

## The Negro in Illinois: The WPA Papers

Julia Mickenberg

*University of Texas, Austin*

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and establishes a basis for interpreting and evaluating the house in the context of regional, state, and local history.

*Others Had It Worse: Sour Dock, Moonshine, & Hard Times in Davis County, Iowa*, by Vetra Melrose Padget Covert and Chris D. Baker. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013. xi, 124 pp. Map, illustrations, bibliography. \$17.50 paperback.

Reviewer Ginette Aley is a Carey Fellow at Kansas State University and teaches history at Washburn University. She is the coeditor, with J. L. Anderson, of *Union Heartland: The Midwestern Home Front during the Civil War* (2013).

For millions of struggling farm families, the Roaring Twenties meant privation and poverty, not the excess and prosperity typically associated with the era. In *Others Had it Worse*, Chris D. Baker shares and interprets his grandmother Vetra Melrose Padget Covert's recollections of her impoverished rural childhood during the 1920s in southern Iowa. Hard times and harsh circumstances formed the backdrop for complicated family relationships that often bore the brunt of Covert's father's participation in an illegal liquor trade.

Readers glimpse another, more gritty Iowa in these pages, not unlike the tensions described in Nebraskan Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules*. Students of the history of Iowa and the rural Midwest will gain fresh perspectives on a poor young woman's sense of the place and time, as she reflects on it later in life in rather brief, simplistic, and pragmatic terms. Coauthor Baker frames the topics in relatable headings such as Family Life, Getting By, The Neighbors, Moonshine, and Social Life, which are complemented by revealing photos. One cannot help but be drawn in by Covert's persistence among such difficulties and meager pleasures.

*The Negro in Illinois: The WPA Papers*, edited by Brian Dolinar. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013. The New Black Studies Series. xliii, 286 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Julia Mickenberg is associate professor of American studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of "Left at Home in Iowa: Progressive Regionalists and the WPA Guide to 1930s Iowa" (*Annals of Iowa*, 1997).

It was like a blast from the past when I was asked to review *The Negro in Illinois: The WPA Papers*. Back when I was in graduate school, I wrote a seminar paper on the "The Negro in Illinois," a project co-directed by the African American writer and librarian Arna Bontemps and the white proletarian writer Jack Conroy, both of whom, as Brian

Dolinar notes in his introduction to this volume, “shared a common interest in depicting folk language and lore in literature” and who went on to collaborate on a number of projects, including writing several children’s books together (xxviii). The Federal Writers Project, most known for the WPA guides to all 50 states, also sponsored a number of other national, regional, and local studies, many of them with a focus on African Americans, ranging from collections of ex-slave narratives, to a study of “Negro Folklore,” to state-based studies such as “The Negro in Virginia.” “The Negro in Illinois,” though essentially completed, was never published because its completion coincided with the termination of funding for the Federal Writers Project. I was interested in the quirky kind of history that the Writers Projects created, a quiriness that came about because the projects themselves were created to make work for unemployed professionals during the Great Depression. Many people, of varying qualifications and varying abilities to collaborate effectively, dug deep into local archives and popular lore for enough material to fill many volumes. They ended up creating a collection of *petite histoires*, that is, stories of common people, or significant figures who, because of their racial, ethnic, class, or gender backgrounds, tended to be erased from historical master narratives until the social history revolution that began in the 1970s. My interest in this particular project was piqued by the list of prominent writers, especially African Americans, who worked on the Illinois Writers Project (IWP), including, besides Bontemps and Conroy, Richard Wright, Katherine Dunham, Fenton Johnson, Margaret Walker, and others—and also by the fact that the study had never been published.

In my own limited forays into the G. Carter Woodson Library and the Newberry Library, I found the array of materials too daunting to pursue. So I was not surprised when Dolinar mentioned that he had been warned about how difficult it would be to collect, edit, and put together copies of chapters that were now scattered in archives around the country. Happily, Dolinar was determined, and his book is a significant accomplishment. Not only does it bring to light a range of wonderful material on a variety of topics (the Underground Railroad, work, churches, professions, social life and social uplift, literature, music, the theater, etc.), but the wonderful introduction and Dolinar’s fine editing skills also make the book a significant contribution to scholarship. For material, and in order to provide deeply textured historical and biographical background and context for the chapters themselves, he has mined archives not just in Chicago and Springfield, Illinois, but also in upstate New York, Tennessee, Washington, D.C.,

and Iowa (the University of Iowa holds the papers of John T. Frederick, director of the Iowa Writers Project). In addition to recovering a lyrical, quirky, and often poetic set of stories about forgotten figures, phenomena, sites, and processes in Illinois history, set against a richly detailed tale of how the project came about and how various chapters came to be written and by whom, and where this work fits into state and national history, the book reminds us that local histories, carefully contextualized, can be of value to national as well as regional audiences.

**Editor's note:** The Iowa Writers Project also began preparation of a history of Iowa African Americans in 1935. Although the reorganized Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the state of Iowa continued the project after 1938, the work was never published. A collection in Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, contains work files created during preparation of the WPA's proposed publication "The Negro in Iowa," including research materials gathered as part of the project, as well as several drafts of the manuscript. Drafts include chapters on African Americans in pre-territorial Iowa; the Underground Railroad; civil and political rights of black Iowans; and African Americans in Des Moines and Polk County. Research material includes biographical sketches; topical papers and material on blacks in Sioux City and Keokuk; Hubert C. Jenkins's M.A. thesis, "The Negro Student at the University of Iowa"; and news clippings. Photocopies of the collection are held in the State Historical Society of Iowa's Iowa City library. Perhaps the Illinois volume reviewed above will encourage an enterprising scholar to do the same for Iowa's "Negro in Iowa" WPA Project.

*Henry Wallace's 1948 Campaign and the Future of Postwar Liberalism*, by Thomas W. Devine. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. xiv, 408 pp. Illustration, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer Bill Pratt is professor of history emeritus at the University of Nebraska Omaha. He is the author of "The Farmers Union and the 1948 Henry Wallace Campaign" (*Annals of Iowa*, 1988).

In 1948 Henry A. Wallace ran for president on a third-party ticket. Fired from the Truman cabinet in 1946, he emerged as a strong critic of the administration's foreign policy. He was particularly dissatisfied with what he saw as an unjustified "get-tough-with-Russia" approach and ultimately opted for the third-party route. The Cold War was well under way by that time and intensified in 1948 with a Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin Blockade. Wallace's crusade, despite initial optimism, ended disastrously with his ticket receiving only 2.4 percent of the popular vote. The candidate himself was discredited and his supporters isolated from the mainstream of American