



Agency: Works Progress Administration (1935-1939)
Works Projects Administration (1939-1942)
Office Location: Denver (for Colorado)
Operating Dates: 1935-1942
Principals: Paul D. Shriver

Information

Although the early programs of President Roosevelt's New Deal relieved the suffering of some Americans, as 1934 ended the economic depression and problems of unemployment continued. The Roosevelt administration proposed to create a broader relief and recovery program known as the "Second New Deal." Central to this new phase was a work relief program for the unemployed, established as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) on May 6, 1935. The WPA modified and expanded previous federal work relief to become the major source of public jobs for the unemployed during the latter part of the thirties.

The WPA sought to put the unemployed to work and remove them from the relief rolls. "Small useful projects" provided employment for a maximum number of needy "employable" workers in the "shortest time possible." The WPA construction projects were intended to provide employment to a large number of unskilled workers, but they also used skilled and semi-skilled workers. The WPA called for the majority of project costs to be wages rather than construction materials. The federal government paid virtually the entire expense of WPA projects, with relatively small sums supplied by sponsors making up the difference. The WPA eventually grew into the largest provider of work relief in the nation during the remainder of the Depression. The construction projects brought about the most widespread and significant change in public capital improvements ever witnessed by the state and nation.

The WPA provided temporary jobs for thousands of Colorado residents, both rural and urban, and resulted in the construction of public works projects in every county and virtually every community across the state. The agency formed the single largest construction and employment program in the state during the thirties.

By early November 1936, 9,000 Coloradans labored in WPA projects, and by late December more than 40,000 had received jobs. The numbers of WPA employed rose to 43,200 by March 1937, the peak of its working force in Colorado. Budget cuts brought periodic retrenchments, forcing the state program to cut back the number of jobs. Many of these occurred when Colorado experienced economic recession, such as in the summer of 1937. By early 1938, the unemployment and relief situation in Colorado nearly reached that of the desperate times of early 1933. With one in five people in the state on relief, Colorado WPA administrator Paul D. Shriver initiated an emergency work program and rehired 15,000 workers in early 1938. When the WPA finally received additional federal funds, the program expanded again, particularly in southern Colorado which had the highest percentage of unemployed in the state.

WPA construction projects made the greatest impact on reducing depression unemployment and on the improvement of the state's public infrastructure. Highways, roads and streets consumed 35 percent of WPA funds in Colorado. Other expenditures included 12 percent for buildings; 8 percent to water, sewer systems and other utilities; 6 percent on conservation projects and a similar percentage for airports and runways; 4 percent on recreational facilities



(excluding buildings); 1.3 percent for sanitation; just under 1 percent used on engineering surveys; and 2.1 percent on all other projects.

Roads and public buildings constituted the bulk of WPA construction projects in Colorado. New and better roads allowed the state to take advantage of its tourist and recreational potential. Eastern Colorado came to depend on an essential network of WPA enhanced “farm to market” roads for the recovery of its agricultural and ranching economy. Statewide, WPA workers built or improved over 9,400 miles of highways, roads or streets, nearly 3,400 bridges and viaducts, and more than 21,000 culverts.

Schools constituted another major category of WPA construction projects in Colorado. Schools in eastern Colorado were in particularly poor shape. Many districts had been unable to keep up with the enrollment growth of the first three decades of the twentieth century. The Depression halted all hopes of new construction and existing schools fell into disrepair. Many rural schools were crowded, outdated and unsafe. Throughout the state, the WPA newly built or expanded 113 schools. Additionally, the agency “reconstructed or improved” 381 schools.

The WPA erected or expanded a total of 583 public buildings across the state, and 764 other public buildings experienced reconstruction or improvements. WPA laborers built or improved 119 Colorado parks, 195 playground and athletic fields, and 32 swimming or wading pools. Public utility enhancement also constituted important WPA projects, particularly in smaller communities. The WPA constructed or improved 78 utility plants, 279 miles of water mains or distribution pipes, and 224 miles of new storm and sanitary sewers. Associated with the issue of sewage sanitation, but often constructed on private properties, the agency built an astounding 31,991 sanitary privies across the state.

While construction made up a large portion of WPA activities, non-construction service projects constituted wide variety of efforts providing employment women as well as white-collar professionals. Projects relating to adult education and the arts (including writing, music, performance, and the visual arts), as well as records and research projects provided jobs to people who had lost related work in similar professions. Rural women were given jobs sewing, gardening, canning, distributing commodities, and serving school hot lunches – thereby providing project employment for women while distributing the goods produced to the needy.

By the time it dismissed its last 1,700 employees in December 1942, the Colorado WPA program had given jobs to approximately 150,000 people statewide generating 195,518,207 worker hours. The federal government expended \$120,102,731 in Colorado, 89 percent going directly to wages. About 15 percent of the \$33,489,704 contributed by the sponsors went to wages. Colorado WPA workers received the highest wages paid by the agency nationwide, ranging from \$40 a month for non-skilled workers, to \$94 for skilled labor.

Statewide, the WPA expended \$1,644,458 for non-construction projects, the products and services produced went to needy Coloradans. WPA workers produced 6,730,092 garments and over 5 million quarts of preserved food. Others served over 22 million school hot lunches, placing Colorado in the top five in the nation. The majority of these service occurred in existing buildings, but occasionally a WPA construction project built a special purpose facility.

Of all the New Deal work relief programs resulting in the construction of public facilities, the WPA most impacted the built environment of the cities, towns, and small communities in hard hit eastern Colorado. While other New Deal programs assisted with soil conservation, farm



subsidies, and loans – all of which helped the residents of the plains region to survive the decade – the WPA built the region’s schools, roads, and public utilities. A majority of these resources remain in use – marking the many achievements made during a most difficult period of Colorado’s history.

Credited Projects (partial list)

Project	Location	Site No.	Date*	Status
Alamosa County Courthouse	702 Fourth St. Alamosa	5AL.263	1936	National Register
Ammunition Igloo	Camp George West, 15001 Denver West Pkwy., Golden	5JF.843	1940	National Register
Central School and Gymnasium	612 First St. Monte Vista	5RN.521	1938	National Register
Colorado Amphitheater	Camp George West, 15001 Denver West Pkwy., Golden	5JF.842.1	1933- 1935	National Register
Colorado Springs City Auditorium (WPA Mural)	231 E. Kiowa St. Colorado Springs	5EP.628	Ca. 1935	National Register
Colorado State Capitol Annex and Boiler Plant	1341 Sherman St. Denver	5DV.3844	1939- 1941	National Register
Devils Kitchen Picnic Shelter	Colorado National Monument, Grand Junction vicinity	5ME.1173	1941	National Register
Douglas Crossing Bridge	County Rd. 28, Granada vicinity	5PW.44	1936	National Register
Fort Vasquez Site (reconstructed fort)	US Hwy. 85 Platteville	5WL.568	Ca. 1938	National Register
Fruita Elementary (additions)	325 E. Aspen St. Fruita	5ME.4600	1936	National Register
Fruita Museum	432 E. Aspen Fruita	5ME.7041	1938	National Register
Hartman Gymnasium	School Ave. Hartman	5PW.74	Ca. 1938	National Register
Holly City Hall	119 E. Cheyenne St., Holly	5PW.175	1938	National Register
Holly Gymnasium	North Main St. Holly	5PW.268	1936	National Register
Julesburg Public Library	300 Cedar St. Julesburg	5SW.80	1937	State Register
Kim Schools	425 State St. Kim	5LA.1815	1935- 1941	National Register
La Junta City Park	Colorado Ave. La Junta	5OT.937	1935- 1941	National Register
Land’s End Observatory	Land’s End Road Whitewater vicinity	5ME.4936	1936- 1937	National Register
Manitou Experimental Forest Station	232 County Rd. 79 Woodland Park vic.	5TL.2130	1937- 1939	National Register
Otis Municipal Waterworks System (WPA-dug well)	113 Works St. Otis	5WN.165	Ca. 1937	State Register



Pueblo City Park Zoo	3455 Nuckolis Ave. Pueblo	5PE.587	1933-1940	National Register
Pueblo Mountain Park (additional construction)	S. Pine Dr., Beulah vicinity	5PE.1663	1935-1940	National Register
Reilly Canyon Bridge P-18-U and P-18-7	Trinidad Lake State Park, Trinidad vic.	5LA.8579	1936	State Register
Rim Rock Drive Historic District	Colorado National Monument, Grand Junction vicinity	5ME.5944	1931-1950	National Register
Ritto Secco Creek Culvert	Colo. Hwy 142 San Luis	5CT.322	1936	National Register
Saddlehorn Comfort Station	Colorado National Monument, Grand Junction vicinity	5ME.1174	1937	National Register
Saddlehorn Utility Area Historic District	Colorado National Monument, Grand Junction vicinity	5ME.7084	1937-1941	National Register
Sedgwick County Courthouse	315 Cedar St. Julesburg	5SW.81	1938-1939	National Register
Superintendent's Residence	Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, Mosca vicinity	5AL.414	Ca. 1938	National Register
Willow Creek Park	Memorial Dr. Lamar	5PW.56	1935-1938	National Register

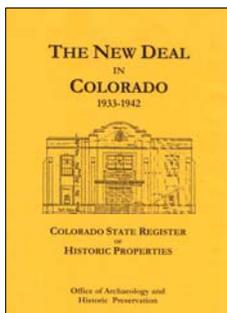
*Completion date or construction span is stated if known. Plan, building permit, or assessor dates are used if completion date or period is unknown.

Reference Material

Site Files Database, Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Colorado Historical Society, Denver.

Wolfenbarger, Deon. "New Deal Resources on Colorado's Eastern Plains," National Register of Historic Places multiple property documentation form, September 23, 2005.

Revised: September 5, 2007



A history of the New Deal on Colorado's Eastern Plains is available on the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation website at: www.coloradohistory-oahp.org/publications/contexts.htm

For more New Deal properties, see the special State Register New Deal property directory on the OAHp website.

