irving's "Sketchbook" and with James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales", which have thrown a romantic glamor about many natural features of New York State, such as the Catskill Mountains and the Mohawk Trail. The research workers of The Guide will seek out all literary works with local settings and list them with the articles describing the sections which they have more or less immortalized.

Other Writers' Projects

In addition to preparing The American Guide, the workers of the Writers' Division will draft semi-monthly field reports on Works Progress Administration activities. These reports will be used as the basis of a general report which will be made to President Roosevelt on all undertakings of the relief program. The writers will also compile an encyclopedia of government functions and engage in a number of other research projects.

Historical Records Survey

The Survey of State and Local Historical Records, which got under way about the first of the year, will make inventories of old documents in all parts of the country. These have accumulated in public offices, libraries, and

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historical association files and are believed to contain a vast amount of material of scientific and historic importance. The lack of adequate cataloging now handicaps the scholars and writers who could make effective use of the facts which they contain. Copies of the local inventories will be deposited with the communities and states, while a master inventory will be placed at Washington, D. C. As the work proceeds, portions of the old documents which seem particularly interesting, or are of outstanding scientific or historical importance, will be made public. This project will also engage a large number of unemployed writers.