Layer 2: Launching the Southern Life History Project

Debates emanating from Chapel Hill over how to understand, document, and represent the South took on new urgency as the effects of the Great Depression continued to ripple throughout the nation and the world. In most cases, the challenges were not new. Issues such as exploitative agricultural economies, industrialization, and unemployment were exacerbated, but not new features of American society. The need to understand and alleviate these social issues took on new urgency with the Great Depression, a problem the Roosevelt Administration hoped to solve through the New Deal.

Against this backdrop emerged the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP). Part employment project and part laudatory experiment in federal support of cultural work, this New Deal agency pursued documentary projects and entered the fore over how to document and communicate the “real” conditions of people in the U.S.[[1]](#footnote-1) Who should be documented, how they should be documented, and why they should be documented were key questions that animated Couch when he joined the Southeastern region of the FWP in 1936.[[2]](#footnote-2) Shaped by emerging documentary practices that privileged folkways as well as institutional possibilities made possible by the vast bureaucratic infrastructure of the FWP, the documentation of “life histories” was Couch’s answer to the debate between Odum and other sociologists over how to best capture the real nature of Southern life.[[3]](#footnote-3)

To accomplish this documentary project, Couch sent unemployed white-collar workers, hired as federal writers, across the Southeast region to interview fellow Southerners about their lives and thereby shape their own identity while communicating local and regional challenges. The ability to hear from Southerners in their words, Couch argued, lent authority and authenticity to their claims about their conditions. Since garnering university support was a tall task, in part due to Odum’s skepticism about the project, Couch utilized his position in the FWP to launch the life histories project. By engaging in questions about how best to capture, document, and analyze social conditions, Couch, UNC, and the New Deal would shape what counted as sociological knowledge and the role of public institutions in the process.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*The New Deal*

As Couch and Odum debated how to assess and address the needs of the South, government officials in Washington were rapidly passing new legislation to alleviate the effects of the Great Depression. With the support of his prominent advisors, known colloquially as the “Brain Trust,” Roosevelt paired his Executive Order power along with the legislative power of Congress to implement a series of policies that were, he stated, “a new deal for the American people.”[[5]](#footnote-5) They reasoned that full recovery required support services that aided those struggling and laws that reformed the very systems that led to economic turmoil. What followed was a series of programs and regulations designed to offer relief while offering reforms that would lead to recovery.

The First New Deal (1933-1934) focused on providing immediate relief through banking and monetary reform. Along with reforms such as moving the United States dollar off the gold standard, the government began to regulate securities at the federal level and require disclosures that helped assess the health of the banks such as gains and losses. Relief was significantly directed at agriculture and providing aid to farmers. The Farm Security Administration paid farmers to put away their plows in order to raise agriculture prices while infrastructure projects like the Rural Electrification Administration and Tennessee Valley Authority were designed to modernize rural life and create jobs. Developing further relief programs, the Second New Deal (1935-1936) focused on American workers - creating jobs, providing social security, and improving labor relations. The federal government served as the nation’s largest employer, hiring in sectors as disparate as highway construction and theatre performance. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), founded in May 1935, led the way by employing millions of mostly White Americans to labor on public works. As such, the federal government demonstrated the strength of the nation as it led the recovery.

While the WPA is often most remembered for its public works such as roads and dams, White collar workers were also in need of work, especially writers, artists, and other cultural workers who began advocating for relief, including the creation of unions.[[6]](#footnote-6) For example, the Author’s League, established in 1917, joined forces with the Unemployed Writers’ Association (UWA), a new organization founded in January 1934 in response to the depression, to lobby Congress to develop a national plan to employ writers. Frustrated by what they saw as partial gains, a subset of members of the UWA became the Writers’ Union.[[7]](#footnote-7) Other writers picketed in the streets to be included in the WPA.[[8]](#footnote-8) To what degree such unions had a direct impact on government policies remains an open question, but there is no denying that organizing helped bring attention to the plight of cultural workers.[[9]](#footnote-9)

At the same time, there were bureaucrats who valued cultural workers’ labor; some argued that all types of workers deserved access to federal resources while others recognized the cultural power of harnessing cultural work. Franklin Roosevelt, for example, supported such efforts because artists needed to live too.[[10]](#footnote-10) Others argued that writers were in a position to highlight and therefore celebrate American life during a crisis of confidence in the nation.[[11]](#footnote-11) Whether driven by providing equal opportunity for employment or using art to celebrate national pride, bureaucrats came together to support employing cultural workers.

*The Founding of the WPA*

Among these savvy and empathetic bureaucrats who recognized cultural workers as deserving support was one of Roosevelt’s trusted New Deal leaders, Harry Hopkins, who served as head of the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) from 1933 to 1935. His philosophy toward economic relief was to match the skills of those on relief with work opportunities that fit their skill sets, so he ordered surveys to assess the occupations of relief recipients. Among the ranks were white collar workers, including writers and artists, who were left out of the state-run relief programs that equated work with manual labor.[[12]](#footnote-12) An artist laying piling for a building was as much a mismatch as a construction worker painting a mural in a city hall. Rather, he reasoned, employment opportunities should reflect the occupations of those on relief. He scoured his network to find successful models for national-level cultural worker programs.

Conditions changed in August 1934 when Hopkin’s former college classmate, Hugh Harlan, became supervisor of the Newspapers Writers’ Project for Los Angeles County. Professional writers were hired to write histories, conduct sociological studies, and write reports. Over half of the writers left for full-time employment, which was considered a resounding success. FERA leaders Jake Baker and Arthur “Tex” Goldschmidt used the program’s success as well as ideas from advocacy groups, such as the Writers’ Union, to outline potential national programs within FERA that included commissioning projects for public institutions, hiring Black writers, interviewing ex-slaves in Ohio, and documenting America’s folklore, which was understood to be vanishing.[[13]](#footnote-13)

When Baker asked Henry Alsberg to join FERA in mid-1934 as supervisor of reports and records, he, too, liked the idea of a writer’s project.[[14]](#footnote-14) Alsberg had matriculated through elite schools in New York City including Columbia, which he entered at 15 years old and stayed for law school. Alsberg was among many Columbia graduates who entered the ranks of New Deal leadership, but his path wasn’t a clear one into government service. After deciding that neither law nor academia was for him, he became a foreign correspondent and then returned stateside to New York City. A writer and supporter of theatre, he circulated in leftist circles and counted among his friends Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and Issac Don Levine. While accounts of Alsberg’s manner suggest his personality was more bohemian than bureaucratic, he enjoyed great respect from colleagues who had ascended into powerful roles within the New Deal state.[[15]](#footnote-15) Once he joined FERA, he was in a position to shape policy and direct resources, which he did by directing his attention to how the government could support cultural workers, particularly writers. He would soon count Couch among his colleagues and confidants and lent his support to collecting life histories and the Southern Life Histories Project.

*The WPA Sets-Up Federal #1*

In 1935, FERA was replaced with two new federal agencies — the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Social Security Administration. Hopkins was tapped to lead the WPA in 1935 and brought with him his care for cultural workers; such a commitment was important because the WPA was appropriated over 4.8 billion dollars ($90 billion in 2019): 6.7 percent of the nation’s GDP.[[16]](#footnote-16) WPA focused on employment, which marked a shift in New Deal policy from funding relief rolls to providing steady jobs with wages established by the government. Like FERA, the focus was on public works, particularly infrastructure such as buildings and roads. However, with Hopkins at the helm, the WPA quickly sought to add programs for white collar workers and procured hundreds of millions of dollars earmarked for these efforts. One reason the monies were sent to the WPA over other agencies, such as Public Works Administration, was due to the creation of Federal Project Number One (Federal #1).

Under the Works Progress Administration, Federal #1 employed over 40,000 creatives in areas such as art, music, acting, and writing under five projects: Federal Art Project, Federal Music Project, Federal Theatre Project, Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), and the Historical Records Survey. The Historical Records Survey began as a part of the FWP but became a separate project in 1939 as the FWP came under increased scrutiny. While a small percentage of WPA employees, only 40,000 of the 8.5 million who worked for the WPA, the cultural impact of Federal #1 was anything but insignificant.[[17]](#footnote-17) Scholars agree that the effort was among the largest and most influential government-led and administered efforts to support and shape cultural production in the United States.[[18]](#footnote-18) Thanks to the support of Alsberg, the life histories project would flourish under the FWP and provide needed autonomy from UNC and Odum.

*Creating the Documentary Decade*

While the structural conditions of the New Deal enabled Couch to find a home for the Southern Life History Project within Federal #1, these formations were also shaped by particular cultural conditions. Labeled by scholars as the “documentary decade,” the 1930s was a period in which cultural workers experimented with documentary representation.[[19]](#footnote-19) Documentary came in many forms including aurally over the radio as well as in writing and images in books, newspapers, exhibitions, and films. Documentary enjoyed claims that it accurately represented reality that gave it political and cultural salience. Listeners could tune into radio documentaries to hear from people in their own words while readers could turn the pages of a documentary book for thick descriptions that conveyed actuality.[[20]](#footnote-20) The indexicality of photography and film lent images a claim to the real that gave documentary authority and power.[[21]](#footnote-21) Documentary - as a genre, form, and idea - was understood as a powerful way of representing reality during the period.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Documentary’s assent was in large part due to the exigencies of the era. Questions abounded about how to understand and communicate the effects of the Great Depression. Cultural workers in areas such as mass media and the federal government looked for methods to make visible and authentically represent contemporary conditions. The need to communicate the toll of the depression led to documentary expression in forms such as film, photography, performance, and writing.

Recognizing a literary market, the publishing industry enjoyed the success of documentary books like *You Have Seen Their Faces*by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White.[[23]](#footnote-23) However, it was not only the belief in documentary’s ability to assess and render visible the effects of the Great Depression that elevated its status, but also its privileged position for rendering truthful depictions of actuality that could “authentically” document everyday life.

*The Power of Social Documentary*

“Social documentary,” in particular, caught the imagination of Americans, making it a prominent genre and cultural form that enjoyed legitimacy and authority. While exact definitions of social documentary remain an open debate, the concept in the 1930s meant work that focused on documenting social conditions.[[24]](#footnote-24) This idea was shaped by over forty years of social documentary photography best known through the work of people like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, known for images of New York City tenements and of child labor in factories respectively. Moreover, cultural workers believed that emphasizing the everyday hardships that Americans experienced during the Great Depression as authentic and true, had the power to reveal the roots of the social problems that caused these harsh conditions so as to affect meaningful and significant social change.[[25]](#footnote-25) Couch shared these commitments by positioning life histories as a form that could document the challenges of life in the South directly through the voices of those impacted, with the added benefit of helping policy makers and scholars identify necessary reforms. The federal government’s embrace of documentary allowed for his idea to flourish.

The belief in the power of social documentary strongly impacted New Deal agencies, which embraced the documentary impulse. Photographers were employed in departments such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and National Youth Administration.[[26]](#footnote-26) The Farm Security Administration’s Historic Division, for example, was initially charged with documenting the need for and success of New Deal relief services as a project; it collected hundreds of thousands of photographs and become one of the most famous documentary photography projects of the 20th century.[[27]](#footnote-27) Government agencies sponsored documentary films such as Pere Lorentz’s *The Plough That Broke The Plains* for the Resettlement Administration.[[28]](#footnote-28) The Federal Writers’ Project embrace of what would be called the Southern Life History Project (SLHP) followed in line with such projects, but in new ways that challenged collection methods and writing genres.

*The Federal Writers’ Project*

Although smaller than its counterparts in Federal #1, the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) was established on July 27, 1935 under the direction of Henry Alsberg. The main goal of the project was to employ white collar workers such as historians, librarians, and writers to produce cultural products such as tourist guide books, often with a focus on the unique traits of the nation.[[29]](#footnote-29) Project directors understood that they were in a position to shape ideas about American culture and belonging, and they set out to create a national culture that embraced pluralism.[[30]](#footnote-30) Writers documented everyday life across the nation and included some of the most prominent authors of the 20th century such as Ralph Ellison, Zora Neal Hurston, and Studs Terkel. While the FWP was under constant scrutiny from conservatives, the project garnered praise from cultural influencers. As one writer for the *New Republic* wrote, within the New Deal programs, the FWP may be “‘the most influential and valuable of them all.’”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Ironically, it was the financial and institutional flux of the FWP rather than stability that made the SLHP possible. The nexus of its struggles was with the American Guide Series, which became the raison d'etre of the agency and one of its most famous projects. Premised on the mobility provided by newly affordable automobiles and the success of guidebooks in Europe, FWP administrators reasoned that carefully researched and written guides could inspire Americans to “See America” by enticing them to explore the interesting stories and beautiful vistas that were in their own backyard.[[32]](#footnote-32) For a nation fractured by the failures of the Great Depression, the Guidebooks became a site to celebrate the state and regional differences that made up America. Each book was to comprise a part of a metaphorical national library, which collectively provided a portrait of a nation.[[33]](#footnote-33) Such guides would celebrate a new pluralistic vision of America, while helping the economy recover through consumerism.

Officially launched in 1936, the hopeful promise of the project caused it to quickly expand to include plans for books about regions and cities with over 400 volumes, many of which featured descriptive essays on topics such as history, labor, and social habits as well as tours designed to be taken by automobile. The FWP administration believed that the magnitude of research needed to complete the Guidebooks required a tiered approach. City offices were created to research local history and culture, state bureaus coordinated the local efforts and served as editors, and the central headquarters in Washington, D.C. oversaw the whole project. While state directors could suggest projects, all initiatives and goals had to be approved by the administrators in the nation’s capital. Such a multi-tiered structure grew quickly, topping out at over 6,000 people within the first year. However, the system also created tension among the different stakeholders at each level who often disagreed over who was best fit to determine what constituted local culture and how to represent it: an institutional challenge the SLHP would have to navigate as well.

It was in these conflicts over authentic culture and representation that the intended audience of the Guidebooks became clear - middle and upper class, White Americans who had the funds to travel to “see America.” The suggested tours and discussion of local cultures in the Guidebooks often used stories of “local color” to exoticize immigrants and African Americans, as well as erasing how people of color could (and could not) travel through these American routes - a testament to the culture of segregation of the era. The Negro Motorist Green Book created in 1936 by the Victor H. Green & Company brings the racialized lens and audience in stark relief.

African Americans used these “Green Books” not as a celebration of American pluralism but as savvy strategies to navigate violent terrains of whiteness in order to move safely throughout the United States.[[34]](#footnote-34) The erasure and/or exoticizing of race and culture in the Guidebooks became a dominant trope due in large part to the reliance on local White writers and the exclusion of African American writers, which was often a source of tension among local offices, especially in the South, and at the central headquarters in Washington, D.C., which housed the FWP’s Office of Negro Affairs.[[35]](#footnote-35) The audience identified by the American Guide Series would mostly go unquestioned in the SLHP; however, what the SLHP would not embrace was a celebratory tale of American progress and pluralism given the economic systems of inequality that shaped Southern life.[[36]](#footnote-36)

*Launching the SLHP*

The opportunity for the creation of the SLHP came during the reorganization of state bureaus under regional offices in 1937. The FWP sought to streamline the reporting hierarchy in order to expedite the completion of the Guidebooks and to reduce the ever-growing number of conflicts between state-level workers and D.C. FWP officials were particularly keen on speeding up the process to get the Guidebooks to print as there was growing discontent by many politicians over the costs of such New Deal projects. It was in this reshuffling that Alsberg brought Couch into the project.

Because of his far-reaching knowledge of the Tar Heel state’s culture and history as Director of UNC Press, Couch was called on to consult on North Carolina-focused projects, ultimately leading to his position as the Associate Director of the N.C. Writers Project. Couch’s editorial prowess and vast network of acclaimed writers and scholars quickly gained him recognition from DC, especially from Henry Alsberg. With the reorganization of the FWP, Couch moved into a central leadership position as the Regional Director of the Southeast states, including Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, at the bequest of Alsberg.[[37]](#footnote-37) With one foot in the federal government and one foot in academia, as the director of the South’s most prominent press, Couch was in a position to pursue his new approach to documenting social lives. His approach helped to move the Southeast region of the FWP away from the American Guidebooks, which used the genre of travel guides to create authorial expertise about place and culture, to what he saw as a new literary genre. He would come to call this genre “life histories” as they relied on Southerners’ own stories about their lives to portray ideas about the culture of the South.

While Couch shepherded the Guidebooks with great care in his new role, his passion was solving the problems of the American South, which was not the goal of Guidebooks that aimed to celebrate and entice readers to celebrate America through leisure and consumerism. Instead Couch was interested in intervening in debates over how to capture and document social life that emerged from sociology’s use of numbers and statistics often procured through surveys, anthropology’s method of ethnography, folklore’s privileging of first-hand stories, and the increasingly broad category of “social documentary” used by artists and authors. Couch questioned how fields such as sociology reduced social conditions to statistics and thereby squandered an opportunity to actually share the experiences of people through narrative storytelling written for a broader reading public.[[38]](#footnote-38)

He was also critical of folklore’s romanticization of the quotidian at the expense of investigations of larger structural social issues; a process that also often reduced people’s lives to nostalgia and quaint folkways that reified the anti-modern and simple-minded stereotypes of the region. While he was persuaded by the descriptive writing that ethnography used to document a subject’s surroundings, he felt this method privileged the voice of the scholar over the research subject. In line with social documentarians, he argued that new methods were needed to accurately illustrate people’s lived realities, and for him this meant combining academic concepts with literary expression to identify the conditions of the South in order to assess how to address the region’s challenges. Therefore, Couch quickly began to use his position and political capital to advocate for the creation of just such a new project in the FWP.

“Somehow they must be given representation, somehow they must be given voice and allowed to speak, in their essential character,” Couch argued. If they could speak, he reasoned, communities could help reshape how the nation understood them. In order to capture the voice of the people in their own words, he proposed that the FWP develop a new method of social documentation called “life histories” that could then be used to document the voices of Southerners. He believed that such stories would be of great interest to a general readership already primed by the literary marketplace to purchase stories about the South. Unlike the Southern Literary Renaissance though, life histories could paint a richer and more nuanced picture of Southern life that, Couch hoped, could spark the type of social change he saw as necessary to address the issues plaguing the region.

According to Couch, these stories would offer “a human point of view” through written narratives that revealed the interviewee as a “living person who has a past and present” rather than reduced to a few data points in a series of statistics that treated “subjects as abstractions” as often practiced by IRSS scholars and the quantitative school of Sociology.[[39]](#footnote-39) The life histories could then be published by UNC Press, just like the North Carolina Guidebook. “It is clear to anyone who has had experience in presenting materials to the reading public, namely the publisher or editor of a newspaper or the head of a publishing firm, that material of this kind will be of interest to the public and will be read if it is made available in good form,” Couch wrote with confidence.[[40]](#footnote-40)

*“Life Histories”*

While Couch’s relationship with Odum had soured by 1938, in large part due to intellectual differences, he did not categorically dismiss the social sciences.[[41]](#footnote-41) Rather, Couch believed in the goals of the field, but not the methods in which to document social conditions. While often based on mixed methods such as case studies, interviews, and social surveys, the broad generalizations published by sociologists overlooked an opportunity to capture social truths about a community through the vividness and intimacy of individual stories. In order to seize such an opportunity, he argued “life histories” should not just be data for social scientific generalizations about communities, but a way of knowing communities that would be available to the broader public.

He drew inspiration for the “life histories” from Rupert Vance, who began as Odum’s doctoral student and moved to a faculty position in the Institute alongside Odum. In *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South,* Vance argued that “the warmth of an emotional interest in the South has as far as possible been restrained by an appeal to the cold and impartial fact. It must be admitted, however, that the great human nexus surrounding cotton culture is too intricate to be set forth adequately by statistics and cases.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Vance used a case studies approach to counter the flattening of cultural complexity produced through statistical generalizations that reduced people to averages and (stereo)types. To create such “emotional interest,” Vance wrote detailed, third-person stories about a number of his research subjects that were then used to argue about the ways that “cotton culture” structured Southern society.

One case study above the others captured Couch’s imagination, which, interestingly, Vance did not conduct himself.[[43]](#footnote-43) Vance adapted journalist Ben Dixon MacNeil’s interview with an “ordinary poor white tenant,” published in the *Raleigh News and Observer* on September 25, 1921 into a case study under the pseudonym “John Smith.” In his book, Vance argued that the interview was an “unusual type of feature story” for a newspaper and that an article written by a non-sociologist made “a vivid presentation of one human factor in cotton.”[[44]](#footnote-44) However, the story was seen as exceptional by Vance as it was unusual for those without sociological training to create the type of story that could be considered evidence in a sociological study. Classifying the story as exceptional provided Couch with further evidence that the sociological gaze was too abstract and distant to accurately and intimately document the lives of everyday people, particularly the working class.[[45]](#footnote-45) Nevertheless, the value of the story to Vance proved to Couch that an individual’s history and contemporary conditions—written with non-academic prose by persons with no sociological training—were of value to academia. Writers from other fields such reporting, like MacNeil, were a better fit, for they could write for a broader public.

Couch used John Smith’s case study as an archetype, rather than as exceptional, for the SLHP. In outlining the new project to FWP writers he explained that “no one has attempted to collect such material purely for its human interest, purely for the value of accurate portrayals of individual lives.”[[46]](#footnote-46) His attention to accuracy in portrayal led Couch to call this new type of methodological writing “life histories” as opposed to “case studies” or “case histories.” While case studies and case histories were common qualitative methods in sociology, life histories were not widely used expect among the Chicago School of Sociology. Couch disliked case studies and histories because he felt that they often created a composite view or a vague abstraction of people rather than focus on a single person’s life. Life histories, on the other hand, did focus on a single individual, but did so only to document deviance, which Couch believed was a significant shortcoming. He explained,

Life histories have had a partial use heretofore, for special purposes in the fields of sociology, and social work. In sociology the use has been restricted usually to segments of persons’ lives used to illustrate particular problems, such as problems of juvenile delinquency, adult criminality, and marital frictions. In no case, however, has the method been applied to representatives of the great body of people, allowing each person to tell his own story as it appears to him, including all those details which while deemed non-essential for sociological generalizations, nevertheless, portray in the realest sense the nature and quality of a man’s living…These discarded details, while not important for social diagnosis may well be the ingredients which actually color the man’s life as an individual. In this sense life histories are what the social worker hears before he begins to select what he deems relevant and necessary [underline original.][[47]](#footnote-47)

Therefore, Couch aimed to repurpose the life histories in four important ways. First, FWP life histories were not to focus on the deviant or maladjusted, but rather “representatives of the great body of people.” Second, life histories should center the perspective of the interviewee subject, allowing that person to define what was important in their own life. Third, a life history was not to be a 300 page report but constructed in a way to attract and keep the attention of a more general public, but rather aimed at the general public interested in understanding how people really lived.

Central to this conception was that federal writers who were not trained sociologists or social workers should collect the life histories. Rather than creating life histories to prove or disprove a particular point, which is what he understood as Vance’s primary goal, writers were instructed to capture “a human point of view corresponding closely with the point of view of the journalist,” he wrote.[[48]](#footnote-48) Like a journalist, the writers were to simply report back what they heard through informal interviews. From memory, the writer would then write a narrative that included the person’s oral history along with a description their current conditions.[[49]](#footnote-49) As one set of instructions stated, “In order for the interview to be successful, you should put at ease the person with whom you are talking and let him ramble on. Then you should hurry home and make your notes.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

The interviewers were given questionnaires that covered topics such as family and labor, which were to be treated as a general guide and not a checklist, so that interviewers could respond to the natural direction of the conversations. Because of this method of careful listening and privileging of the interviewees own voices, life histories served as a predecessor of a method that would become known as “oral history.” However, it was in the writing style that Couch encouraged, which instructed writers to occupy the gaze of journalist to document compelling stories that primarily featured the interviewee’s voice that the life histories truly became unique.

*Privileging Work in Life Histories*

Couch’s ambitions for the SLHP were extensive as he desired to forge a new genre while offering a picture of the South. In a letter to Alsberg outlining his plans, Couch wrote that material similar to Vance’s case histories “ought to be collected from every Southern state, from all types of tenants, sharecroppers, share renders, and renters, and ought to include all the most important types of farming.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Along with sociologists, he was joining a wealth of cultural workers, from journalists such as Jonathan Daniels, writers such as Erskine Caldwell, and photographers such as Marion Post Wolcott, concerned during the documentary decade with depicting rural Southern (and most often White) working class by capturing their “authentic” and “real” conditions.[[52]](#footnote-52) While photographers from the acclaimed FSA photography unit used cameras, Couch called the life histories “word pictures” and joined academics and journalists who relied on the pen, typewriter, and printing press. With the SLHP, Couch added the FWP among the institutions placing a microscope over the region.

Steeped in current debates over what to document and how, Couch quickly expanded the scope to other significant economic sectors, including mill workers, lumberers, miners, fishers, and service occupations, and topics such as eating and drinking habits, health and disease, and recreational facilities.[[53]](#footnote-53) His extensive list of topics represented the areas of social life that he and a plethora of researchers on the region, many of whom were published by UNC Press, saw as the greatest issues in need of remedy. Sharing the decade’s concern with working class (and mostly White) labor, Couch’s particular focus was documenting the lives of workers in the South by occupation, which emphasized the centrality of labor and positioned subjectivity as based on work. Such positioning provided the SLHP with a much needed niche among the many documentary projects in the FWP as layer 3 will discuss in much greater detail as well as worked against tired stereotypes characterizing residents of the South as lazy, idle and unproductive.

Such stereotypes were fueled by President Roosevelt’s declaration in July 1938 that “the South presents right now the nation's No. 1 economic problem—the nation's problem, not merely the South's.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Primarily a series of statistics mined from scholarship by researchers such as Odum and Vance, the *Report of Economic Conditions of the South* garnered national attention further amplifying efforts by politicians and intellectuals to increase the South’s economic vitality to ensure national economic recovery. Moreover, a focus on work and occupations also reflected the major preoccupation of the New Deal - putting America back to work and building an ecosystem of benefits to care for workers and the unemployed alike.

In addition to countering stereotypes, Couch believed that accurate stories about these problems would constitute an important step for Southerners, themselves, to address the issues they faced. He argued that President Roosevelt and the New Deal “can do little for us if we refuse to do anything. It is our interest to know in detail all the important truths, pleasant and unpleasant about ourselves and our land; and Southerners who attempt to obscure these truths are doing themselves and the South the greatest possible damage.”[[55]](#footnote-55) For Couch, life histories would present Southerners and the nation with precisely such important truths.

While Couch was focused on telling “the important truths” of the South, it was very much a story based in whiteness with little critical investigation of the profound impact of slavery and segregation on non-White Southerners. For example, despite all of his concern with new documentary methods, he never took on the significant work undertaken by Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and James Agee who posed pointed questions about positionality and privilege in documentary practices.[[56]](#footnote-56) This lack of critical reflection about the relationship between race, gender and power permeated the structure of SLHP from hiring decisions, interviewing practices, and in the writing and editing of the life histories themselves, which we address further in Layer 3 and Layer 4. Nonetheless, the SLHP believed the pursuit of more accurate, authentic documents would not only benefit the south, but be a new method of documentation.

*Claims to Authenticity*

Concerns about authenticity, truth, and accessibility were at the forefront of the life histories method. Conveying the region’s truths meant forging an authentic and accessible practice and form. The challenge was how to accurately “portray individual lives” with “emotional interest” while allowing the person “to speak, in their essential character” to reveal “important truths” about Southern society and culture through writing. By attending to these critical issues, Couch and his colleagues hoped to lend authority, credibility, and legitimacy to the published life histories.

The process began with hiring “writers” and not academics. Among those hired included creative writers, journalists, secretaries, and educators with emphasis placed on hiring people who were from the region. Unlike the distant observation often privileged by the social sciences, the proximity of the writers to local communities was seen as an asset because they were tied into local networks and attuned to local history, customs, and politics. Their local knowledge was a resource rather than hinderance.

Once hired, writers were assigned topics and then charged with identifying interviewees, conducting the interview, writing the life history, and then editing based on feedback from staff in their state office and Couch. Much of the framing about how to conduct and write the life histories came from conversations between Couch and those he saw as the most skilled writers. In one such back and forth between Bernice Harris, who would become one of the most prolific life history writers, and Couch, he explained,

You may use your own judgement as to when to write your stories. You should not wait long enough to let details become vague and to get your stories mixed. I believe it is best not to wait long after you have collected material to write each story, but this is a matter on which I think it is best for you to use your own judgement. The one thing to remember here is that we do not want composite pictures. We do not want you to take the characteristics of several persons and put these together into one imaginary person. *We want the stories to be photographic in accuracy but, as you know, a good photographer is one who decides what is important and photographs that rather than trying to photograph everything* [emphasis mine].[[57]](#footnote-57)

Couch’s directions to Harris and the other writers belie a significant question underlying the project: how could authenticity be demonstrated through writing alone? Photographers working for the Department of Agriculture and Farm Security Administration used the camera lens as a way to demonstrate authenticity through the supposed truth represented in photographs.[[58]](#footnote-58) Folklorists documented songs and music with audio equipment allowing people to hear proof of authenticity. However, federal writers did not have cameras nor audio equipment, which was too expensive and cumbersome to use at the scale of the project. Nor was it necessary as they believed that the life histories could reveal truths through words, which represented a significant contribution to a decade bent on documenting the real.

This question about how to both create and demonstrate authenticity as well as what the form and specific methods of a life history looked like became areas of debate among Couch, SLHP administrators and writers. While Couch had larger idea about the potential of life histories as genre of documentation that could give insight into people’s lived experience in new ways that extended beyond the South, he had to contend with competing projects in the FWP vying for limited resources as well as the desires of state administrators and writers in the South. This complicated constellation of actors contributed to what became the little over 1200 life histories in the SLHP before it was forced to dismantle in the end of 1939. Layer 3 now turns to exploration of this process of negotiation over the new genre of a life history through the use of mapping techniques that visualize the collection as scale.

1. Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2004); Wendy Griswold and Wendy Griswold, *American Guides: The Federal Writers’ Project and the Casting of American Culture* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943* (Syracuse University Press, 1996); Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project ; a Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (Verso, 1994); Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*; Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (OUP USA, 2010); Sonnet H. Retman, *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression* (Duke University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lynn Moss Sanders, *Howard W. Odum’s Folklore Odyssey: Transformation to Tolerance Through African American Folk Studies* (University of Georgia Press, 2003); Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*; Retman, *Real Folks*; Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is a significant amount of research on the New Deal State, work includes: Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams, eds., *Shaped by the State: Toward a New Political History of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton University Press, 1989); Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941.*, reprint (Times Books, 1993), https://www.amazon.com/Great-Depression-America-1929-1941/dp/0812923278; Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (Liveright, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “The Presidency: The Roosevelt Week: Jul. 11, 1932,” *Time*, accessed September 6, 2019, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,743953,00.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project ; a Study in Government Patronage of the Arts*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Penkower, 1–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Penkower, 15–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Penkower, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts*, 9–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Penkower, 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Penkower, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Penkower, 18-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Deborah Mutnick, “Toward a Twenty-First-Century Federal Writers’ Project,” *College English* 77, no. 2 (2014): 124–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cara A. Finnegan, “What Is This a Picture of?: Some Thoughts on Images and Archives,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 116–123; William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (University of Chicago Press, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Saul Carson, “Notes toward an Examination of the Radio Documentary,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1949): 69–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/1209386; Walker Evans and James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (HMH, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1993); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Macmillan, 1981); Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “The Totalizing Quest of Meaning,” *Theorizing Documentary* 1 (1993): 90–107; Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary* (Routledge, 2012); Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, vol. 48 (Macmillan, 2001); Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real II: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond* (BFI, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*; Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, vol. 681 (Indiana University Press, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Erskine Caldwell, Margaret Bourke-White, and Alan Trachtenberg, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*; Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Pete Daniel et al., *Official Images : New Deal Photography* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Gilles Mora and Beverly W. Brannan, *FSA: The American Vision* (Harry N. Abrams, 2006), https://www.amazon.com/FSA-American-Vision-Gilles-Mora/dp/0810954974. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. R. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film University of Oklahoma Press* (Norman, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Bold, *The WPA Guides*, xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Jeutonne P. Brewer, *The Federal Writers’ Project: A Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J. : Scarecrow Press, 1994., 1994), 325, https://catalog.lib.unc.edu/catalog/UNCb2670885.br [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The most notable guidebook was the Baedeker Guides, which became popular as trains and then automobiles made travel into an exciting adventure that was accessible to wider audiences. Though not often credited, the idea for the American Guidebooks was largely the result of Katherine Kellock, who would become a key member of the WPA staff. See Bold, *The WPA Guides* and Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project ; A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts*. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Michael W. Pesses, “Road less traveled: race and American automobility, *Mobilities* 12 no. 5 (2017): 677-691. DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2016.1240319 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery;* John Edgar Tidwell, "Recasting Negro Life History: Sterling A. Brown and the Federal Writer's Project." *The Langston Hughes Review* 13, no. 2 (1995): 77-82. Accessed January 9, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/26434434. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In *Portrait of a Nation,* Jerrold Hirsch’s argues that the FWP was wholly invested in cultural nationalism through pluralism. There is no denying that celebrating diversity became a part of the portrait of America created in the Guidebooks as other scholars such as Alfred Kazin, Jerry Maginone, and Christine Bold have argued. However, the SLHP complicates the extent of Hirsch’s claim. FWP officials from the top such as Alsberg to state-level writers such as Leonard Rapport knew the life histories would reveal tensions in the region that could not be eased simply by celebrating cultural diversity. These tensions become clear in the subsequent layers through the distant reading of the entire life history collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Letter from Harry L. Hopkins to William Couch, May 24, 1938. Folder 1084 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital image: 0898. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. He joined a growing chorus of intellectuals from the Chicago-school sociologists, sociologist Robert and Helen Lynd’s increasingly anthropological approach as pioneered in *Middletown*, and the regionalist sociologists in Chapel Hill debating how to understand communities, particularly those in poverty. See Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 55-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South”, July 11, 1938. Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Couch specifically singles out work by scholars trained in UNC’s Department of Sociology such as Dr. Jenning J Rhyne as examples of the limits of current sociology methods. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing: An Editor’s Career as Lightning Rod for Controversy*; O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Rupert Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1929), vii-ix. Accessed online at: https://archive.org/details/humanfactorsinco00vancrich [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1929)*,* 259. Accessed online at: <https://archive.org/stream/humanfactorsinco00vancrich#page/260/mode/2up> [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Couch thought sociologists would be so dismissive of the SLHP that he suggested using the Vance example if there were objections. See “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South”, July 11, 1938. Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid. Couch thought sociologists would be so dismissive of the SLHP that he suggested using the Vance example if there were objections. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People,” no date given, Folder 1165 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1165 img\_5254). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South”, July 11, 1938. Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Letter to Mrs. Mary S. Venable from Eudora Ramsay Richardson, November 2, 1938. Folder 1098 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1098, IMG\_1228 - 1231 from Folder 1098. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Letter to Harry G. Alsberg from William T Couch, April 22, 1938. Folder 1083 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1083, IMG\_0872-0877. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. For more on Jonathan Worth Daniel’s, see Jennifer Rittenhouse, *Discovering the South: One Man’s Travels through a Changing America in the 1930*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017) and Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America.* [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South”, July 11, 1938. Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. National Emergency Council, “Report on the Economic Conditions of the South” (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1938). Available online at: <https://archive.org/details/reportoneconomic00nati/page/n3>. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Letter to Mr. Tarleton Collier from William Couch on September 14, 1938. Folder 1091 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 1004-1005. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Retman, *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression,* Chapter 4*;* Autumn Womack, “‘The Brown Bag of Miscellany’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Practice of Overexposure”, *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2015), 115-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Letter from William Couch to Bernice Kelly Harris, October 20, 1938. Folder 1096 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 1139-1140. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Pete Daniel et al., *Official Images : New Deal Photography*; Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs*, xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)