

Politics of Culture

The Federal Music Project in Oklahoma

*By Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr.**

Unemployment among musicians was chronic even before the Great Depression. It was caused by the phonograph, the radio, the film soundtrack, and by the development of music curricula in the public schools which materially reduced the demand for private music teachers. Conditions were so bad that by 1934 the American Federation of Musicians estimated that perhaps as many as 70 percent of formerly employed musicians were out of work.

At first the problem was most noticeable in the large cities like New York, and virtually all relief efforts were centered there. Meager financial support came from the American Federation of Musicians and other interested groups. The first public effort to assist musicians came in 1932 when, under the Emergency Reconstruction Act, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation was empowered to lend money to the states for work relief projects. There were a few cases in which states applied for such loans and set up musicians' projects. However, these were rare instances.

Under the Civil Works Administration (CWA) established in 1933, work relief projects for artists including musicians were set up in several states, but by no means everywhere. Those projects which were established were for the most part recreational, and small. State relief administrators were generally unenthusiastic about these and virtually all white collar work relief activities.

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With the termination of the CWA the few music projects which continued to exist were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and soon the program expanded. By the middle of 1935 most states had developed some form of music education or recreation program and twenty-four states had orchestras. Oklahoma was one of these. The Tulsa symphony orchestra received some federal assistance during the FERA period.



Despite this ambitious beginning, it was under the work relief program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), initiated in late 1935, that white collar workers and artists received their greatest support from the New Deal. Projects were set up in most states for musicians, artists, writers, and actors. Collectively, they were known as Federal One.¹

The WPA Federal Music Project (FMP) commenced its work late in 1935 under the direction of Dr. Nicolai Sokoloff, conductor of the Cleveland Symphony. The Oklahoma state director was Dean Richardson. During the next four years theirs was to be a tempestuous relationship. Both were skilled artists and reasonably competent administrators—Richardson probably better than Sokoloff—but both were also possessed of the artistic temperament and were quick to criticize and quick to lose their tempers. Richardson found it particularly difficult to acknowledge that he was dealing



The WPA Music Project was only one of many make-work, New Deal programs, such as shoe repair for needy children (left) and park improvements (above) (Courtesy Oklahoma Department of Libraries).

with a bureaucracy; his concern was to make music. Sokoloff found it difficult to be flexible. Under pressure from outside critics from the beginning of his tenure, he was determined to avoid any action which might permit his enemies to offer a smug "I told you so" to his boss, Harry Hopkins.²

After receiving his initial instructions from Washington, Richardson appointed a state advisory board and conducted a survey of the musical needs of his state. Working with local relief agencies, he identified 500 persons claiming to be professional musicians who were on relief. He then prepared a long list of useful projects which he pared down to seven and submitted to Washington. He requested forty musicians each for Tulsa and Oklahoma City to serve as the nucleus for symphony orchestras; forty persons to be employed as music recreation leaders in Oklahoma County and other areas; the creation of a Negro dance band; a band for Okmulgee; and fifty music

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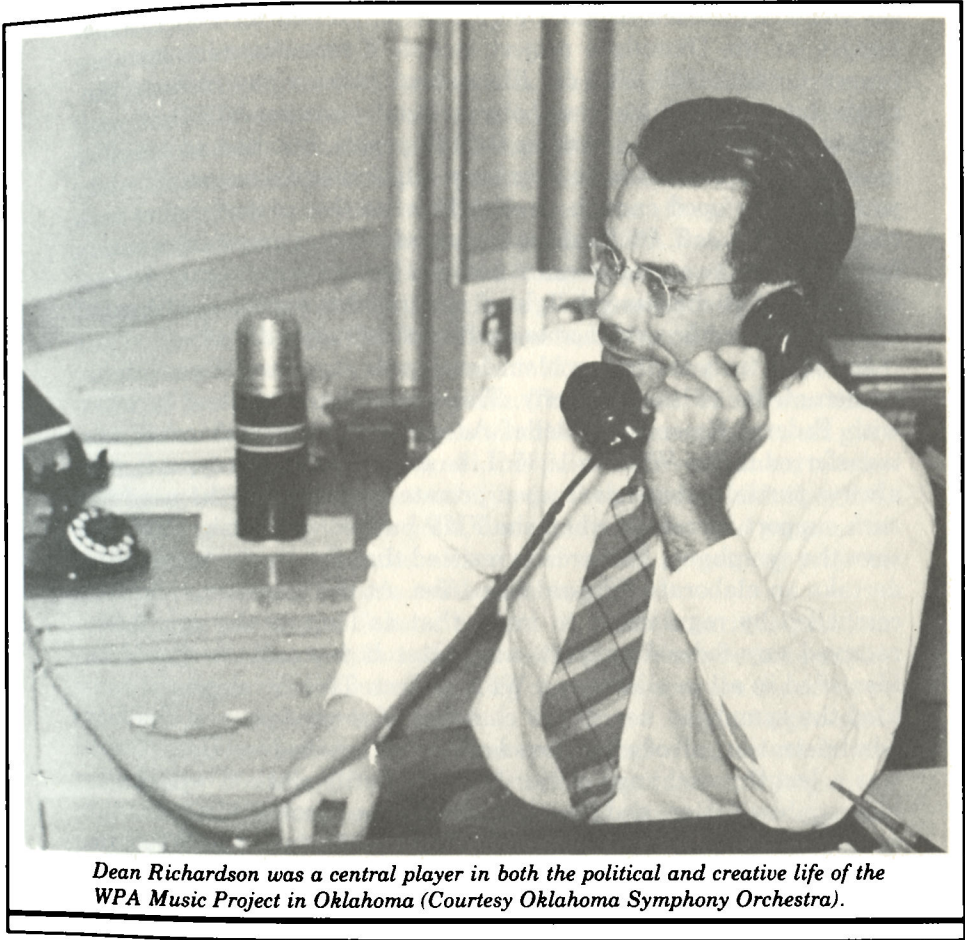
teachers to be placed in Oklahoma's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps. The total cost of these first projects was to be \$13,000 for one month.³

Within ten days after submitting his first list, Richardson changed it. He dropped the idea of putting music teachers in the CCC camps and added a request for ninety-two teachers and band leaders to serve in rural communities. He also considered dropping the idea for a Negro dance band, but after deleting it from his list he added it again and this project became a permanent feature of the program. As for the rural teaching project, it too became a permanent feature of the FMP in Oklahoma and for many people the most important. In the next six years FMP teachers in small towns and rural areas would bring the joy of music to thousands of people who would otherwise never have had it. Richardson also added small band projects for Ardmore and Shawnee and dropped the idea of a symphony for Oklahoma City. This last move was very controversial and it is difficult to say why it was done, although Richardson later explained that it was because too few local musicians registered for federal assistance. More likely, it was an artistic decision. Richardson was afraid there were too few quality musicians available to support two symphonies.⁴

Virtually from the beginning, Richardson faced administrative difficulties. For one thing, budgetary limitations necessitated a quota of recipients far lower than the number of applicants. This condition affected projects as well as individuals. Consider, for example, the case of Ardmore. O. C. Skinner, supervisor of the project there, complained that allocations were coming in slowly from Washington. He believed that the explanation lay in the fact FMP officials in Washington thought there were very few real musicians in Oklahoma. Skinner was bitter. "They hint," he wrote, "that a few cowboy guitar players and Indians is [sic] all we have."⁵

Then there was the case of Louise Stablein, a Tulsa violinist. With an attitude typical of those not selected for assistance, she complained to Harry Hopkins that she qualified for relief because she had no income. She demanded to know why many capable musicians like herself remained unemployed when the project was supposedly designed to meet their needs. "I need the work," she wrote, "worse than many others who are getting full-time checks."⁶

The response of the administration to cases like these varied. Skinner received some support and was able to carry on for a year before giving up in 1938, but Miss Stablein received no help because she lacked sufficient talent. Like all arts projects administrators,



Dean Richardson was a central player in both the political and creative life of the WPA Music Project in Oklahoma (Courtesy Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra).

Dean Richardson sought to allocate his limited resources only to those best qualified. Inevitably, many people who considered themselves professional artists were bitterly disappointed.⁷

Richardson also was embroiled in almost perpetual controversy with Sokoloff. He irritated the director by bending the rules of procedure in order to achieve artistic excellence, even though Sokoloff basically approved of his philosophy. The unending tension between them was reflected in their correspondence. For example, in September, 1936, Sokoloff directed one of his many pointed inquiries to the harried Richardson. "A number of (your projects)," he wrote, "bear items which I do not quite understand and, therefore, I am going to

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ask you for a detailed explanation. . . .” Why, queried Sokoloff, did the budget for the Okmulgee project include a miscellaneous encumbrance for \$639.80? Why did Richardson grant a pay raise to the conductor of the Tulsa symphony without permission? What was project #S-135? It was written for 170 people, but had no specific location. Also, it included a very large superintendence cost. “I wish you would be good enough to explain what this project refers to,” concluded Sokoloff. Richardson explained all these mysteries satisfactorily, but the scenario was to be repeated again and again. It was almost as if Richardson delighted to taunt his superior, although there is no specific evidence to confirm this supposition.⁸

In 1937 a truly serious problem developed concerning the administration of the Tulsa symphony. This group was organized in 1934 with Federal Emergency Relief Administration support and was transferred to the WPA in 1935. Like all projects of its type, it was always partially dependent upon private support, and the need for such support increased when the FMP budget was cut in 1937. To save the symphony, Richardson insisted that the local sponsors undertake an elaborate fund-raising drive. At the same time, he was compelled by regulations to insist that as long as the symphony received any federal support, no matter how small, it should be identified in all publicity as a WPA project. This development rankled the symphony board, the chamber of commerce, and the city administration, all of whom loved music but not the New Deal. There was a lengthy exchange of harsh words thinly cloaked with high-brow sophistication, and then in mid-July the executive board of the symphony voted to reject all further assistance from the WPA, informing Richardson of their decision in a curt letter from Mrs. Walter Ferguson, president of the symphony association. The *Tulsa Tribune* captured the essence of the dispute in a story which appeared on July 17, 1937. Here it was explained that a 30 percent cut in FMP personnel left only sixteen orchestra members on the government payroll and placed most of the burden of management upon the shoulders of the symphony association. And yet, complained the Tulsans, the government continued to demand that the Tulsa Symphony be sublimated to the FMP and the WPA. Robert Gordon, promotions manager for the symphony association, told the press that the symphony was to be “emancipated.” The orchestra would accept no more federal assistance and there would be no more mention of the WPA in their printed material. “The orchestra is now free,” said Gordon, “from the politics of the WPA and the everchanging and

conflicting regulations imposed by the various interpretations of government employees."⁹

When Sokoloff heard of these events, he demanded a full explanation from Richardson, who responded on July 27 with a slightly different version. He emphasized that although the leaders of the symphony movement in Tulsa wanted federal dollars, they did not want to be identified with the WPA. Earlier, when they had refused to give adequate support to the project unless WPA was dropped from the name, Richardson had made a counter-proposal. He told the Tulsans that if they would organize a strong symphony association amply financed by local business interests, he would drop WPA from the name of the orchestra but retain it in a credit line on all printed material pertaining to the orchestra. They agreed, but it was then, said Richardson, that they began to object unreasonably to all government rules and regulations. At this point he invited them to take over complete financial responsibility for the project, which they did. This was really all to the good, he explained, for one purpose of government support for the arts was to assist in getting projects started and thus to become self-sustaining.¹⁰

With the passing of federal control in Tulsa a serious problem seemingly was averted, but within weeks conditions became explosive once again. Oklahoma City, long disturbed because the drive to establish a symphony had failed in 1935, now began to pressure Richardson for action. He was receptive and went to work immediately. He identified 125 eligible musicians and began to organize, but the moment he did the Tulsans objected. Fearing competition with their orchestra, Mayor T.A. Penny and Mrs. Ferguson wired Senator Elmer Thomas with charges that Richardson was attempting to pirate their players away to Oklahoma City. Thomas sent the complaint to Sokoloff who relayed it to Richardson.¹¹

"Absurd; ridiculous," retorted the state director. "The local union would never stand for such an action. They are interested in the welfare of local musicians, not those from Tulsa. . . . I would certainly be inviting trouble were I to try to employ Tulsa musicians even if they were needed in Oklahoma City, which they are not."¹²

The musicians' local also responded to the protest, while virtually everyone in Oklahoma City with an interest in music now demanded that the project be consummated.¹³ But the Tulsans did not give up. They dispatched another protest to Senator Josh Lee reflecting their fear that Oklahoma could not support two symphonies. They also insisted that, in spite of his denials, Richardson wanted to lure some of Tulsa's key musicians away.¹⁴

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The newspapers in Tulsa and Oklahoma City called it a "music war." The *Daily Oklahoman* declared, "... observers of things musical agree the conflict is fraught with peril to the cultural life of the state."¹⁵ Meanwhile, the *Tulsa Tribune* sought to reassure residents of the Oil Capital that they would not lose their orchestra. The paper quoted Dorothy Heywood Reedy, vice president of the symphony association. "I'm quite sure that Oklahoma City is not going to wreck Tulsa's symphony," she said, "unless the businessmen who promised to aid us . . . change their minds."¹⁶

An investigation of conditions in Tulsa revealed the exact nature of the difficulty. The symphony association failed to raise sufficient funds in the early fall of 1937 to support the orchestra and therefore placed several players on furlough without pay. Those who were



In April of 1938 the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra moved from the Shrine Auditorium to the recently completed Municipal Auditorium (top center), another public works project (Courtesy OHS).

previously on relief and now had no income were given an opportunity to transfer to Oklahoma City. Fourteen of them did so. This was hardly a case of "piracy." Richardson was simply trying to do his job, and in spite of his earlier worries, he had the support of everyone in Oklahoma City including the local musicians' union.¹⁷

Still, Nicolai Sokoloff was dissatisfied with Richardson's performance and sent him a critical letter.¹⁸ Richardson's reply was explosive. "You . . . misunderstand the Tulsa situation," he retorted. ". . . I think you lose sight of the fact that the members of the Tulsa Symphony Board were selected largely from the . . . Chamber of Commerce and are whole-heartedly opposed to the WPA. . . . They did not want government supervision."

Richardson reminded Sokoloff that he gladly would have received advice or instructions from Washington concerning the situation, but neither was offered. He declared further that the situation was really the fault of the federal government. It was the drastic reduction of the state quota which caused the Tulsa Symphony Association to act. It was the quota reduction which was ultimately responsible for the demise of the Tulsa project, and that in time caused a complete reorganization of the Federal Music Project in Oklahoma. "The Oklahoma City orchestra is not an expansion," he concluded, "but it is designed to carry on an aggressive successful program and to employ the maximum number of musicians with a minimum of supervisory expense."¹⁹

Ironically, the Tulsa symphony did not survive. With the failure of the fund drive and the withdrawal of federal support it ceased operations and was not reactivated until 1948. Meanwhile, by mid-September, 1937, the Oklahoma Symphony was in rehearsal for its inaugural season. It was an orchestra of sixty pieces, billed as a representative of the entire state rather than Oklahoma City alone. When it began to perform, it was an instant success. "I wish you could have been in Oklahoma City last night," wrote Richardson to Sokoloff. ". . . Bravos, whistling, and ten curtain calls closed the first series of concerts given in Oklahoma City since 1929. The success of this first trial series for Oklahoma City brings us to a new era . . . for Oklahoma City as well as Oklahoma has taken this organization as its own."²⁰

In the spring of 1938 the orchestra toured the state to even greater acclaim. They played in cities like Altus and Chickasha, which had never before hosted a symphony orchestra. Richardson was euphoric. "Everywhere this orchestra appears," he wrote, "we are received with

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genuine enthusiasm. . . . Our reception would certainly disprove the impression that American audiences do not like symphony music. . . . This . . . orchestra can be booked continuously for an indefinite period if it were possible to do it."²¹

The year 1938 passed without incident except that Richardson appealed to Washington for higher pay for his staff and was turned down, and Washington complained that Richardson was becoming too involved, almost obsessed, with the symphony and was giving too little attention to other aspects of the Federal Music Project, especially the teaching project.²² This too was an irony since Sokoloff himself was much more concerned with performance and artistic excellence than with any other aspect of the program.

Unfortunately, 1939 brought more trouble. Once again Washington cut the FMP quota for Oklahoma, thus threatening the existence of the symphony. Richardson became desperate in his efforts to preserve it. He published propaganda materials and prevailed upon civic leaders in Oklahoma City to pressure the congressional delegation. All this was viewed with alarm by Sokoloff in Washington and by state WPA Director, Ron Stephens. Sokoloff cautioned Richardson to be more discreet, while Stephens complained that Richardson had lost sight of the administrative framework and was becoming far too independent.²³

As of September 1, 1939, all the arts projects were required to have local sponsors. For the Oklahoma City Federal Symphony this role was filled by the Symphony Society. Similar organizations in other parts of the country were often not so fortunate. But the new arrangements led to further difficulties. WPA Director Stephens became even more disturbed by Richardson's apparent arrogance and independence. He now complained that Richardson practically ignored the continued affiliation of the project with the WPA. He also was concerned by Richardson's close connection with Mrs. Roland Wright, head of the Symphony Society. While this group supported the Federal Symphony generously with private donations, they also accepted WPA money, but seemed reluctant to acknowledge it. The pattern was much the same as it had been in Tulsa. On the one hand private support from the Symphony Society was vital because of the new administrative situation. The orchestra could not continue without this assistance. On the other hand Stephens believed the reluctance of Richardson and the Society to acknowledge WPA support was a result of their fear of pressure or interference from anti-New Deal circles in the state led by the *Daily Oklahoman*.²⁴



Photographed before a concert were, from left to right: Dean Richardson; Dalies Franz, world famous pianist; Mrs. Roland Wright, head of the Symphony Society; Spencer Norton, music teacher at OU; and Victor Alessandro, conductor (Courtesy Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra).

The problem was resolved in mid-1940 when Mrs. Wright met privately with Stephens and his publicity supervisor, Carl Held. She told the WPA leaders that her group had no objection to acknowledging the WPA and that she felt relations with the press were satisfactory. Moreover, she told them flatly that the Society would withdraw its support entirely if Richardson was dismissed. She reported her views to National Director Earl Moore, and although there is no evidence of his reply, it appears from subsequent events that matters were smoothed thereafter.²⁵

In spite of the happy solutions to the administrative and political squabbles which plagued the FMP in Oklahoma, and in spite of its successes, the program declined precipitously after 1940. The cause was the war. The need for relief virtually disappeared, and federal monies were re-directed toward the support of national defense. In these circumstances, the foundation of private support laid previously proved invaluable. As federal support rapidly dwindled, the Oklahoma Symphony continued under the direction of the Symphony Society, and still exists in 1986. At the same time several outlying communities agreed to absorb the costs of their FMP music teacher so that the local programs could continue. Thus, even in the dark days which followed, some aspects of culture were preserved for those Oklahomans who desired them.²⁶ In 1943 the Music Project was terminated entirely and nothing remained except the Oklahoma Symphony.

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In 1940 the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra and a large choral group were photographed in Room 412, the rehearsal hall at Municipal Auditorium. The

In spite of the problems recounted here, it must be said that the Federal Music Project experiment in Oklahoma made some important cultural contributions. The teaching project was strong from the beginning. As early as December, 1936, it had placed teachers in seventy communities throughout the state. These teachers offered 1,500 classes per week with an average attendance of twenty-five. This popularity continued throughout the life of the program. In addition to their teaching, the local FMP leaders organized entertainments, community sings, radio broadcasts, and special programs for orphans, the sick, and the elderly. The teachers themselves also received instruction and assistance in the form of library materials, teaching aids, and clinics.²⁷

During its brief existence the Tulsa-WPA Symphony was popular. It performed for specialized groups such as the student body of Tulsa University and high school groups, and it gave numerous public concerts. One of its most popular series was the Starlight Concert Program performed at Skelly Field on the TU campus. These concerts were attended by thousands of appreciative listeners.²⁸



photographer apparently stood in one location and took at least three shots of the rehearsal. Unfortunately, the middle photo is missing (Courtesy OPUBCO).

On a smaller scale, the Ardmore, Okmulgee, and Shawnee orchestras were equally popular. They performed frequently and when they faced extinction resulting from budget cutbacks after 1937, there was considerable public protest.²⁹

The Federal Music Project in Oklahoma, then, went far towards the achievement of its goals; when it ended many people were disappointed. Many, in fact, argued vigorously that the program should be continued and perhaps should become a permanent service of the federal government. In retrospect, however, it is necessary to conclude that the project came to a timely end. The experiment in federal support for the arts contained a number of serious flaws which in all likelihood would never have been fully corrected. For example, Oklahoma was not alone in its administrative difficulties. In many states, especially those of rural America, there were similar disputes involving project administrators, performers, and patrons of the arts. WPA officials, who were seldom concerned very deeply with the needs of white collar workers or artists, also were frequently a source of difficulty. Moreover, the attitude towards culture and the arts varied

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so dramatically from place to place that the development and application of a consistent policy was almost impossible.

Another problem arose directly from the effects of limited budgets. Administrators and artists in all the states experienced frustrations and disappointments such as those in Oklahoma when quotas and cutbacks made it impossible to assist everyone. Many talented musicians as well as those of questionable ability had to be turned away. The fact is that there was never a sufficient commitment by the federal government to establish a fully developed government supported arts program.³⁰ In spite of the efforts of people like Dean Richardson to use the program to promote both excellence and appreciation, and in spite of the fact that Richardson and others like him achieved some measure of success, the fact remains that Federal One was never intended to be more than a work relief project which was to be terminated when the financial need no longer existed.

ENDNOTES

* Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., is a Professor of History at Midwestern State University, Wichita Falls, Texas. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Hardin Foundation, which made the preparation of this article possible.

¹ See: William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), pp. 584-617.

² Mrs. Henry Morgenthau to Harry L. Hopkins, August 22, 1935, Federal Music Project, File 211.1; also see: files of the Federal Music Project, Oklahoma, File 651.311, Record Group 69, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Hereinafter cited: FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

³ Dean Richardson to Nicolai Sokoloff, December 14, 24, 1935; January 10, 24, 1936, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

⁴ Richardson to Sokoloff, April 11, December 1, 1936, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

⁵ O.C. Skinner to Earl Brown, February 22, 1936, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

⁶ Louise Stablein to Harry L. Hopkins, July 23, 1936, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

⁷ Richardson to Sokoloff, July 20, August 4, September 14, 1936; Sokoloff to Richardson, July 30, September 15, 1936, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

⁸ Sokoloff to Richardson, September 15, 29, 1936; Richardson to Sokoloff, September 29, 1936, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

⁹ Mrs. Walter Ferguson to Richardson, July 16, 1937, FMP Okla RG 69 NA; *Tulsa Tribune*, July 17, 1937.

¹⁰ Sokoloff to Richardson, July 17, 1937; Richardson to Sokoloff, July 27, 1937, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

¹¹ Richardson to Sokoloff, September 17, 1937; T.A. Penny, et al. to Elmer Thomas, August 17, 1937, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

¹² Richardson to Sokoloff, August 19, 1937, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

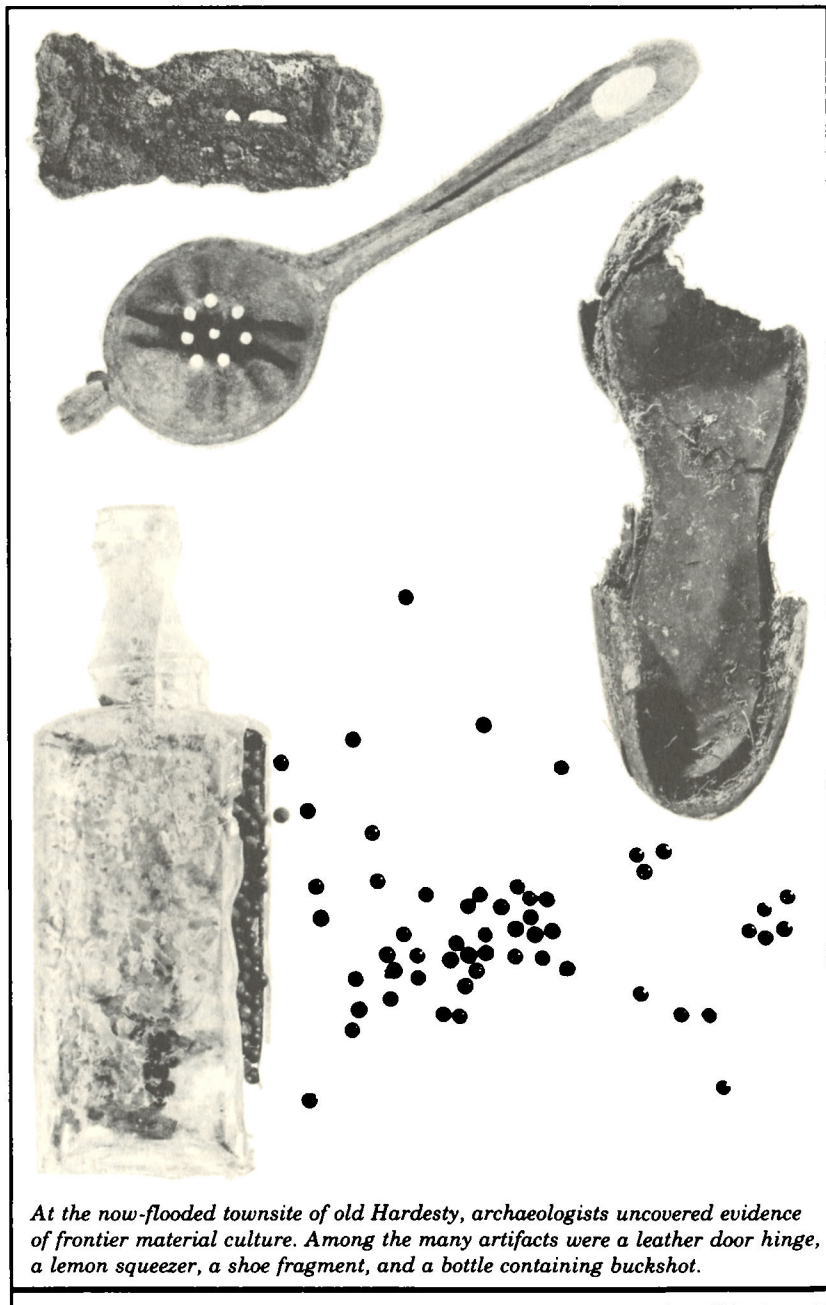
¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ T.A. Penny, et al. to Josh Lee, n.d., 1937, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.

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- ¹⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, n.d., 1937.
- ¹⁶ *Tulsa Tribune*, n.d., 1937.
- ¹⁷ Conrad M. Moore to Dean Richardson, October 6, 1937, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ¹⁸ Sokoloff to Richardson, August 25, 1937, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ¹⁹ Richardson to Sokoloff, September 10, 1937, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ²⁰ Richardson to Sokoloff, March 15, 1938, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ²¹ Richardson to Sokoloff, March 4, 1938, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ²² Sokoloff to Richardson, July 29, November 17, 1938; December 1, 1938, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ²³ Richardson to Sokoloff, January 20, 1939; Sokoloff to Richardson, February 1, 1939, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ²⁴ Leo G. Spofford to Florence Kerr, May 9, 1940, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ²⁵ Mrs. Roland Wright to Earl Moore, June 4, 1940, FMP Okla RG 69 NA; (Moore succeeded Sokoloff in late 1939).
- ²⁶ Dean Richardson to Eula Fullerton, September 11, 1940; Florence Kerr to Charles B. Braun, May 5, 1942, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ²⁷ Dean Richardson to Sokoloff, December 6, 1936, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ²⁸ Richardson to Sokoloff, August 1, 1936, FMP Okla RG 69 NA.
- ²⁹ *The Daily Ardmoreite*, June 18, 1937.
- ³⁰ These statements are based upon a study of the files of the Federal Music Projects and other WPA arts projects in Iowa, Missouri, Texas, and Minnesota. These records are located in Record Group 69, National Archives.

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At the now-flooded townsite of old Hardesty, archaeologists uncovered evidence of frontier material culture. Among the many artifacts were a leather door hinge, a lemon squeezer, a shoe fragment, and a bottle containing buckshot.