HANDOUT TWO

group 6

The WPA

The Work Projects Administration (WPA), originally called the Works Progress Administration, was the largest government agency established to fight unemployment during the Great Depression. From its inception in 1935 as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the agency was responsible for refurbishing America's road infrastructure, erecting buildings and bridges, improving airports, developing the arts, and giving millions of its employees an honest wage and a job in the broken American economy.

By 1935, America had some twenty million people on government relief. The WPA paid heads of families on relief for a thirty-hour work week. The agency employed both blue- and white-collar workers, who did everything from building zoos and writing books to laying sewers, landscaping parks, and paving airport runways.

The WPA is well remembered for its contribution to American arts and letters. One program was the Federal Writers' Project, an ambitious venture that produced, among other things, a series of comprehensive state and regional guidebooks. The American Guide Series offered cultural essays, automobile tours, historical reflections, photographs, and more. The Writers' Project also produced extensive folklore research, including interviews with many former slaves recorded in the Slave Narrative Collection.

The WPA's reach in the arts extended far beyond the written word. Through the Federal Art Project (FAP), unemployed American artists were hired to decorate and create murals for public buildings such as schools, libraries, and post offices. They created some 200,000 works of art during the FAP's tenure. Among the artists who worked for the WPA were Thomas Hart Benton, Ben Shahn, Willem de Kooning, and Jacob Lawrence.

WPA photographers also captured the visual saga of America in the Great Depression. They depicted urban and rural life of the 1930s and extensively documented programs including the Federal Theatre Project, another artistic arm of the WPA. Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans took the best-known photos of the Depression, those showing poverty in rural America, under the direction of the Farm Security Administration, a sister relief agency created under the New Deal.

The WPA employed over eight million people during its existence, including writers Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Studs Terkel, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston. By the time the agency disbanded in 1943, it had bequeathed a legacy, both economic and artistic, that would benefit generations of Americans with its documentary precision, its enormous scale, and its human touch.

HANDOUT THREE

group 7

Migrant Farm Workers

Land in America is plentiful, but not always cheap. Those who cannot afford to buy it often work it for a wage. Tenant farmers cultivate a plot of land and pay a portion of the harvest to the owner, as do the Joads before the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. But migrant farmers and laborers occupy a rung further down the ladder, traveling seasonally and getting paid by the bushel to do painful and dehumanizing "stoop labor."

Since subsistence farming began to wane during the late nineteenth century, cheap migrant labor in America has been in constant demand. The people taking migrant jobs have belonged to many different groups: whites like the Joads, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. The Depression-era photographs of Dorothea Lange, Horace Bristol, Walker Evans, and others made the grim faces of migrant farmers a permanent part of the collective American memory.

During the Depression, American citizens desperate for work did most of the migrant labor. Due to the labor shortage caused by World War II, however, the Bracero Program brought five million Mexican agricultural workers to the United States, beginning in 1942. The program ended two decades later, when a rash of accusations and lawsuits charging human rights abuses were filed against the American and Mexican governments.

In the 1960s, the United Farm Workers brought to light the conditions of migrant laborers. Led by Arizona-born César Chávez, the union organized protests, marches, and boycotts to educate the American public about who was picking their produce and the conditions in which they lived. In the 1970s, an estimated seventeen million Americans participated in a successful boycott of nonunion grapes.

In more recent years, right-to-work legislation and a surplus of labor have prevented most migrant farmers from unionizing. Though estimates vary, it is safe to say that more than two million migrant farm workers labor in America's fields—most of them Spanish-speaking and at least 100,000 of them children. About a third of the total are U.S. citizens who live a hand-to-mouth existence. Their average education stops at the sixth grade, their lifespan ranks substantially below the American norm, and the majority of them have incomes well below the poverty line.

Many farm workers today labor under conditions familiar to the writers and photographers who chronicled their precursors during the Depression. Migrant farmers remain a large yet nearly invisible presence in the American mosaic.