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Article Summary: Umland became Nebraska state editor of the WPA Federal Writers' Project in 1936. Many of the Nebraska writers were inexperienced and their office was chaotic, but they produced state and city guide books as well as many booklets and pamphlets on Nebraska topics.

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Photographs / Images: Rudolph E Umland, 1982; Mari Sandoz supervising WPA workers clipping newspaper items; State Historical Society Superintendent Addison E Sheldon supervising an office staff of WPA workers

T H E

Federal Writers' Project

A NEBRASKA
EDITOR
REMEMBERS

Introduction

Rudolph E. Umland, born in 1907 on a farm near Eagle, Cass County, came of age during the Depression when work and dreams were scarce for American youth. He graduated from Eagle High School in 1925 and entered the University of Nebraska. In 1928 he left school and entrained for the West Coast as a hobo, but got only as far as Idaho. Umland returned to Lincoln, but left again the next year for Chicago and then "bummed" around the country working at any job he could find and writing when he could. By his own estimate Umland traveled about 12,000 miles by boxcar, before rejoining his father and brother on the family farm near Eagle in 1932.¹

During this unsettled period of his life he met Lowry C. Wimberly, a popular University of Nebraska English professor and founder and long-time editor of the *Prairie Schooner* magazine. Umland's first published contribution, a book review, appeared in its third issue in 1927, and his first published short story in 1932. Wimberly became an inspiration to Umland and other young writers such as Mari Sandoz. It was Wimberly who in 1936 persuaded Umland to join the WPA Federal Writers' Project (FWP). He served first as an editor and later as assistant state and state supervisor.²

The Federal Writers' Project was a work relief program begun in 1935 under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. It provided a modest income for unemployed writers and other white-collar professionals—in Nebraska "several hundred unemployed teachers, typists, reporters, housewives, bankers,

By Rudolph E. Umland



Rudolph E. Umland, 1982. Courtesy Journal-Star Printing Company, Lincoln.

students, insurance agents—even an osteopathic physician."³ The bulk of the FWP's work was carried out between 1937 and 1939. In Nebraska it produced about thirty books and pamphlets, including *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State*, published by Viking Press in 1939 (republished by University of Nebraska Press in 1979) as part of the WPA American Guide Series. The FWP

also published guidebooks on Lincoln and Omaha and pamphlets on folklore, place names, and state history.⁴

The Nebraska State Historical Society was the FWP's state sponsor until August 31, 1939. The federal government provided most of the funds, principally as wages. Society Superintendent Addison E. Sheldon and other NSHS staff members helped edit and publish FWP publications. After September 1 the program, now called the Nebraska Writers' Project, was operated for two and one-half more years under the sponsorship of the University of Nebraska College of Arts and Sciences. It was terminated in 1942.⁵

A number of Nebraska writers besides Umland were employed by the FWP, including Robert Carlson, folklorist; Weldon Keyes, who later gained national prominence as a poet; and Loren Eiseley, poet, anthropologist, and scientific philosopher. *Nebraska Guide* contributors who had also published in *Prairie Schooner* included Kees, Eiseley, Fred Christensen, Jacob Harris Gable (later state FWP director), Kenetha Thomas, Martha Lund, Dale Smith, Norris Getty, and Carl Uhlirik.⁶ Another member of this cluster of Lincoln authors was Mari Sandoz, who had supervised WPA workers at NSHS in 1934 before the FWP was established and had gathered material that later emerged in her historical writing.⁷

When World War II began, Umland went to work for the U.S. Postal Censorship Station in New Orleans and later worked for the Veterans Administration in Lincoln and for the Social Security Administration in Kansas City, where he

also reviewed books for the *Kansas City Star* and the *Kansas City Times*. He estimated in retirement that he had published about seventy-five stories and articles and 150 book reviews during his writing career. He died July 16, 1993, in Lincoln.⁸

The following reminiscence (from the Rudolph E. Umland Collection at the Nebraska State Historical Society) illustrates the whimsical humor which characterized much of Umland's writing and recalls the frenetic pace of his days with the Federal Writers' Project in Nebraska.—Patricia C. Gaster, Research and Publications Division, NSHS.

On Editing WPA Guide Books

The Federal Writers' Project was established in 1935 for two reasons: the giving of useful employment to indigent writers and research workers; the writing of state and city guide books in each of the forty-eight States. The particular task of the Nebraska project was the writing of *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State*, the *Lincoln City Guide*, and *Omaha: A Guide to the City and Environs*. The completed manuscripts of these books were turned over to sponsors qualified to arrange for their publication; the Nebraska and Lincoln guides were published. In addition, the Nebraska project completed booklets on Bellevue, John Neihardt, Febold Feboldson, Nebraska place names, military history, an almanac for Nebraskans, and numerous folklore pamphlets. Requests for the latter, designed primarily for school children, were received from librarians and individuals in many states and the Panama Canal Zone. In June 1938 the project inaugurated a news bureau that sent weekly releases of historical interest to over 200 newspapers in the state.

I started work as an editor on the Nebraska project in 1936. The state office, having a staff of eight workers at the time, was in the Union Terminal Warehouse at Lincoln. In the same room were several hundred other workers of various state and district administrative

offices of the WPA. The staccato rat-tat-tat of over a hundred typewriters, voices barking out dictation, clerks opening and closing metal filing cabinets, ringing of telephones, scurrying of workers to and from rest-rooms, and clerks transporting office supplies filled the room with a confusion that was little conducive to writing. It was in this environment, however, that much of the material for the Nebraska State Guide was compiled and edited.

One day I was given a manuscript to edit on the margin of which the state director, then a lady [Elizabeth Sheehan], had inscribed: "Such beautiful, beautiful writing!" The manuscript, relating the experiences of an early traveler crossing the Nebraska plains, gave me nightmares for weeks. A brief quotation will suffice: "After a pleasant evening, he set out on his return to camp in the midst of a terrible storm, against the wishes of his hosts. Then followed his experiences: he fell into a ravine; he became lost; he saw wolves. When daylight which he awaited came, he tried to reach the Platte River. Here he came upon a hidden glen where were many buffalo bones piled high, a fearful sight. He sang snatches from grand opera and recited all the poetry he knew to pass the night. During the time, he knew no hunger; he had eaten mushrooms and other wild growths. He had great strength, probably aroused by the great strain of fear and danger; he saw antelope and wolves. In fact, he wanted to fight a wolf but the wolf would not come out of his den."

When I finished reading the manuscript, I was ready to fight several wolves myself. I could see little hope for the Federal Writers' Project in Nebraska. Better, I thought, for the WPA to put these scribblers on a project that was less exacting. But I know now that the wretched style of the early manuscripts was derived partly from the environment of the state office. You can hardly expect a writer to express himself in a smooth flow of words when planted suddenly in an office filled with confusion and distraction. A seasoned news-

paper writer can perhaps, but most of the workers on the Nebraska project were recruited from the ranks of unemployed teachers, college graduates, and newspaper reporters of short experience. The latter were first to become "acclimated" to the office.

There was at least one inspired worker on the project. He was inspired to such heights, however, that it became necessary to tie millstones to his feet. He was assigned to write the essay of a motor tour that followed the eastern border of Nebraska along the Missouri River. Even with the millstones, he soared. "Traveling north on highway 73 through Florence," he wrote, "we should fill our very souls with the fragrance and beauty of the flower and rock gardens on either side of the road.

"As we come up over the rolling hills out of Florence let us cast our eyes to the east. What is that to the east of us? The river, of course, the great winding river on which our forefathers traveled. To the east of the river are the high towering bluffs of Iowa. Beautiful, yes, but more than beautiful, they are historic, men of the ages as it were. But let us cast our eye to the roadside again. What is that on the hillside? Grapevines, vines producing grapes for the city and country folk, yes. California is noted for her raisins but Nebraska too has its possibilities.

"As we travel along we cannot help but see the shades of light and deep green, intermingled with the beautiful open spaces filled with man's bountiful harvest of wheat and corn. Yes, wheat grows well on the flats near the river, in fact some of the highest yields ever attained come from those very fields on which your eye is set. But lo, what is that in the distance? A town, you say. Yes, sure enough, it is that old historic scene, Fort Atkinson, which is now called Fort Cathoun.

"Let us see what the town holds in store for us today. Well, first of all, we should make a trip out to the site of the old fort. It is marked by a flagpole, one half mile east of town. Then perhaps as we go along we might uncover some

old soldiers' buttons or some early coins. But let's not stop yet, we cannot miss those interesting bluffs in which our forefathers built their caves and cellars. Let's go on out there to the bluffs and see those caves. Perhaps if we have time we can do a little pioneering for ourselves and see if we can find any other marks of time.

"In our rush to see all these interesting sights we should remember the scenes round about us, look up the river, look down the river; do you see that stream, see how it sparkles, see how it tries in vain to talk to you? Let nature have its course, speak with it, drink it in, Nebraska wants you to share in its beauty. Come, let us go in our car and travel on for this is but a start, a small drop in the bucket compared to the rest of the river country.

"Notice those farm homes along the road. See how regularly they come into view. Each having its own definite setting. See how each setting seems naturally to fit the other. The beautiful bushes around the houses and the gorgeous colored flowers ranging from deep purple and yellow to the beautiful white of snow. Then to the right and left of the homes, the barnyards, with the large red barns each more than likely filled to capacity with the sweet smelling odor of the new mown alfalfa hay. The granaries, too, overflowing with the ripe grain of the last year's harvest. The yards themselves filled with the pork for the nation."

The "writer" of the above paragraphs was eliminated from the project in a simple manner. We removed the millstones from his feet and assigned him to write a description of the Nebraska State Capitol in moonlight. He soared so far, so far, this time that we never saw him again. It was rumored that some Republican shades caught him among the clouds.

The project gradually—with the appointment of a new state director (Jacob Harris Gable), the removal of the state office to better quarters, and the transfer of a few of its lesser wits to other projects—developed into something of the organization it was de-



Mari Sandoz (rear) supervised WPA workers clipping newspaper items in the Nebraska State Historical Society quarters in the State Capitol building. NSHS-F293-1302

signed to be.⁹ Good copy started to come into the state office. Manuscripts that revealed considerable research on the part of the workers cluttered the desks of the editors. To check this material for accuracy, to compile, rewrite and edit it, proved a slow and difficult task. An editorial board was set up, composed of the more capable workers, and a definite flow of material, as in a newspaper office, established. There were several rewrite editors, a tour editor, a cities' editor, an essay editor, and a managing editor. Since the State Guide was a cooperative venture, each editor contributed his two-cents' worth to the volume. But, in order to avoid a patchwork effect in the text, there had to be a uniformity of style and form in the various essays.

On one occasion, the tour editor—a poetess of some renown in the state—wrote an essay that needed revision. It was given to one of the rewrite editors for alteration: an act that drew bitter resentment, from the poetess. "I have had twenty years of editorial experience and am the author of several books," she exclaimed. "What do you mean by giving Mr. — my essay to rewrite? He'll take

away all its color, destroy its beauty!" The essay was greatly improved by removal of its purple passages and superfluous wordage. But it was an affront that the pride of the poetess could not bear. She left the project.

As soon as the State Guide was well under way, a group of workers in Lincoln was assigned to gather material for the Lincoln City Guide. Old-timers were interviewed and newspaper files searched for facts. Most of the workers were women, former school-teachers, who had unshakable faith in the morals of the city. They accepted, in complete seriousness, the assertion that Lincoln was the Bethlehem of America. It was really a problem to get them to gather any material that did not lend support to this view. I remember how shocked one worker was when she inadvertently discovered that a prominent Lincoln church woman had once been involved in a scandal. That such a thing as an illegitimate birth could occur in Lincoln was quite beyond her comprehension. Of course the project was not engaged in compiling such information. It did, however, want to write a guide to Lincoln that would be unbiased and enter-

taining. The editors felt that the Mollie Hall Cigar Store, a notorious dive of early days, deserved mention as well as the reputable Epworth (Methodist) Assembly. Each had contributed to the city's history.

Although Lincoln was a comparatively young city, the workers had difficulty in finding what years certain of its historic buildings were erected. Records, in many cases, were incomplete or contradictory. More than once a field worker brought in a report that commenced like the following: "The *Prairie Capital* says that Funke's Opera House was opened sometime during 1883-1885. The 1880 and 1881 city directories do not mention it, but the 1885 directory does. The elevator man says it was built in 1875, but I am wondering if this is the same opera house. The city directory for 1876-1877 says that a new opera house was just being completed to take the place of one burned down in October 1875, which was, without doubt, the finest in the West, outside of Chicago and St. Louis, with the exception of Tootle's Opera House at St. Joseph. I am wondering if this is the same one. I have been told by others that there was another house by the same name at a different location. I believe the elevator man has a good memory, but what he says disagrees with what some of the others say, etc., etc." It was such reports that caused editors on the project to tear their hair, swear, and carry on like bolsheviks.

The manuscript of the Lincoln City Guide was soon completed. A local civic organization was asked to sponsor its publication, but, after several of the members had read the manuscript the request was emphatically refused. Objections were made to the sparing use of adjectives glorifying the city and the mention of such a place as the Mollie Hall Cigar Store. The Nebraska State Historical Society, whose superintendent, Addison E. Sheldon, had given valuable assistance to the project from the start, then consented to act as sponsor. Upon publication, the book was favorably re-

viewed by local critics. George Grimes of the *Omaha World-Herald* wrote: "My respect for the white collar section of the WPA increases greatly as a result of this publication. It is a good piece of work, more than ordinarily good, and it will lead, I think, to an eager awaiting of the results of the WPA writers' delving into other cities and parts of Nebraska." In less than a year 16,000 copies of the book had been sold.

In certain areas of the state the project had no workers. To obtain information for the State Guide on towns and points of interest in these areas, an appeal was made to schools for contributions. The response was gratifying. For a time one editor was kept busy searching the school material for facts and stories that could be used. Quite often bits of unsophisticated humor were encountered. A school pupil at Macy related the following about a somewhat punctilious ghost: "There was an old Indian man buried upon this hill. It is thought that every year on the 17th of October this man hollers. But just a few years ago my aunt told me that this man would never yell as long as there was noise. It had to be quiet before he would yell. He yells about one o'clock in the morning."

The first draft of the State Guide was completed in 1937 and submitted to the national office at Washington for approval. It was returned with many suggestions for revision, chiefly in regard to form. When the project was first set up, a manual of instruction for the compilation of the guides was issued by the national office. It was only gradually, however, that a specific form for the guides evolved; supplementary instructions to the manual, therefore appeared every few months. Even after several guides had been published, the technical form of the tours continued to be changed. It is difficult to say how often the tour section of the Nebraska State Guide underwent revision. About the time one revision was completed, new supplementary instructions were received calling for another revision. This was true not only in Nebraska but in other states as

well. Deadlines for the completion of the books were set, set again, and yet again. A poet expressed the feelings of many state editors when he wrote:

I think that I have never tried
A job as painful as the guide.
A guide which changes every day
Because our betters feel that way.
A guide whose deadlines come so fast
Yet no one lives to see the last.
A guide to which we give our best
To hear: "This stinks like all the rest!"
There's no way out but suicide.
For only God can end the guide.¹⁰

[A] Start was made on the Omaha City Guide. Workers in Omaha were assigned to research; the writing was done chiefly in the state office at Lincoln. In editing manuscripts on the art collections, a knowledge of ancient history was quickly found essential. For instance, an art collection in the Joslyn Memorial was said to contain "vases and curios of Phoenician glass, some dating as early as 100 B.C." This date is late, rather than early, for Phoenicia was on the decline by 100 B.C. In a collection of Egyptian funerary objects were listed "a mirror from Pompeii, a Babylonian tablet, and a letter opener carved from a hippopotamus bone." Neither Pompeii nor Babylon was ever in Egypt and it is quite unlikely that ancient Egyptians ever used letter openers since they did not write letters. Another collection was said to contain "examples of pottery from the burial places of people who lived in 4000 B.C., most of them Roman pieces." Historians doubt that any civilization existed at Rome prior to 1000 B.C., and are positive the place was not inhabited prior to 2000 B.C. The Byron Reed collection in the Omaha Public Library was said to contain "several coins of the period between 135 B.C. and 127 B.C. issued by Herod, Pontius Pilate, and Agrippa." Herod was the name of a dynasty that existed from about 40 B.C. to 60 A.D., of which Herod Agrippa I and Herod Agrippa II were two kings. Pontius Pilate was procurator of Jerusalem at the time of Christ. Therefore, even if the names



During the 1930s State Historical Society Superintendent Addison E. Sheldon (standing at right) supervised an office staff of WPA workers. NSHS-H673

are accurate, the coins could hardly have been issued during the period given. To catch the dozens of such errors as well as such absurdities as "coins dated 246 B.C." (implying a soothsayer's knowledge of the future date of Christ's birth), and "books dating back to earliest times" (books were not printed until about 1440 A.D.), called for editors who did not "lean on their shovels." After being approved by the state office, manuscripts were read by specialists in various fields of art and history in the national office at Washington.

Numerous inaccuracies were discovered in the published histories of Omaha. It was amusing to notice to what length some historians went in attempting to locate the site of Fort Croghan in Omaha, the actual site of the fort being across the river in Iowa. Several historical sites in Omaha were commemorated by plaques or markers placed by local chapters of [various patriotic organizations]. . . . Very few of these bore accurate inscriptions. The plaque on the building that covered the site of the first territorial capitol of Ne-

braska bore the date 1867 instead of 1855–1857. The stone marker before the Weber Mill in Florence bore the statement that the mill was built by the Mormons in 1846. Evidence unearthed by workers on the project revealed that the mill was built by a company organized to promote the industrial growth of Florence about seven years after the Mormons had abandoned the site. A large cottonwood tree in Florence Park bore a plaque stating that the tree was used as a hitching post by Brigham Young in 1846–1847. No evidence was found by the project workers to support this claim. Credence was given instead to the claim of Samuel Forgey, carpenter, that he had cut a stout limb from a cottonwood tree and driven it into the ground to serve as a hitching post for his horse while building the nearby residence of James Mitchell in 1855. The ground was wet and the limb took root and grew into the flourishing tree. The story that Brigham Young built the Mitchell residence was discredited as a piece of romantic fiction.

On the marker at the site of Fort Atkinson the date 1819 was found to be wrong. The first cantonment, erected by the troops under the command of Colonel Henry Atkinson in 1819, was not at this site, but two or three miles farther up the river, and was known as Camp Missouri. It was not until June 1820 that a cantonment, known as Camp Council Bluffs, was established at the site of the marker; the following year its name was changed to Fort Atkinson. In the Bellevue Public Library was a plaque . . . stating that Bellevue was the site of the first territorial capitol. The mere fact that the first territorial governor, Francis Burt, lay ill abed for twelve days and died at Bellevue did not make that spot a capital. The first territorial capitol was a brick building erected in 1854 by the Council Bluffs & Nebraska Ferry Company in Omaha. A stone memorial on Military Road in Omaha bore the inscription: "One of the Oregon Trails." There was but one Oregon Trail and that did not pass through Omaha; the

Military Road was merely a branch running from Omaha to Fort Kearny. So numerous were the mistakes found on the markers that some of the project workers came to feel that their chief mission in life was to correct [these] errors. . . .

In May 1938 the manuscript of the Nebraska State Guide was approved by the national office. It was then turned over to the Viking Press in New York City for publication. After reading the manuscript, Addison E. Sheldon, Nebraska historian, wrote: "I am moved with admiration for the enormous mass of detailed information which is here assembled and organized. In the words of Horace, the poet, *Quod non Imber edax non Aquilo impotens possit diluere* (That which neither destructive rain nor the raging north wind can destroy)."

However, even before the guide was published, destructive forces were at work. In November 1938 Representative Martin Dies of Texas, chairman of a Congressional committee investigating un-American activities, named the Nebraska State Guide among several others of the American Guide Series, charged with containing communist propaganda and inflammatory statements criticizing the American system of government. "I sincerely hope," Dies said, "that the Federal Writers' Project will instruct the Viking Press not to go to press with these guides until they are corrected so as to remove from them such propaganda and appeals to class hatred." How such a charge could be made against the Nebraska State Guide proved enigmatic to even the most conservative reader of the manuscript. No corrections were made. The cry "Red" had been heard before—from people who wore their patriotism on their coat lapels.¹¹

The Nebraska State Guide does describe the cities and towns of the state in terms less roseate than those used by chambers of commerce. Mention is made of Omaha's Saturday night brawls, drugstore cowboys, gambling halls, and dime-a-drink girls. "The working people are concentrated in South Omaha and in districts to the east, center and north

of town," the guide states. "Elsewhere, spread out for miles, are the homes of salesmen, advertising men, insurance men, realtors, wholesale officials, refrigerator men, teachers and second vice presidents." When the guide was published in June 1939 Harry Hansen, literary critic of the New York *World-Telegram*, commented: "It isn't hard to guess the sympathies of the man who wrote that paragraph." The volume evidently succeeds—as the editors had intended—in presenting something of the individuality of the state, for in his review Hansen continued:

There's a different world in Nebraska. Its people watch the barometer; their livelihood depends on the state of the soil. It's a land where towns hang out banners reading, "Welcome, Odd Fellows," or "Welcome, Sheriffs," where the cattle have white faces, where the chief topic is whether it's going to rain and for how long. It's a land with memories of stage coach days and sod houses and false front stores, and with some of the finest modern architecture of our time, including Goodhue's Capitol.

The writers' project was terminated as a federal project on August 31, 1939. A Congressional committee investigating the WPA had found that the number of certified workers who had been continuously employed on the relief projects for three years or more for the entire country totaled 16.7 percent. On the arts projects, however, the number of workers who had been employed for more than three years totaled 33 percent. The committee decided therefore that the latter projects were providing careers rather than temporary work relief and suggested curtailment. The Federal Theater Project was abolished entirely and the other arts projects, including the writers', were restricted only to such states where a local sponsoring agency could be secured. On September 1, 1939, the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Nebraska became the official sponsor of the WPA Writers' Program in Nebraska and the ink continued to flow another two and a half years.

¹ Rudolph E. Umland, "Wimberly and Others," *Prairie Schooner*, 51 (Spring 1977):22-23. "Travel, Writing Urges Infected Umland," *Lincoln (Sunday) Journal and Star*, Apr. 26, 1982; B. 6. S. 4. F. 1, Rudolph E. Umland Collection, MS1599, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter cited as Umland Collection).

² Umland, "Wimberly," 29.

³ The name of the Works Progress Administration was changed to the Work Projects Administration on July 1, 1939, under a reorganization plan. Quote from Umland, "Wimberly," 29.

⁴ Ibid.; Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 27; "The WPA Writers' Program," B.5. S.2. F.5, Umland Collection.

⁵ Addison E. Sheldon, "The Nebraska Guide Book," *Nebraska History*, 19 (July-September 1938), 248.

⁶ Umland, "Wimberly," 29, 43-45.

⁷ NSHS sponsored WPA relief programs other than the FWP. The most important were the American Imprints Inventory, the Historical Records Survey, the Workers' Service Project, and the records copying project of the Deborah Avery Chapter of the DAR. Anne Dillendal, "A Centennial History of the Nebraska State Historical Society, 1878-1978," *Nebraska History* (Fall 1978):380-81. NSHS has the raw data of the FWP and the Historical Records Survey.

⁸ "Travel," Umland obituary, *Lincoln Journal*, July 16, 1993; B.6. S.4. F.1, Umland Collection.

⁹ Jacob Harris Gable in July 1936 became state director of the FWP. Gable, one of the student founders of the *Prairie Schooner* about ten years before, was recommended for the post by Lowry Wimberly. Umland, "Wimberly," 31.

¹⁰ This has been quoted elsewhere in connection with the FWP. Penkower includes it and attributes it to an "exasperated state editor." Penkower, *Writers' Project*, 33. Jerry Mangione in *The Dream and the Deal, The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 138-40, identifies the writer as Miriam Allen deFord of the California FWP.

¹¹ Umland had participated in a 1933 farmers' march on the Nebraska State Capitol to demand a moratorium on farm foreclosures. He was later personally criticized for participating in an event at which Communists were allegedly present. He candidly discussed the leftist political leanings of several of his FWP friends, including Weldon Kees, in "Wimberly," 34.