



DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. LIBRARY

A collaboration between the City of San José and San José State University

News Release

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Soul of a People: Smithsonian documentary and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library revisit FDR's Federal Writers' Project

SAN JOSE, Calif. – Hundreds of thousands of people had lost their jobs. Banks were collapsing. People could not pay mortgages and abandoned their homes. This was America in 1933, and Franklin D. Roosevelt had just been elected president. To alleviate the crisis in the country's economic and political systems, Roosevelt quickly created the still controversial Works Progress Administration (WPA) to put people back to work, building roads, bridges and schools.

One small section of the mammoth WPA initiative was the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). Instead of building roads and bridges, the FWP's formerly jobless writers and artists helped to create a remarkable portrait in words of something less tangible: the country's soul.

“Soul of a People: Writing America's Story” is a major documentary television program about the Federal Writers' Project produced by Spark Media, a Washington, D.C.-based production and outreach company specializing in issues of social change. “Soul of A People” is being broadcast on the Smithsonian Channel HD (check local listings or visit <http://www.SmithsonianChannel.com>).

To support the broadcast, the [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library](#) will present a number of programs **starting September 12** (running through October 6), which will look closely at the unique accomplishments of the Federal Writers' Project. “Soul of a People” programs in libraries are sponsored

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by the American Library Association Public Programs Office with the support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: great ideas brought to life. King Library is the only library in California selected by the American Library Association to receive this support.

Probably the most widely known achievements of the Federal Writers' Project were the travel guides created for every state—the famous “American Guides” series. John Steinbeck used the WPA state guides as he crossed the continent in the early 1960s and he later wrote *Travels with Charley* about his journey.

WPA writers also compiled guides for many cities and for distinctive cultural regions in the U.S. Among the more colorful regional titles are *Gumbo Ya Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales*, *An Ornerly Bunch: Tales and Anecdotes Collected by the WPA Montana Writers Project* and *Mister, You've Got Yourself a Horse* by the Nebraska Writers' Project. Writers interviewed former slaves and recorded the life histories of citizens all across America. A number of those interviews can be found today on <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/wpaintro/wpahome.html> and <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> at the Library of Congress.

“We're very pleased that our library was chosen to receive a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for programs to support the ‘Soul of a People’ documentary,” said Reference Librarian Paul Kauppila. “We have plans for a number of events that will introduce people to the Federal Writers' Project and to the amazing resources it created, and remind people of what the 1930s were like. The travel guides, interviews with former slaves and other citizens, and the many other works created by FWP writers are a rich historical treasure available to everyone. Reading the words of an ex-slave, or the experiences of a grocery store owner in a small town during the 1930s makes history vital and vibrant. We look forward to sharing these resources with our community.”

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A number of writers who toiled in FWP offices around the country later became prominent in the nation's literary landscape. Authors such as Richard Wright, Saul Bellow, Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, Ralph Ellison, John Cheever, Dorothy West, Kenneth Rexroth, May Swenson and Nelson Algren got their start in the Writers' Project. Some went on to win National Book Awards and the Pulitzer Prize; others established a foundation for successful writing careers in many different genres.

There was some opposition to the work of the Writers' Project. When WPA writers investigated sensitive social issues such as slavery, local corruption and scandals, opponents of FDR's New Deal complained. Sections of volumes in the "American Guides" series were labeled as propaganda by a committee created by Congress to look into "Un-American" activities. WPA funding was slashed in the late 1930s and most of the work of the Writers' Project ceased. But across the country—in archives, libraries, universities and other repositories—it can still be found. It is slowly coming back into public view as a new generation of readers and researchers discovers its historical riches and its glimpse into a tumultuous and fascinating era of American culture.

For more information on the Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. Library's programs supporting the "Soul of a People" documentary and on the documentary itself, call **(408) 808-2397** or visit www.sjlibrary.org/soul.htm and www.SmithsonianChannel.com.

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