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Oral history interview with Don G. Abel, 1965 June 10

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Transcript

Interview

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH DON ABEL
WASHINGTON STATE LIQUOR CONTROL BOARD
OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON
JUNE 10, 1965
INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY BESTOR

DB: DOROTHY BESTOR
DA: DON ABEL

DB: Mr. Abel, how long were you State Administrator for the WPA in Washington?

DA: Three years and ten months -- from May 1936 until February, 1940.

DB: Oh, and then in February of 1940, Carl Smith took over . . . ?

DA: Yes, I resigned and came down to Olympia with the State Government, and Carl Smith was appointed administrator.

DB: . . . and he had been acting administrator for . . . ?

DA: He had been on my staff for some time prior to that.

DB: I see. Well, in Seattle, we're very much impressed by all sorts of varied evidences of the WPA, the school additions and tennis courts and the Arboretum planting and the highway markers and so on, but what I'm especially interested in at the moment is the Arts Project. When you were State Administrator, what fields did you have authority over the Arts Project, for I know you had to do with the budget and the correspondence with the office procedure, but did you decide also the general policy of the Art Project or was that left to Mr. Inverarity or whom?

DA: Well, the general policy of the Art Project was left to Mr. Inverarity, and there was a national administrator of the Art Project. The WPA operated with Harry Hopkins as national administrator, and he had complete authority over the WPA, and they had certain principles based on the WPA paying wages, and a certain amount of money for cost and material, and then you had to get a local sponsor who put up a certain amount, the balance of the amount for material. But within the state, the WPA gave us certain broad, general outlines of principles; the state administrator had complete authority. There were always, or practically always, one or more assistants of Mr. Hopkins who were in the State of Washington, checking on various phases of the work and informing myself as well as the national offices as to the operation. But, generally speaking, the State Administrator had complete authority to hire and fire and carry on the functions of the WPA.

DB: I see. Now, there was this Mr. Hinkley whom you were mentioning before we turned the tape on?

DA: Mr. Robert Hinkley was one of 5 assistants to Harry Hopkins. Mr. Hinkley had lived in Salt Lake City and he had jurisdiction over the 11 Western states with the WPA.

DB: I see. Did he visit Seattle?

DA: He visited Seattle many times. I was in Salt Lake many times. I was in Washington, D.C. many times. We got together 3 to 6 times a year with either Mr. Hinkley or Mr. Hopkins. I had a practice of being in Washington, D.C. at a minimum of twice a year and Salt Lake City a minimum of 3 or 4 times a year.

DB: I see. It's interesting that Mr. Hinkley doesn't appear in the somewhat incomplete files of correspondence we have in the University of Washington Library. A good deal of your correspondence does appear there with Mr. Inverarity and some of it with Washington, D.C., but not apparently with Mr. Hinkley. do you know what happened to your files of correspondence at all? Are they in the National Archives where some of the WPA files went?

DA: They might be; I do not know. I resigned in February, 1940 and shortly thereafter the Second World War came along and I do not know. Possibly we can locate some of those files.

DB: Well, that would be interesting. The Archives of American Art is very much interested in having any correspondence microfilmed that has a bearing on this, and I've had the University of Washington files filmed but, as I say, they are not complete. Is that phone for you?

DA: No.

DB: Oh, fine. Did you have a chance, or I should say, which of the actual centers did you have a chance to visit during those years? There were, of course, Seattle and Spokane where the major work was carried on, and then there were exhibition galleries in Chehalis, and Pullman and Fort Lewis and Wenatchee. Did you get around to the exhibits and galleries?

DA: I think the only ones I visited were Seattle and Spokane.

DB: They were, of course, the most important ones, and they were where actual work was carried on. The four galleries were staffed by a single attendant and they had the traveling shows, the circuit shows, mainly from Washington, D.C. but I believe some state ones too. In Seattle, as you probably remember, there were many changes of locale. I think for the longest time there was a studio at the Bailey-Gatzert School where project workers painted. You might be amused to see this reproduction of 2 sketches made of painters working on the Project by one of the workers, Hans Bok. He made those for Fay Chong, who lent them to me the other day to have filmed.

DA: That's very interesting.

DB: And then this photograph is a group of the staff -- of the actual painters on the Project. With whom, if anyone, did you come in contact or know personally? Did you know Kenneth Downer over in Spokane, who was the head there for quite a while?

DA: I might have known him but I can't place him.

DB: All right, it certainly was a long time ago. Or did you know Carl Morris and Hilda Deutsch who were in Spokane for quite a while as heads of the Art Center and then they were sent over to Seattle to organize this plan of exhibition galleries?

DA: I probably knew them but I can't -- I have no memory right now.

DB: This inquiry might well have been started earlier than it was.

DA: I should like to just interject this: I think that probably the most enthusiastic supporter of the Art Projects and other types of projects that were not work projects was Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, and she was out here a number of times because her daughter lived in Seattle, and she invariably went to the different Art Projects, and particularly projects where women were involved in the Seattle area. I don't recollect that she got over to Eastern Washington, but in the Seattle-Tacoma area, she spent considerable time visiting all of the Art Projects and the projects involving women.

DB: Oh, good. Well then she also must have visited not only the Art Projects but the various craft projects . . .

DA: Yes, she did.

DB: . . . under the direction of Erna Gunther of the Museum, who had women working on Indian art.

DA: Yes, I'm sure she did. I recollect one time we spent 3 days. I was with her and she went to all of the projects in King county, including the hospitals particularly, where women were working.

DB: Well, that's very interesting. I hope she was enthusiastically received.

DA: Oh, I assure you she was.

DB: Well, was the WPA pretty well received in Seattle generally or was there a good deal of political opposition to it?

DA: Well, when I say Mrs. Roosevelt was enthusiastically received, I mean she was well received by the WPA people. There were and still are people who are just bitterly opposed to anything connected with the WPA and Mrs. Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt, but I think they're pretty much in the minority.

DB: Yes.

DA: I think they are, but there was a great deal of bitter opposition, politically and probably in some other aspects. Looking back on it, probably some aspects of the WPA were used politically by the Democrats. No question about it. Well, there was more money, and that's the unfortunate part about it, and it would then tend to give some justification for some of the opposition. But, of course, it was, in my opinion, and I think any sensible person, knowing the conditions, would realize it was completely essential that something like that, like

the WPA, be operated for the benefit of people who had no place to go.

DB: Yes. Do you think that in the Art Project, as far as you remember, there were any examples of this?

DA: Well, I think because there was a tendency of some people and some newspapers to take very possible potshot at the WPA, they would, at times, try to single out the people who were, we'll say, not attempting to build a road or a bridge or plant a tree, they were trying to . . . . There was more opposition from the reactionary people in the state to the Art Project than to the other types.

DB: I see.

DA: Because, I suppose, in the first place, many people don't know what's involved in art and so, if they have opposition, why, they just take a crack at it.

DB: It's less tangible, so it's easier to ridicule.

DA: It's easier to ridicule, and you can ridicule, we'll say, the construction of a road or an airport that costs too much, but in the end you've got the airport, you've got the road. But if they start to ridicule, as they did, be it a picture or anything that has to do with art or the theatre, why, it's hard to show where you got anything from this that's tangible and that it's worth so much, you see.

DB: Yes. Sometimes, something would be accomplished in a tangible way like the highway markers or the bas relief at the entrance to the Floating Bridge, but you can't say for sure how much it's worth, but the Art Project did leave lots of tangible reminders in the murals in the various high schools . . .

DA: You're right, you're right.

DB: . . . and in the Post Offices. Most of them are still there.

DA: I do think, though, that if it hadn't been for the insistence of President Roosevelt and his wife, we wouldn't have had any Art Project.

DB: Oh, really?

DA: I do think so. That would be my judgment, I'm sure. Of course, if it hadn't have been for them, we wouldn't have had any of it, but I'm sure that they were the driving force behind the Art Project.

DB: And then Harry Hopkins' insistence caught fire from there?

DA: Well, Harry Hopkins was very close to President Roosevelt and he took his enthusiasm in that area, I'm sure, from the President and Mrs. Roosevelt, I'm sure of that, from my limited contact and I spent many days with them. Not with the President, himself, but with Mrs. Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins and those people.

DB: Well, that's very interesting. Can you tell me anything more about your time with Mrs. Roosevelt?

DA: Well, we were at her home, her daughter's home, and had dinner together. We lunched together many times and Mrs. Roosevelt was, regardless of what people say, she was a tireless worker . . .

DB: Yes, she certainly was.

DA: . . . a tireless worker and I noticed this. When she would be in a car being taken anyplace, we always had a driver but we'd get to a place, some project or to a hospital or someplace, why, she would always shake hands and thank the driver and inquire about their health and their family and she made herself very well known to people that way.

DB: Do you think she was interested in the Art Project because it was art or because it was a chance to help people?

DA: My judgment would be that she was particularly interested in art because she wanted to help all people and all phases of life and, unless you help the artists, you're neglecting an important phase of life. Now that would be my judgment.

DB: Yes, it was a sort of social mission in a way.

DA: A social mission to help all classes of people.

DB: Was she interested in the Writers Project and the Theatre Project just as much, do you think?

DA: Oh, I'm sure she was. She, I would say this, devoted herself particularly to projects where women worked. Where any women worked, she wanted to see that project and she wanted to get acquainted with them. She might talk with me, for instance, about some airport project or something like that, but we never did visit those particularly. We'd go out to the University of Washington and go out around there, and many people don't realize it, but up until the Depression days, the people who entered domestic service in this country, I guess they were lucky if they got their food and old hand-me-down clothes.

DB: That's true.

DA: They got practically no money and, of course, many of them were not too well educated, if they were educated at all, so they were brought into the projects, and I'm speaking particularly of women, and they were taught how to behave and how to handle themselves and they were given clean clothes and taught how to talk and how to sit down and eat a meal with a knife and fork and how to serve and some of them were in the Art Projects and they were given encouragement by Mrs. Roosevelt. I think more than any person living in those days, Mrs. Roosevelt did more for them.

DB: Good. Well, that is certainly a very interesting glimpse of her. You were saying that you dealt in Seattle mainly with Mr. Robert Bruce Inverarity. Do you remember him well?

DA: Yes, a tall, fine-looking man; I haven't seen him for a long time.

DB: He's in the Adirondacks now. He is the director of some museum or art foundation there. Yes, he's at Saranac Lake, I believe.

DA: I'm going to make a note of that.

DB: While you make a note, I'll jsut turn this off and play it back a minute or so to see how your voice is.

DA: I get back East every once in a while; we have a daughter living in Boston.

DB: Oh, have you?

DA: So we get back there at least once a year.

DB: We're going East for the summer, leaving next Monday. That's why I rushed in to see you now during one of your busiest weeks. But, before I go I'll look up in the files Mr. Inverarity's exact address and send it to you, because I'm sure he'd be delighted to hear from you or to see you. Do you remember much about his administration of the Seattle part of the Project?

DA: My only memory is that he did a good job and was well received and handled everything properly as far as I can remember.

DB: Fine. When on reads the correspondence, one sometimes gets the picture that there were so many administrative headaches for everyone that it was all rather frantic. You -all had so much to do with the certification and the forms and the budget . . . .

DA: Times were very hectic in the operation. There were many people who were probably off mentally, who were either working in the WPA or wanted to work or had been working of something . . . .

DB: Oh, I hadn't realized that.

DA: And at one time I used to meet at different times with groups who were professed Communists and there was one time in the winter of 1937, '38, when I attended a large meeting in the old Union Hall in Seattle. Now it's been torn down since . . . it was located, at my memory, on University Street between 6th and 7th Avenues, and there were several hundred, possibly 1500 people there. The hall was jammed and I went in to the meeting; you had to go through a crowd, the halls were crowded, the passageways were crowded. But I went in with 6 Communists and I was in the center, and the reason they all stood around me, they said what that, "with us around you, why, nobody will take a pot shot at you." It wasn't funny in some areas. During that winter, a sergeant of the Seattle Police Department was always in an office adjoining my office, and he had a direct line to the Seattle Police Dept. During a part of that winter, my home was under surveillance by the Police Department.

DB: Good Heavens! Now, what was the Communist line, that the WPA wasn't doing enough?

DA: Actually, my relationship with the top Communists was satisfactory, but there were a lot of excitable people, and they would have a tendency to go to extreme measures, and it's usually a person who is off-base mentally who gets involved in those kind of things.

DA: Right.

DB: Why it's almost unbelievable, but at one time there was talk about a mass march on the Alaska Building where we had our offices, and we had about 200 administrative employees in that building. It's now called the New World Life Building in Seattle, down at the corner of 2nd and Cherry; and the Treasury Department, who paid our bills, they were a separate organization and paid our bills, were on the floor above us. We had the 2nd, 3rd and 4th floor and they were on the 5th, and the man in charge of the Treasury Department, and I'm sure he made a mistake, but in any event, he called the commanding Officer of Fort Lewis and asked him to send a platoon of soldiers with machine guns, and they got in there one morning and the first thing I knew there were machine guns mounted on the floor above us. I called Washington, D.C. immediately and they told me to notify the Treasury that unless the machine guns were out of there within an hour, everybody employed by the WPA would pick up their movables and move out of the building, within an hour. Well, of course, you could imagine that the wires were hot, and actually the Army moved out, and there was, of course, no cause for it, and well, there might have been some reason for being alarmed, but anything like that could only end in bloodshed and it would be a complete mistake. It would be a complete mistake, but particularly in the winter of '37, '38, things were bad, economically, for many people. In Seattle, why, at that same meeting I was speaking about where I went in with these Communists around me, of course, the Seattle Police Department or the FBI had been among the Communists and I was told it was perfectly proper for me to go to that meeting, but Charley Ernst, who was then the State Administrator of the State Relief, was told that he should stay away, and his people should stay away.

DB: Well, now, why did they draw this distinction?

DA: Well, in the thinking of some people, and there's no question there's some merit to it, the State Government was right here, and they couldn't pass the buck. They were right here on the job and they dealt directly with the . . . we'll say the "unemployable." And they were the most desperate ones, probably that was more the reason than anything.

DB: So they would have been vulnerable.

DA: They were more vulnerable to people who were mentally . . . . Again, you're not dealing with people who are normal; you're dealing with people who are not normal.

DB: True. Well, now, to get back a minute to the march, did the march actually start or was it just a rumor?

DA: It never took place; it was just a rumor. But it indicates how tense things were.

DB: Yes, then the object of the march would really have been just to harass?

DA: Harass and demonstrate.

DB: I see. Well, that was quite a thing.

DA: For instance, I was always willing to meet with a group, and I would deal with some of these leaders, at least many of whom were Communists at that time. Not all of them, at least some of them were Communists, but I would deal with the leaders and I would see now that they'd bring some rough characters, screwballs in their committee. I've had meetings in my office, which was an office about the size of this, we'll say 20 by 30, and it would be full and I'd be sitting there at my desk and it'd really be full. And there'd be people out in the hall, but always the leaders, they would see that they were in close, because they did not want any mentally disturbed person to get involved in some attack or some demonstration of some type that they would regret. Now that's my experience with them. I think most people don't realize it.

DB: No, I think you're right. That's very interesting. Well, now, when there were these demonstrations and delegations from Communists and others, what was their aim as far as the WPA was concerned? Did they want you to loosen the restrictions and support everyone and give work to everyone, or did they want to abolish the WPA"

DA: Oh, they wanted more money; they wanted more opportunity, more work, more pay.

DB: But through the channels of the WPA, they just wanted to get on it?

DA: That was it; that was it. Get more money, you see; we would have to cut down and the money was running out, and we'd have to cut down, and that's what happens.

DB: That's one thing that some of the people I've interviewed mentioned, that Dr. Erna Gunther who directed the Museum sponsorship of some of the WPA projects, she directed the workers who were making the dioramas for the Museum and so on, and she said that there were quite frequently sudden cut-backs or sudden rumors

that the WPA Art Project would have to cut down, and the rumors were not always well-founded. And one day she would be told to dismiss everyone and late that evening be told to tell them to come tomorrow after all. Now was this because of orders from Washington, D.C.?

DA: Yes. It would sometimes be actually that money did run out, and part of it would possibly be to bring pressure on the Congress to appropriate more money.

DB: I see.

DA: Bear in mind that there were some people in the Congress who wanted to botch the whole thing, and others who didn't want to spend as much as they were spending, and so it would have to be, I assume, that what people were doing was to exert political pressure and those things occurred particularly in the large cities.

DB: Yes, I gather they did occur fairly often in Seattle. Do you remember for how long a time the Federal Government would appropriate money? Would it be for 6 months at a time or a year at a time or various periods?

DA: Well, it was supposed to be for a year at a time, but then they'd run out or one thing or another. By the way, I might mention one of the most beautiful projects having to do with the arts was the building built on Mount Hood. And what did they call it? I forget it -- you should see that whole building and there's a lot of art objects in there, was all built by the WPA.

DB: Oh, fine, I will go and look at that.

DA: It is the inn on Mount Hood.

DB: I've been by Mount Hood, but I haven't seen that. I certainly will look at it. One or two other things, and then I know you're very busy, so I'll leave you. But do you think things were better and easier to administer after this transition from the Federal Art Projects to the Washington State-wide Project that took place in the summer of 1939?

DA: Well, I would think so, because it became more local than being directed from Washington, D.C.

DB: And you were more autonomous probably then, too. But there was still a difficulty in getting funds after . . . ?

DA: There was always difficulty in getting funds.

DB: Two last things: Do you think the Art Project accomplished anything really significant out here in the Northwest?

DA: Well, I would say that this building down there on top of Mount Hood was . . . I do know that the Art Project got extra money from the Federal Government and it was advertised or discussed nationally and . . . . I haven't been there for many years but it used to be a terrific place to go and just a beautiful place. Lots of works of art there but I . . . Of course, we group all the arts together. I think that the WPA Writers' Project on the histories of the different states was one of the best works that was accomplished. For instance, when we go, when my wife and I go, and I know a number of other people who do this, who travel in other states, we think that probably the best place to go to find out about the history of an area in a state is to go to the Writer's Project book on that state.

DB: Yes, we do that, too. My husband has them all.

DA: Yes, yes, they're in all the libraries; they're in all the libraries and I think they're used quite extensively.

DB: Yes, they certainly are. Do you think the Art Project, aside from the Mount Hood Building, accomplished anything comparable to the Guide Books, that is not in the field of . . . ?

DA: Oh, I would say probably the chief accomplishment was to maintain the spirit and the interest of the people involved.

DB: And you feel that it did do that?

DA: Oh, there's no question about it.

DB: Fine. And last of all, are there any ways in which any future government art project, if there are some, could benefit from the lessons of this one, either from its positive achievements or from any difficulties it got into?

DA: Well, of course, there's quite a bit of activity in many areas now on the Art Projects. I think that the people interested in this phase of life are getting more from, we'll say, different local groups than they used to get. You'll find that in Portland, you'll find that in Seattle, up there in Port Townsend, there's quite an active group up there, I think, right now.

DB: Yes, there is. They're having that summer festival.

DA: I think that my limited observation would be that there is a different feeling now among the public for public support, and I question whether we need to go to the Federal Government for those things. Right now, of course, we're having reasonably prosperous times. If we've ever had prosperous times, we have them now, and people are able and are, I would think, contributing quite a bit.

DB: So you think the arts have sort of made their way; they don't need paternalistic help?

DA: I think so. I think the arts are much better off now than they used to be.

DB: Yes, the certainly are. Perhaps that's in large part because of the boost that the Federal Arts Project gave them.

DA: Well, I think the Federal Arts Project under the WPA accomplished considerably much.

DB: Well, thank you very, very much, Mr. Abel.
[END OF INTERVIEW]