



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Henry W.  
Hough, 1964 June 11

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions](http://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions)  
[www.aaa.si.edu/](http://www.aaa.si.edu/)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Henry W. Hough on June 11, 1964. The interview took place in Denver, Colorado, and was conducted by Richard Keith Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

RICHARD DOUD: This is an interview with Henry Hough in Denver, Colorado, June 11, 1964. The interviewer is Richard K. Doud.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

I think it might be of interest to start with your background and how you happened to become the state director of the Writers' Project in Colorado.

HENRY HOUGH: Well, my background was in journalism. I had been active 30 years in magazine work and writing. I had worked with *Scripps Howard* newspapers and had been in New York as one of the editors of *the Scientific American*. I had come back to Colorado a few years before the Writers' Project and other such got underway, in '31 in fact. And I was doing freelance writing, advertising work, representing *Time* and *Life* as a correspondent stringer, and I was aware of these projects being put together and a friend of mine, Dr. Ben Cherrington of the University of Denver told me one night at one of our meetings that they were putting together some activities in the federal government and might need my help in getting some of them organized. And pretty soon it turned out that what he was talking about was the WPA Adult Education Program.

RICHARD DOUD: I see, mm-hmm [affirmative.]

HENRY HOUGH: And they sounded like they had a very interesting activity developing and I went in as state supervisor of public affairs education, and ran that for two or three years. Then they gave me also a project called Workers Education to direct on a state-wide basis. And this was largely a matter of selecting and training people on the WPA roles who had qualities of leadership or who had some background as a preacher or a teacher or something of that sort who could conduct meetings and—

RICHARD DOUD: White collar type.

HENRY HOUGH: Yes, white collar workers who had some capacity for leadership, and an interest in educational work of that type. Some of them had been teachers, some of them were minor labor leaders and such. I remember we got into a lot of excitement one time because they found out that we were training leaders who were organizing strikes against the WPA [Richard Doud laughs] which was our employer. [They laugh.] The boss came around and said, What in the world are you doing, striking against us? I said, No, just showing people how it's done. [They laugh.]

But in addition to that, then there were state-wide library project which ended up in my lap to direct, and the Writers' Project had been going along in good hands by the direction of other men. And a man named Harry Simonson had been the last supervisor of it until they turned it over to me also. And most of their books had been produced—or their American guidebook on Colorado. They had a great raft of minor little projects underway, and I spent most of the time—this was long toward the end of the WPA period—in seeing to it that anything we had that was of any value at all was copied and made available, either in the Western history section of the Denver Public Library or in the—and in addition to the Library of the state historical society in the state museum building. So with that done, I got out. And I went to work for *Time*, and *Life*, *Fortune* on a fulltime basis, and after doing that for a few years I got into publishing on my own account. There was quite an oil boom developing out

in this part of the country then and I developed an oil journal, which I've run ever since.

And a rather short time ago I sold that and merged my operations with a larger publishing organization so that I could devote most of my time to book publication. And now I'm in charge of the book division of the Golden Bell Press, and I'm concerned almost entirely with books, although I keep a hand on the oil thing too.

[00:05:21]

RICHARD DOUD: Well, it's always puzzled me, particularly on the Writers' Project, how individuals would be selected to do the job of going around to various parts of a state and doing this type of research. I can see where an artist it was expected at least to have had some art training, and an actor was expected to have some theatrical experience and all before they could qualify as artists or actors in the WPA Project. What about writers? Were there really that many people trained in writing to cover a state such as Colorado and do this research?

HENRY HOUGH: Well, some of them had a little background in news-papering or they thought they were freelance writers or something as such. Not a very many of them had much background. But, oh, I—there was one that had graduated from the University of Colorado in journalism. She's been working for me ever since.

RICHARD DOUD: Is that right? [Laughs.]

HENRY HOUGH: I still have her, I just left her 10 minutes ago. And some of them had pretty good qualifications, they just happened not to—at that time, to be able to get regular jobs. Or they had, through family breakups and one thing or another got disassociated with the town or area where they had worked and just never had managed to catch on again during a period when jobs were very scarce.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, other than the guide series that, I guess, was almost universal in this country—

HENRY HOUGH: Yes, that pattern was very similar in all the states, I think.

RICHARD DOUD: What projects were carried out here that were strictly Colorado projects? In other words, how would your state have differed in your Writers' Project?

HENRY HOUGH: Well, there were some other more or less standard projects we worked on. One was the place name projects, digging out derivations and origins of the names of all the places, which was used very widely, and has always been of interest to people. And the tourist agencies still use a lot of that stuff, find it of interest to people. But it took a good deal of digging to find where these creeks, and rivers, and mountains, and towns did get their names. Now that's all on the record, I don't think it was ever published in any very good book form, but a lot of very interesting colorful material in that project. And that was done all over the state, in out of the way nooks and crannies. Usually, these people working on WPA were not moved any great distance from where they lived, they stayed put.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HENRY HOUGH: So, they would get to work on anything that the—he or the supervisor could think of in his area that might have any interest at all. And one of the best bets was to run down the names of things, see how they got there, who the people were. Well, in the process you really uncover what little history there is in an area.

RICHARD DOUD: Certainly.

HENRY HOUGH: So that took up a lot of time. And then there were specific jobs done for the public schools who would point a finger at an area of interest, such as the beginnings of the churches in Denver. So we put a crew of people to work running down when the first Jews started churches, and the Presbyterians, and the Baptists, and so on and put this together in a book that I think the schools still use on that aspect of social problems, or whatever they called it. And as I remember there were half a dozen other projects of that nature done for the schools in digging up backgrounds for them to use on close to home things that the student's might be conceivably interested in because it was something they could talk about at home.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure. Well, I noticed going through some of the material here at the public library and the state historical society that in some cases the work will be very well documented and extensively footnoted and in other cases there will be absolutely no source given. Why should there be this extreme dichotomy of standard, and who would actually set the standard and—

[00:10:24]

HENRY HOUGH: Well, it may have been the question of what it was for. Of course, just like anybody today, writing a book for scholarly use, will foot note it, and do such. Now if this is designed for public release to the general public or is done for—under the sponsorship of some local tourist bureau or an agency of that kind, footnotes are the last thing they'd want.

RICHARD DOUD: Certainly.

HENRY HOUGH: So even though it might have been done from the same material, it doesn't necessarily mean that it was done badly, it's just it was done to meet a different market.

RICHARD DOUD: You think then that—

HENRY HOUGH: We prepared a great many radio scripts the latter part of the period, and those were, of course, not footnoted in any way. They were patterned as much as possible after what available scripts there were to use as a guide for little things. I remember the—getting ready for the war was a big job in those days and we had scads of munitions plants being developed around here, and army bases being built, and great gobs of soldiers all around the place and we developed some things that would be of—for tie-ins with those groups on matters that probably are purely transitory interest and wouldn't be of any use now. But at the time kept a lot of workers busy on what looked like useful work at the moment.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. There's an interesting and I think a valuable collection at the historical society, extracts from newspaper items. I'm sure you're familiar with this. They have about four or five file cabinets of, I think, four by six cards.

[Cross talk.]

HENRY HOUGH: [Inaudible.]

RICHARD DOUD: Were you—did you have anything to do with this or—

HENRY HOUGH: Well, I think that was part of the accumulation they were making on various of these studies. I don't know just which ones you refer to.

RICHARD DOUD: Um—

HENRY HOUGH: There were voluminous files, of course, in those—just vertical files of subject matter accumulations, that—

RICHARD DOUD: Well, this particular file is quite a favorite, I think, at the historical society and a former director had something to do with getting it done. But I was wondering who had the idea of going through all the old Colorado papers and either extracting verbatim the news items or clipping various items and breaking them down extensively in very useable groups. It's, to me it would be an extremely valuable source for any [inaudible]—

HENRY HOUGH: That—I don't know just what, which ones you're referring to. I do remember file cabinet after filing cabinet of material of that kind that was developed for various purposes. I turned over to them also, I think, some of my own files. I was getting around the region a lot in my work with *Time*, and *Life*, and *Fortune*, and I was struck with the development of the sentiment toward the war that we were leading in to, World War II. And keeping track of a lot of clippings on things like that. You would see for instance a sentiment in a community change from extreme nationalistic uninterest in world affairs, last thing in the world they think of would be to go to war with anybody, Japan or Germany. They had done that, they were through with all that sort of thing. Extreme pacifist, America First spirit out here in this country. And then they would be bought off gradually. The chamber of commerce or somebody would get a munitions plant or a big army installation and pretty soon this big new payroll had changed their attitude and—

[00:15:02]

RICHARD DOUD: Makes all the difference in the world.

HENRY HOUGH: —pretty soon they were whooping it up just like everybody else was, had changed from their other provincial isolationist attitudes to watching what was going on all over the world. It's a good technique and I was going to do a book about it, and I collected several I think file cabinets full of that stuff [they laugh], just because it showed how community after community was—well it looked at the time like they were being corrupted. I suppose it was all for a good purpose and—

RICHARD DOUD: This type of thing would be an interesting documentary on human nature.

[Cross talk.]

HENRY HOUGH: Oh, just fascinating.

RICHARD DOUD: The power of the dollar in a sense, and how their opinions can be swayed by economic [inaudible]—

HENRY HOUGH: There were ministers for instance in the early—oh, over a period of just two or three years they would change, from a rampantly isolationist position, pretty soon they'd be sort of neutral, and after a while they'd be up there christening the new munitions plant. [They laugh.] [Inaudible] along with everybody else.

RICHARD DOUD: Another interesting point. Are you familiar with the series of bound typescripts they have at the historical society composed of interviews conducted under the early Civilian Works Administration? Where they sent people around over Colorado to interview the old timers and—

HENRY HOUGH: Yes, I've seen that, and we used some of those things. Every once in a while they turned up something that was useful in the guidebooks and such, although generally it was a waste of time.

RICHARD DOUD: Interesting, but not very important.

HENRY HOUGH: Not very productive.

RICHARD DOUD: I see. I know that I sort of got sidetracked on them the other day, leafing through some of them and there's some pretty tall tales involved.

HENRY HOUGH: Yes, and there's some good material there but it'd be—

RICHARD DOUD: Of course everything [inaudible]—

HENRY HOUGH: —for some future researcher to get in there and develop his own yard sticks for trying to figure out how to judge the good from the bad. We were working on things like tall tales at one time, and you find a raft of that material there. A lot of sort of folklore that was evident in various parts of this state, as in other states. That wasn't ever utilized very well. Strangely too, because this folk music thing was just coming up at that time and since then has become very popular. But I think someday people will go back into those archives and dig out a lot of good folklore that was pinned down at that time. That still has the makings of some wonderful books.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, this is sort of outside your area of responsibility, but since there is, at the moment, a dearth of information, can you tell me anything about what happened here in Federal Music or Federal Theatre? Were you familiar with what was going on in those other areas?

HENRY HOUGH: Yes, the Federal Theatre did some work that was considered probably their best job in this part of the country. They had some good leaders, good directors, and players, in Denver particularly. I don't know whether they amounted to much in the other larger towns or not. Maybe Denver was the only place that they had a Federal Theatre unit. But they put on several excellent plays and were well received and provided very useful training for a lot of young people especially that went on into other work. That was a good one.

The—certainly, the work done by the artists under Don Bear, and Boardman Robinson back in the days when Frank Mechau, and the Magafan twins, and Ed Chavez, and the others were painting murals in post offices. Those were fine things and launched the careers of a number of artists that really rank now. Some of them—most of them—several of them have died since, like Frank Mechau. But terrific career was really launched through that art program. Don Bear's dead too, so unfortunately you can't get information from him now.

[00:19:53]

The—there was a much weaker phase of the art program that developed later under the WPA Education Program. It never was much good because there were no profitable assignments to be given out and it was just a marking-time proposition. We used to make fun of it by calling it, "painting rose buds on beer bottles." [They laugh.] Crafts rather than art really. And yet I suppose it provided some amusement for some of the people in the towns, and one more way to keep a guy on a payroll, keep him from becoming a complete Bolshevik.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure. What was the general attitude toward, let's say, the white collar WPA Projects in Colorado? I know in Texas and some of the more southern states anything dealing with the federal government was sort of frowned upon.

HENRY HOUGH: Well, it never had much status. Once in a while they would break through and do something worthwhile that anybody would concede was worthwhile. But in general, they operated pretty much in a vacuum with a sponsorship of their whatever group it was and a few meetings with them now and then. But rather inconspicuous. The examples of—or the exceptions, such as the Federal Theatre and some of the work that the painters did, of course were so conspicuous. Everybody admired those terrifically.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HENRY HOUGH: I think the Colorado guidebook done by the Writers' Project was regarded as a very successful book. Certainly, there's been a need for it ever since. I had a man bring me a manuscript the other day for a book just on Denver, but he had made a real study and couldn't find anything of any real value to give people looking for information about the area. He said the only thing that's any good at all is the Colorado guidebook done by WPA 20-some years ago.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

HENRY HOUGH: It isn't available now, it's out of print, and so it just needs to be done all over again. But the unfortunate thing was that so much of their stuff didn't get into print. Finding publishers was difficult at that time. The offset process hadn't gotten very far and it seemed like an enormous undertaking to put into print, and into covers, material. So that very little actually was published in a legitimate sense of the word. Much of this material that was accumulated, if it were being done today, would be published.

RICHARD DOUD: Certainly.

HENRY HOUGH: Because there are inexpensive ways of putting things into print. We have paperbacks, we have all kinds of stuff. But at that time your only choice was mimeographing the stuff, or going to a very extensive book production job. Well, the result is that mimeographing is as far as most of it ever got. And that was just one of the handicaps of that particular era. Nowadays a great deal of it would have emerged in the form of very useful paperbacks which would again, have been in the libraries and available, and good material for future writers to utilize.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, what was your opinion of all this? I sort of feel that you were in favor of the government [inaudible]—

HENRY HOUGH: Yes, I think they did a very useful job. Of course, they took a pretty much untrained, raw group of people, and there wasn't any leverage on them to do much. You had no way of disciplining them. You couldn't fire 'em hardly. There was no place else for them to go. It wasn't a work situation conducive to anything much. They did manage to develop some *esprit de corps* in things like the Theatre projects and the Writers' Project. Those that were in it felt lucky, they felt that they were on useful work. We tried to make them think it was useful. It could be useful if they didn't just fritter their time away. But it wasn't by any

means wasted. It was, maybe 15 percent of it was really successful. [Laughs.]

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah. Well, that's better than nothing. How do you feel about some sort of government assistance to creative people today on a national basis? Do you think that our government should actively support culture and encourage writers, or artists, or musicians?

[00:25:18]

HENRY HOUGH: Well, I don't know. I'm not—it seems to me that today there's such a wealth of opportunity available that almost anybody that has a manuscript for a book, or is any good at painting, or has any other talent, can find expression. Little theaters, for instance, are very abundant now. And the thing that gave an opportunity in WPA days to an actor, now you can join up with any one of a dozen groups. You won't get paid for it, but they sandwich it in so you can hold a job down someplace and do this on the side, which may be as far as your talent justifies.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

HENRY HOUGH: I tried publishing a little arts magazine a few years ago and carried it along for two or three years, and had a lot of fun with it particularly in bedeviling the successful conductors and other leaders [Richard Doud laughs] of our great programs because there's some sort of a sacrosanct feeling. Nobody dares to criticize these imminent people and it seemed like a good idea to provide a little noise and opposition. But I concluded after a while that the newspapers and the other media do such a good job for artists of making their works known, making their displays and exhibits known, that there just wasn't any need for any more publications. Certainly not that kind, because the arts were well served by the press, and the radio, and tv, and things like that.

So, I would not oppose any project for federal subsidy of these things at the present time, but I would suggest it be deferred maybe until another depression or limited to areas where there is a depression now, which we certainly have some. At least for the good flourishing towns like Denver, of which there must be many now, it wouldn't seem to be in order. Matter of fact, people would be so busy you couldn't even recruit anybody to work on it. And yet you go to West Virginia, or you go to some of the towns in New Mexico, or even Southern Colorado, you may find talent languishing for lack of just an opportunity like you speak of. Or that could be developed with a well-conceived, well-directed program with not only federal support but probably public support of other kinds too. I mean state, local, foundations, and whatnot.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure. What do you think about perhaps some sort of government interest in publishing some of the material that your federal writers collected, that is being more or less wasted and disintegrating in some of these public depositories? Do you think that this material merits publication as historic material?

HENRY HOUGH: I don't think so. Not unless there was a great crisis of some kind in employment where you couldn't employ people comfortably otherwise. I do think it's very valuable to have the material there for writers, researchers to dig in to. I think there's a wealth of material for books and other such in these files and they aren't disintegrating. Those are good places, that stuff will last for another 100 years, if they don't throw it out for lack of space which is always a hazard.

RICHARD DOUD: This is a problem.

HENRY HOUGH: But I'll bet you a lot of it hasn't even come out on the shelves yet. I mean they deliberately stashed it away until some friend of theirs, or the guy that runs the museum gets around to doing some writing on that subject. No, I would question whether there's need at this time for the government to get into that. But I'm not an expert in that field, I don't know.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I certainly thank you for your comments. It's been a pleasure—

HENRY HOUGH: It's been very interesting to think about these things again.

RICHARD DOUD: I dare say it's been some time since you've given it much serious thought.

HENRY HOUGH: It has been a long time. And yet because I've been working in related fields all this time it hasn't been too far away from me.

[00:30:03]

RICHARD DOUD: You probably refer occasionally back to something—

[Cross talk.]

HENRY HOUGH: Still run into these people all over.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative].

HENRY HOUGH: I thought at the time we should organize an association and call it the WPA alumni. [Richard Doud laughs.] I thought that it wouldn't be long before we had a president, and senators, and congress men.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

HENRY HOUGH: Well, I find this is true. We haven't got a president yet, but it is surprising how many of these people that worked on these projects 20 years ago are well established now and are still trying to do the thing in a modern way that they were doing then. And a lot of them really have a certain amount of public conscious about it.

RICHARD DOUD: I think these projects really gave impetus to a lot of careers that developed [inaudible]—

HENRY HOUGH: I think they did, and I found very few of them that look back on it with anything but pleasure. They regarded it as an opportunity and a time for advancement. The—all the instances that could be sighted are just legion. The man who runs the whole city welfare department today was one of my teachers under WPA running little discussion groups for farm workers and such back at that time. He is doing a terrific job now running a department with hundreds of people. He recently was checked up on by the grand jury and so on, and given a completely clean bill of health as very excellent public servant. This is just typical of what's happened to the kind of people that, at that time, were the low man on the totem pole, but now they're becoming pretty prominent people, some of them.

RICHARD DOUD: My experience has been that the people who were actively associated with the WPA realized the value and appreciate what was done, and the knocks come from people who were really ignorant of what WPA did.

[Cross talk.]

HENRY HOUGH: Outsiders never got in, never helped, never had anything to do with it really.

RICHARD DOUD: That's right. They belittled it then, they belittle it now. So, it's another side of the story. Well, thanks again.

HENRY HOUGH: It's been very interesting.

RICHARD DOUD: My pleasure.

HENRY HOUGH: Yep.

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