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UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY

WASHINGTON



May 25, 1944

Mr. Jerome K. Wilcox
Associate Librarian
University Library
University of California
Berkeley 4, California

Dear Mr. Wilcox:

On checking, I find that the University Library is on our mailing list for all material which is subject to general distribution.

The over-all history, which is my assignment, takes shape very slowly, partly because I have thus far been obliged to devote much time to the preparation of quarterly or semi-annual official reports, and partly because the subject is very broad in scope and exceedingly complex. Thus far only one section of it has actually been written in final form, and that has been issued only for restricted distribution to staff members. However, in view of your interest in the development of the WRA history and on the understanding that the document will not be made available to the general public or to members of the press, I am sending you a copy of California and Her Less Favored Minorities for your files. It is anticipated that other sections of the history will materialize before long.

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Sincerely,

Ruth E. McKee
Ruth E. McKee, Historian

Enclosure

Ruth E. McKee, WRA Historian,
Report to the Director,
June 18, 1946.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROPER CARE AND TREATMENT OF HISTORIANS

Although it is customary to end a narrative of one's experience and problems as a WRA staff member with conclusions and recommendations, I introduce my report with them instead, because it seems to me that they give point to the narrative.

Since I have not accomplished the major task which I was hired to do for WRA--though I have done a variety of other jobs that needed to be done--I have thought a good deal about the factors that prevented my writing a complete history and also about what conditions might allow an adequate history of a temporary agency to be written. It has occurred to me that there are two possible ways of treating the historian in order to guarantee production of history--though my own experience makes me skeptical of the first way:

- 1) Give the historian a private office, a typist who is capable of keeping files in order, freedom from interruption, and let her collect her materials and convert them into a tidy history.
- 2) Accept the fact that the historian will never, during the functioning of the agency, be allowed to write history, and make budgetary allowance for retaining the history for a year beyond the life of the agency so that the life of the agency may be recorded in post mortem calm.

The first proposition is on the face of the matter sensible and simple, but I do not believe that it would ever work out in a Government agency. There seems to be an unwritten law against isolation for writers who could do better work and more of it in less time in isolation. The day I reached Washington and discovered that I was the Historian, I suggested that I be put in a cubbyhole somewhere alone and left to my own resources. Of course I didn't realize what I was asking, but I did notice that Messrs. Baker and Tozier looked shocked and unhappy and they chorused: "The Government doesn't have cubbyholes where anyone can be alone!" Never having been expected to write anything more than a personal letter with anyone else in the room with me, I was shocked and incredulous. They assured me that people could and did write with other people talking over the telephone or dictating or slamming and banging in the same room with them, and that I would soon adjust to conditions.

I was given about a month of unnatural calm and freedom from interruption, in which to begin collecting material for the history and plan it. As I was on the verge of starting to write on it, I was asked to prepare the agency's quarterly report to Congress and the President. The Division Chief tried to convince me that the preparation of the official reports of the agency was a logical and helpful step toward the preparation of the overall history of the agency. I have never been convinced on that point. The proper function of the Historian is recording in detail and evaluating what happened; the Historian is writing for the benefit of serious students who need a full picture of what happened and why. The writer of official reports to Congress, telling of current and controversial happenings must be careful to tell nothing but the truth, but he must be equally careful to select his truths with discretion. The difference in

substance between the two kinds of reporting is the difference between cream and skim milk. It is bad for any writer to be expected to be thorough and scholarly half the time and disingenuously selective and superficial the rest of the time.

While I was learning to write governmentese for the consumption of possibly hostile Congressmen, I shared an office with one temperamental refugee whose life was a complex of emotional crises and who was vocal about them in three languages and who could and many times daily did wail like a banshee, and with another woman who conducted much of her work on the telephone and dictated in jerks the rest of the time. To complicate matters, at this time as an economy measure many of the outside telephone connections were eliminated, and by some mischance, three men in reports who needed outside connections constantly lost their telephones, while I who dislike telephones and probably use them less than anyone else in the agency was left with my outside phone intact. So the three men tramped in and out of my office at five minute intervals to use my telephone. In this period I lost 15 pounds and what had been intermittent insomnia became chronic.

From that office I was transferred to another which I shared with the Assistant Division Chief. In fairly short order I adjusted to his habit of leaping out of his swivel chair so that it slid across the room and banged against the window and to crashing of doors as he shot in and out, but he had a steady stream of people consulting him or being interviewed by him, or was on the telephone or dictating.

By the spring of 1944, I had one monograph of 29 pages to show for my attempts to be a historian, but I had done one quarterly report and half of one semi-annual and the whole of another. I was settling down to a monograph on the Segregation Program when I was once again interrupted with a command order to produce a "complete, comprehensive, confidential" historical record of WRA's wartime activities from December 7, 1941 to June 30, 1944, as a contribution to the Department of Interior's War Records Project,--in six weeks' time. By the time I recovered from that assignment and had settled down to Segregation again, the Revocation of Exclusion was foremost in people's minds, and I began to document that with a view to writing it up while the details were clearly in mind. That enterprise was interrupted by an assignment to prepare a legal memo on our leave regulations for use in the Indio case, then one to revise the handbook on final reporting for closing centers, devising procedures for both technical and personal narrative reports from projects, field offices and various Washington staff members. These accomplished, I was out on a field trip for ten weeks, resumed work on a history of the revocation of exclusion, but was quickly taken off that to prepare a monograph on the Wartime Handling of Evacuee Property. By the time I had assembled the necessary material for it and made a fair start on the actual writing, I was asked to drop everything to write the material required to make a Medal for Merit recommendation, a project that had my complete enthusiasm. That finished, I was asked to produce some arguments favoring the claims bill and the naturalization bill. Suddenly the Assistant Director who had urged me to drop everything, including evacuee property, to do these other things, began asking why the Wartime Handling of Evacuee Property was not finished. He was told, firmly and with more fluency than the Historian can usually command orally, with the result that he went quietly away and actually restrained himself from handing her out any more first priority assignments until the evacuee property monograph was completed.

Two months before the final liquidation of WRA, and six weeks before the deadline for any reports that were to be offset, I got back on Wartime Exile. By working days and nights and Saturdays and Sundays, I finished 180 pages, roughly one third of the planned report.

The historian of this (and other agencies, I have been given to understand) suffers an almost constant block to progress by reason of being a source of considerable information to others. It is taken for granted that the historian should know stray facts, should have on file any bit of documentation that is hard to locate in central files or in the library. There is always the hope that the historian can answer off hand some question in the mind of another writer and save the latter, if not the historian time. The historian feels honor bound to come through with the answer--even if finding the answer takes an hour or three hours or even longer. Every answer the historian comes through with paves the way for another question that may be even worse than the last. There have been many days in this last half-year, when everybody who can write is writing final reports, when the historian has not been able to write a single sentence without being interrupted at least once by requests for information. If I said firmly that I had never heard of the item, had no knowledge of where it might be found and could be of no help whatsoever, nobody believed me. The inquisitor simply stood and waited--or in the case of my Division Chief, came back every two minutes to ask if I hadn't remembered or found the necessary information yet. The historian is between Scylla and Charybdis; if the historian answers questions and digs up information for people at all, that function is certain to get out of hand and consume so much time that no history gets written; if the historian shuts up like an oyster and gives out nothing, everybody assumes that she doesn't know anything, and she would be replaced by a more generous spirited person, and the original oyster-historian still would not be allowed to write history. This is a fairly sad and nervewracking dilemma; your historian who has been on its horns for several years now and has developed high blood pressure, occasional ringing in the ears, nightmares or no sleep because of it, earnestly recommends that in hiring a historian in future, you give thought to the plan to reserve the actual writing of history for the time when the agency is no more.

In closing, I should like to state to you and for the record, that the present historian, while regretful that so little history has been written by her, feels richly compensated for having high blood pressure, jangly nerves, and insomnia in the very satisfactory and stimulating personal relations she has enjoyed with the very people who have ~~been~~ most consistently interrupted her prosecution of the job for which she was hired. The WRA program has absorbed my full imagination as well as interest from the start, and it has been a privilege to be closely associated in such a program with some of the finest minds I have ever encountered.

Respectfully submitted,

Ruth E. McKee, Historian