'American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA' by Nick Taylor

Account paints rosy picture for agency's role in easing Depression

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

In the 1930s, Americans learned a new word -- "boon-doggle."

During hearings in 1935 on the use of federal relief appropriations, Robert Marshall, a federally funded crafts instructor in Brooklyn, told a committee of the New York City Board of Aldermen that he taught "boon doggles" or, as he explained, "things men and boys do that are useful in their everyday operations or recreation or about their home."

His students learned how to make belts, tents and sleeping bags.

The press had a field day. In a story headlined "Today's Boon-Doggle," the New York Sun ridiculed government-funded projects to build a dog shelter in Memphis, Tenn., clean and varnish desks in Gadsden, Ala., and repair shoes on Long Island.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt shrugged off the criticism. "If we can boon-doggle ourselves out of this depression," he proclaimed, "that word is going to be enshrined in the hearts of the people for many years to come."

Through public works projects, administered by an array of "alphabet agencies," including the WPA (Works Progress Administration), Roosevelt's New Deal provided relief to millions of unemployed Americans and pumped money into the devastated private economy.

In his new book, subtitled "When FDR Put the Nation to Work," Nick Taylor, a freelance writer, provides a lively "people's history" of the WPA.

An unreconstructed New Dealer, Taylor dismisses or ignores evidence that public works projects did not promote -- and may have retarded -- recovery.

He celebrates the WPA for "treating people as a resource and not as a commodity." Thrown out of work through no fault of their own, Americans made the most of the opportunities the New Deal gave them, "to sweat in honest work as part of our democracy," Taylor argues.

The accomplishments of WPA workers, Taylor demonstrates, were awesome. They comprised rescue and recovery crews following floods, fires and hurricanes.

They built 650,000 miles of roads, 78,000 bridges, 800 airports and served 900 million hot lunches to school children.

Through programs in art, theater, music and writing, they presented concerts, puppet shows and circuses, performed plays, painted murals and produced 1,000 books, pamphlets and travel guides.

Since numbers numb, Taylor highlights "real people doing real jobs." He lets Johnny Mills speak for many of them.

A Republican from Jackson County, North Carolina, Mills was assigned by the WPA to a road crew, working on the state highway. He arose at 4 a.m., milked his cow and walked a mile to wait for a truck that would take him and other men to the job site. The money he earned -- about $44 a month, the going rate for unskilled white workers in the South -- helped pay the doctor, who delivered his daughter.

Mills earned his salary, he told Taylor. "Good people, they can't always help hard times, tough luck. ... And it was a help to us."

Most critics of the New Deal acknowledge the WPA's impact on individual lives and its role in rebuilding the infrastructure of the United States. But they do not agree that "by most objective measures," the jobs program was a success.

After all, throughout the 1930s, unemployment remained high and private investment in infrastructure remained low. Had the $10.5 billion allocated to the WPA been spent on a stimulus package for the private sector, they suggest, the Great Depression might have been shorter and shallower -- and Johnny Mills might have gotten work with the Mead Paper Company, the employer of choice in his one-industry town.

As we mark the 75th anniversary of the New Deal, the legacy of its nationwide jobs programs remains contested.

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