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# The WPA Federal Music Project in New Mexico

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CHARLES R. CUTTER

As victims of the Great Depression of the 1930s, American artists were not exceptional. But as a group writers, actors, artists, and musicians were among the first to experience hard times since “luxuries” such as art and entertainment were the first things cut back in times of economic hardship. Many musicians were forced to give up their professional endeavors and seek whatever available employment they could find. It was in this prevailing atmosphere of despair that musicians throughout the country found a new patron in the federal government. Under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Music Project provided a variety of jobs for unemployed musicians.

In New Mexico, as elsewhere in the country, the impact of the Federal Music Project (FMP) was largely beneficial. Local circumstances, however, created different needs that were met both imaginatively and energetically by the state’s FMP director, Helen Chandler Ryan, and project employees. Although generally ignored, the era of the Federal Music Project forms an interesting and important chapter in the history of New Mexico’s musical community.

Among the many agencies created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to cope with the economic devastation of the Great Depression was the Works Progress Administration. On May 6, 1935, Executive Order

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Helen Chandler Ryan in 1946. Courtesy of the Ryan family.

7034 established the WPA as an independent agency, pursuant to the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935.<sup>1</sup> The philosophy of the WPA, headed by Harry Hopkins, was to avoid the "dole," preferring instead to provide work-relief for America's unemployed by creating worthwhile jobs at various levels, from unskilled to white collar.

Perhaps it was Roosevelt's patrician sense of noblesse oblige that inclined him favorably to the role of government as friend of the arts. Certainly his background had provided him with some knowledge of, and appreciation for, fine arts. Possibly it was his wish to share this appreciation with the common people, or he may have felt obligated to help artists as a group. Judging from the stated aims of the Federal Arts

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1. Executive Order 7034, May 6, 1935.

Projects—to provide work and serve the community—both factors played a part in the decision to offer help. Whatever the reasons, in July 1935, the WPA organized the Division of Professional and Service Projects under the direction of Jacob Baker. Within this division was created Federal Project Number One, commonly known simply as Federal One, which consisted of four main subdivisions devoted to music, drama, literature, and art. Funding began in October of the same year, and the WPA initiated the federal government's venture into the world of artistic patronage shortly thereafter.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the success of some programs, especially that of music, opposition to FDR's New Deal, and Federal One in particular, mounted. Many felt that the Theatre Project was far too radical, and it became the target of conservative attacks in Congress. Consequently, Federal One was terminated in September 1939. In a reorganization of the program, the Theatre Project ceased and all other projects fell under the general designation of the WPA Art Program. Changes in operating procedure, designed to weaken the program, greatly altered the nature of activities of the music program. Local or state sponsorship of at least 25 percent was now required. More damaging was the "eighteen month" clause providing that no individual be allowed on project relief rolls for any longer than one and a half years. This especially hurt the continuity and quality of projects of a highly professional nature, such as symphony orchestras.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the country the Federal Music Project functioned in much the same way, though regional and local variation did exist. Named to head the project was Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, former conductor of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra and respected music educator. Sokoloff's emphasis on professionalism resulted in the formation of several highly acclaimed symphony orchestras comprised of WPA employees. It also brought criticism from many for his neglect of, and disdain for, community oriented music programs which featured folk or popular musicians.<sup>4</sup> Partly because of this conflict, Sokoloff resigned in 1939. His successor, Earl V. Moore, gave much more attention to promoting music as an amateur activity.<sup>5</sup>

Despite administrative problems, the FMP achieved remarkable success and, more importantly, public acceptance. Within nine months

2. Francis O'Connor, *Federal Art Patronage, 1933-1943* (College Park, Maryland: University of Maryland, 1966), 27.

3. William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 616; O'Connor, *Patronage*, 28.

4. Neal Cannon, "Art For Whose Sake: The Federal Music Project of the WPA," Ray Browne, Larry N. Landrum and William K. Bottorf, eds., *Challenges in American Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1970), 85-98.

5. McDonald, *Federal Relief*, 605-10.

of its inception the project boasted an enrollment of more than 15,000 musicians nationwide who otherwise would have been unemployed, "their horns untootled."<sup>6</sup> After one full year of operation the musicians employed by the music project increased to over 17,000 with work in 159 symphony and concert orchestras, 89 bands, 25 chamber music ensembles, 133 dance, theatre and novelty groups, 35 vocal groups, and 258 teaching projects. There also existed programs for copyists, arrangers, binders, tuners, and instrument repairmen, as well as work for nearly 350 persons in administrative capacities of the project.<sup>7</sup> The national Federal Music Project was a wide-ranging ambitious endeavor.

Many musicians were already on work-relief when the project began, most of them working as laborers.<sup>8</sup> "Able musicians were swinging picks and shovels on labor projects, their hands toughening and all but losing their essential sensitivity."<sup>9</sup> One of the first steps taken by the project was to set up audition boards to evaluate the musical capacity of applicants. Naturally, standards of musicianship varied from place to place, but there was a firm insistence upon technical proficiency. In fact, Sokoloff's standards were at first so high that many professional musicians found themselves unqualified for the program. Pressures from groups such as the American Federation of Music forced Sokoloff to recognize the fact that not all professional musicians were of symphony caliber.<sup>10</sup> By giving jobs as musicians to those who qualified the project eased the tight labor market in two ways. Not only did musicians find work, but others took their places as laborers in less esoteric work-relief projects.

The big music centers of the country tended to emphasize large symphony orchestras and often had distinguished conductors, such as Leopold Stokowski, who volunteered their services to the program. Smaller population centers supported lesser known figures and often emphasized regional folklore or musical instruction.<sup>11</sup> At every level, however, talented men and women found a much needed avenue to pursue their musical careers. Like a number of important American painters, the

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6. "WPA Melody for Twenty Millions," *Literary Digest*, 122 (September 19, 1936), 22.

7. "The Federal Music Project," *New Republic*, 89 (November 11, 1936), 48; National Archives and Records Center, Record Group 69, "Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment: The Federal Music Project, 1935 to 1943," 46, WPA Federal Music Project (hereafter cited as FMP), Record Group 69, National Archives.

8. McDonald, *Federal Relief*, 584-600, gives details concerning pre-WPA work relief for musicians.

9. "WPA Melody," 22.

10. McDonald, *Federal Relief*, 610.

11. "WPA Melody," 22.

federal government patronized these musicians during the lean years of the Great Depression.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the most important and unexpected result of the Federal Music Project was the great stimulus it gave to the appreciation of music by the general American public. In the first nine months of the project alone, some twenty million persons attended the government-sponsored concerts. Just as important, hundreds of thousands of Americans, adults and children, eagerly enrolled in various instructional programs offered by FMP teachers.<sup>13</sup> Americans seemed to favor the work being done by the WPA Federal Music Project, not only for the employment opportunities for musicians, but also for its entertainment and artistic value. Wrote one music critic:

The Federal Music Project of the WPA has done noble work for music in America. In fact, its labors in the cause of creative music are unique. Never before has there been so wholesale an exposure of a nation's creative sources.<sup>14</sup>

Among the states of the Rocky Mountain West, New Mexico was fortunate in having one of the most imaginative and dynamic FMP directors. Appointed on January 1, 1936, Helen Chandler Ryan served as head of the New Mexico project until just before the program ended in 1943.<sup>15</sup> Operating from her headquarters at 1403 West Central Avenue in Albuquerque, her tireless efforts on behalf of the FMP won praise from colleagues both in and out of state.

A special set of problems confronted Ryan in the initial stages of the program. Since allocation of federal funds was based on the number of musicians and music projects within a state, New Mexico's small population meant less money. With Albuquerque as the largest city (about 35,000 inhabitants) New Mexico was hard pressed to compete with states that had cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York (which alone had two full WPA symphony orchestras and employed nearly 700 musicians).<sup>16</sup> Ryan wisely decided not to imitate programs of the larger states, but set out to develop a project better suited to New Mexico's circumstances.

Whereas other mountain states, particularly Utah and Colorado,

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12. William Schuman and Roger L. Stevens, *Economic Pressures and the Future of the Arts* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 80.

13. "Federal Music Project," *Current History*, 48-49 (September 1938), 43; FMP, "Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment," 360, FMP.

14. Samuel Shotzinoff, as quoted in "WPA Melody," 22.

15. Memo from Ellen S. Woodward to Jay duVon, n.d., 651.311 New Mexico, FMP.

16. "Pride of New York City WPA," *Newsweek*, 17 (March 31, 1941), 63.

spent considerable effort in supporting fine performing symphony orchestras, no professional WPA performing unit existed in New Mexico. Instead, the state FMP limited its sponsorship to musical groups that performed under the leadership of so-called "instructor-directors" employed by the WPA.<sup>17</sup> Unlike regular WPA performing units, these groups were permitted to charge admission for their concerts since members were not on the federal payroll. The only stipulation was that the instructor-director donate the time spent at performances.<sup>18</sup>

A surprising variation in musical styles characterized New Mexico's FMP presentations. The most uniquely Southwestern of the performing groups organized and instructed by WPA teachers were the típica orchestras that likewise existed in Arizona and Texas.<sup>19</sup> Playing the Hispanic music of the region, several such groups performed in New Mexico, including the Children's Típica Orchestra of Albuquerque, led by Pedro Valles, and a similar group under the direction of Pablo Mares in Las Vegas. This second group performed frequently at fiestas and other public functions in the Santa Fe area. Another well-known group which played Hispanic folk music was the guitar ensemble of the Hernández brothers of Bernalillo.<sup>20</sup> The New Mexico FMP proudly capped 1938 by presenting *Los Pastores*, a traditional Hispanic nativity play, performed by children under the guidance of music project teachers at Santa Fe's historic Palace of the Governors.<sup>21</sup>

As with the Hispanic music, most performances sponsored by the New Mexico FMP were of a popular nature. City parks, public schools, hospitals, and churches served as sites for presentations. Various community concert bands, choral groups, "Anglo-folk" ensembles, and a few jazz groups performed regularly throughout the state. Albuquerque's Junior Community Band reportedly played two concerts a week during the month of June 1938. The Española Community Band was equally active, giving performances in Taos, Chama, Puye, and Parkview.<sup>22</sup> Both Albuquerque and Roswell had Negro spiritual vocal groups, and Don Lesmen, a long-time Albuquerque musician, recalls that the San Isidro CCC jazz band he led often played at the "concert in the park" series

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17. Helen Ryan to Nikolai Sokoloff, February 1, 1938, 651.311 New Mexico, FMP.

18. Ryan to Sokoloff, April 6, 1938, *ibid.*

19. Narrative Reports, Arizona 1939, FMP.

20. Narrative Reports, New Mexico 1939, FMP; personal interview with K. L. Higgins, Albuquerque, October 1983; personal interview with Concha Ortiz y Pino de Kleven, Albuquerque, April 1982; personal interview with Higgins, Albuquerque, April 1982.

21. Ryan to Sokoloff, December 10, 1938, 651.311 New Mexico, FMP.

22. Interview with Higgins, October 6, 1983; personal interviews with Don Lesmen, Albuquerque, March 1982 and November 1983; Narrative Reports, New Mexico 1938, FMP.

in Albuquerque. An accordion band developed by the New Mexico FMP so excited Senator Carl Hatch that he sought to book the group at the nation's capital. Some 736 free public concerts under WPA sponsorship were given in New Mexico in the first two years of the project's existence.<sup>23</sup>

Of the other mountain states, only Arizona came close to approximating New Mexico's commitment to the idea of "music for the people." Although Utah and Colorado symphony orchestras gave numerous public performances gratis or at greatly reduced prices, their real emphasis was clearly on "artistic" rather than popular music. When one Colorado group attempted to lighten its program, it received a sharp reprimand from the national office warning against including such numbers as "Mr. Krevas and His Musical Bottles" or Miss Matlick's "Whistling Novelty."<sup>24</sup> New Mexico sidestepped this difficulty by not having any professional performing unit and by designating all groups as "community activity groups." In this way, they were free to perform the music they desired.<sup>25</sup>

Though performances were a major part of the FMP, in New Mexico other aspects of the project had greater impact. Perhaps reflective of Ryan's training in the field of music education, one of the most important contributions of the New Mexico project was in music instruction. Co-sponsored by school districts, many of them rural, the WPA offered instruction through the schools in twenty-three of the state's thirty-one counties. By August 1939, music education reached sixty-two schools where music had never been provided by local boards of education. Belen, for example, started its first school band in 1936 under the direction of music project employee Bennett Shacklett.<sup>26</sup> As a gesture to private instructors who feared losing students to the WPA, children were required to submit a form showing their parents' inability to pay for lessons.<sup>27</sup>

Other institutions also served as centers for FMP education. As an extracurricular activity, a number of Civilian Conservation Corps camps offered music instruction. Because the military administered the CCC, some of the music programs were run by army personnel. Other CCC

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23. Interview with Lesmen, March 1982, Narrative Reports, New Mexico 1942, FMP; memo from duVon to Douglas Brooks, July 11, 1941, 651.311 New Mexico, FMP; WPA Writers Program, *New Mexico: A Guide to the Colorful State* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1945), 147.

24. Alma Munsell to Ivan Miller, February 26, 1936, 651.311 Colorado, FMP.

25. Sokoloff to Ryan, June 17, 1938, 651.311 New Mexico, FMP.

26. Narrative Reports, New Mexico 1939, FMP; personal interview with Bennett Shacklett, Roswell, December 1, 1983.

27. Ryan to Sokoloff, October 11, 1938, 651.311 New Mexico, FMP.

camp, however, went through the state FMP to hire their band leaders.<sup>28</sup> The National Youth Administration Girls' and Boys' Camps and Girls' Welfare Home in Albuquerque, likewise, offered WPA music classes.<sup>29</sup>

Instruction was not only for school children. As part of the folklore project, teacher-directors trekked from community to community organizing vocal groups and giving instruction in the use of traditional instruments of New Mexico such as the guitar and violin. In Roswell and Las Cruces, several black churches combined to co-sponsor two instructor-directors from California who headed several Negro spiritual groups. Response from participants and community to these two musicians, Carrie Daniels and Arthur Walker, was enthusiastic and the work accomplished "very gratifying."<sup>30</sup> Even the inmates at the New Mexico State Penitentiary benefitted from the WPA Music Project. A penitentiary orchestra under FMP direction afforded a figurative escape for the men who played as well as entertainment for the rest of the inmates.<sup>31</sup>

An excellent example of Ryan's enthusiasm and commitment to the educational aspect of the FMP was the Work Conference of Federal Music Teachers which she organized in March 1939. Held at the University of New Mexico, the three-day session featured workshops, demonstrations, and lectures designed to instruct and inspire the project teachers of New Mexico. So great was respect for her among colleagues that prominent music educators outside the project took part in the conference and one Albuquerque music store owner, Bernie May, offered to accommodate visiting teachers in his own home.<sup>32</sup>

New Mexico thus differed from other states in the region by emphasizing music education, especially in rural areas. While Colorado, Utah, and Arizona offered performances for school children, these projects did not actively promote actual musical instruction to the extent demonstrated in New Mexico. Ryan's instructional approach won praise from National Director Earl V. Moore, who felt that New Mexico's program "should be extended to . . . nearby states which have similar rural problems."<sup>33</sup>

Across the country, the Great Depression years were marked by

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28. Personal interviews with Charles G. Ryan, Albuquerque, April 1982 and November 1983; interview with Lesmen, November 1983; Narrative Reports, New Mexico 1939, FMP.

29. Narrative Reports, New Mexico 1938, FMP.

30. "Spanish-American Folk Songs of New Mexico," Works Progress Administration, Federal Music Project, Unit Number 1, 1936-37. Mimeographed booklet available at the Albuquerque Public Library, Special Collections; interview with Charles G. Ryan, April 1982; Healy to Woodward, June 25, 1938, 651.311 New Mexico, FMP.

31. Narrative Reports, New Mexico 1939, FMP.

32. Narrative Reports, New Mexico 1939, FMP; personal interview with Bernie May, Albuquerque, December 1, 1983.

33. Ryan to Earl V. Moore, September 12, 1939, 651.311 New Mexico, FMP.



Illustration from *The Spanish-American Song and Game Book* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1942).

an inward-looking nationalism that stressed the unique features of American cultural life. New Mexico's FMP reflected this general trend.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, one of the most ambitious projects on the state level, and certainly the most conspicuous in a national context, was the collection of traditional Hispanic folklore. Director Ryan, like so many before and since, was fascinated by the simple yet beautiful melodies of the Hispanic community. Under her impetus the project avidly sought to preserve these tunes.

WPA employees from both the music and writers' projects set out to collect as many folk songs from as many sources as possible, usually from older Hispanics. Long isolated because of rugged terrain, poor roads, an absence of electronic media, and perhaps a certain mistrust of the Anglo world, many villages of northern New Mexico still maintained some archaic vestiges of Spanish culture. Not only speech patterns, but many of the songs sung by these hardy people had died out in both Spain and Mexico yet were still part of the New Mexican tradition.<sup>35</sup>

34. Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), x.

35. Personal interview with John Donald Robb, Albuquerque, March 1982.

Having compiled the tunes, FMP workers scored the musical notation along with accompanying words, cut stencils, and supplied mimeographed copies to music project teachers in the state.<sup>36</sup> One típica orchestra from El Paso eventually recorded two of these numbers for the National Youth Administration using the arrangements of the New Mexico project.<sup>37</sup>

This dimension of the project, carried out in cooperation with the state's Federal Writers Project, received considerable attention both in and out of state. New Mexico's effort to collect and revive Hispanic folk music prompted national folk festivals director Sarah Gertrude Knott to remark in 1939 that "there is in New Mexico a finer integration of music project activities with the life of the people than in any other part of the United States that I have visited."<sup>38</sup>

Presentations of folklore such as *Los Pastores* and the típica concerts have been mentioned. A frequent co-sponsor of these events was the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) who understandably supported the spread of Hispanic culture through the FMP. A typical program presented under LULAC patronage in 1936 featured "songs and dances handed down from generation to generation in New Mexico from Spanish ancestors."<sup>39</sup>

Besides public performances and group instruction of folk music, the New Mexico FMP also published some of the songs collected by project employees. Significantly, all five of the agency's publications dealt in one way or another with the Hispanic music of the region. Federal Music Project Unit Number 1 (1936–1937) was entitled "Spanish-American Folk Songs of New Mexico." FMP Unit Number 2 carried the same title and dates but offered a different selection of tunes. A third publication, printed in 1939, was a "Guitar Method with Guitar Arrangements of Spanish-American Folk Songs of New Mexico." Federal Music Project Unit Number 3 appeared in 1940 as "Spanish-American Singing Games of New Mexico," and reappeared two years later as a formal publication under the title *The Spanish-American Song and Game Book*, a joint venture with the state's Writers Project. A final publication, "Spanish-American Dance Tunes of New Mexico," comprised Unit Number 4 and was published in 1942.

With the advent of World War II, the Federal Music Project declined in importance throughout the country. By 1940 FMP groups had begun to play for the entertainment of troops in several areas. Once the nation

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36. "Spanish-American Folk Songs," Unit Number 1; personal interviews with Virginia LaPine, Albuquerque, April 1982 and November 1983.

37. Ryan to Margaret Valiant, May 5, 1941, 651.311 New Mexico, FMP.

38. As quoted in Lorin Brown, *Hispano Folklife of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 242.

39. *Albuquerque Journal*, June 4, 1936, p. 7.

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actually entered into hostilities, all efforts of the WPA went to the war cause.<sup>40</sup> New Mexico differed little from other music projects in this respect. The plan adopted by the state FMP as of June 1942 stated that the project would only "operate in places where there are Military establishments and only for [the] War Effort." In May 1942 the music project sponsored a city-wide contest at Barelvas Community Center in Albuquerque to discover musical talent for locally stationed troops. Other activities included performances at the Veterans Hospital, entertainment of troop trains, and a "half-hour program at the State-Wide Price Control Meeting" where the state director led the singing of the Star Spangled Banner.<sup>41</sup> The Federal Music Program came to a quiet end on June 30, 1943 when Congress terminated the Federal Works Administration.

Like the national Federal Music Project, the agency's impact on New Mexico was largely beneficial. New Mexico, however, differed from other areas, even other states in the region, in several important ways. Realizing that New Mexico's small allocation of federal funds could not support a salaried professional symphony as in Utah and Colorado, Ryan sought to spread the direct financial benefits around the state to different types of musicians, both performers and instructors. Though funding and employee numbers were comparatively small (never exceeding thirty musicians), the project nevertheless offered much needed employment. As one Albuquerque saxophone player succinctly phrased it, "The WPA was a good thing, man; times were bad and it gave us musicians a chance to work."<sup>42</sup> Besides providing actual jobs, the project served to boost the morale of musicians and kept up their professional skills. Undoubtedly, it helped raise the flagging spirits of New Mexicans in general since they were treated to free quality entertainment.

Former FMP employees have recounted numerous stories of underprivileged children getting their first taste of music participation, underscoring another benefit of the program. At Civilian Conservation Corps camps, rural schools, or community activities, youngsters had a chance to experience the thrill of playing an instrument, something they would ordinarily have been denied. A number of schools, including Belen, trace their music education program to the WPA.<sup>43</sup>

Some effects of the project became apparent later; many musicians gained valuable experience as WPA workers that helped them in their

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40. McDonald, *Federal Relief*, 616.

41. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 7, 1942, p. 7; Report of May 26, 1942, 651.311 New Mexico, FMP.

42. Interview with Lesmen, March 1982.

43. Nearly all of the interviewees had stories of this nature. Bennett Shacklett began the music program in the Belen schools.



Illustration from *The Spanish-American Song and Game Book* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1942).

subsequent careers. K. L. Higgins, a long-time respected music educator with the Albuquerque Public Schools, acquired teaching experience in the summer music camps funded by the FMP. Bennett Shaklett moved directly from his project assignment in Belen to head that school district's first music education program. Similarly, Don Lesmen's stint as director of a CCC jazz group aided in his later career as leader of various Albuquerque jazz ensembles.

New Mexico's Federal Music Project is characterized by a conspicuous lack of ethnic or racial prejudice in its programs. The emphasis on Hispanic music has been noted, but even groups not specializing in this area were often directed by, and included, a large number of persons of Spanish ancestry. Blacks were likewise represented in groups such as Albuquerque's Junior Community Band, as well as Negro spiritual groups. The music project thus served to promote ethnic diversity in the state.

The music project also had an impact on the study of New Mexican folklore. While there had been scattered interest from many different quarters in collecting Hispanic folklore and folk songs, it was under the direction of the federal government that the first systematic and coordinated efforts were made to record and revive New Mexico's rich folk

tradition.<sup>44</sup> The WPA brought together both the collectors and the participants and served as a catalyst for a concerted effort to collect, preserve, and teach various aspects of Hispanic folk art in New Mexico. The high caliber of this effort is demonstrated in the presence of Arthur L. Campa and Rubén Cobos, major Hispanic folklorists at the University of New Mexico, as participants in the WPA program, though not as employees of the music project. Later research on the subject followed the trend set in the WPA era: folklorists looked to the government to fund their efforts.<sup>45</sup>

It is apparent that New Mexico's Federal Music Project offered a wide variety of employment opportunities and community programs which helped relieve the economic distress of the state's musicians and heightened musical appreciation among the general public. Helen Chandler Ryan's ability to transmit project ideals into workable programs that maximized New Mexico's strong points benefitted musicians and non-musicians alike. When viewed in terms of its immediate and long-range achievements, the Federal Music Project in New Mexico appears to have been an overwhelming success.

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44. Personal interview with Grace Edmister, Albuquerque, March 1982; interview with Charles G. Ryan, April 1982.

45. Interview with Robb, March 1982.