



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Mary Perry
and Clair Laning, 1964 Apr. 2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Perry and Clair Laning on April 2, 1964. The interview took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and was conducted by Sylvia Loomis 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 retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript has been added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. 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

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Miss Mary Perry at her home in Santa Fe on April 2, 1964. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe Office of the Archives of American Art. And the subject to be discussed is Miss Perry's activity as director of Women's Work for the WPA in New Mexico during the 1930s. Would you tell us, Miss Perry, just what this project was and how it related to the WPA Art Program?

MARY PERRY: The WPA was—took over, actually, I believe, the work that had been done under PWA. And FERA, too, as a matter of fact, became the agency in the state. And I had been working here for a year in social work capacity under Margaret Reeves before she was fired. And then, when Mr. Rowland came in as a director of the WPA, I was appointed the Women's Work director.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was that Mr. Rowland?

MARY PERRY: Lea Rowland.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY PERRY: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I don't know about him, yet.

MARY PERRY: Well—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's a new one on me.

MARY PERRY: —he's quite an important gentleman at this point. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: [Laughs.] Came from Artesia.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. And—

MARY PERRY: And it's—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —was he the state director?

MARY PERRY: He's the state director.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Of WPA?

MARY PERRY: Of WPA—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —for New Mexico. He'd been the city engineer for Roswell.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: And I—I'm afraid he's dead, but he was quite a guy. But he knew nothing about the arts. And so, I remember very early in this thing when the material began to come in about the arts he said—just turned it over to me and said, I don't know anything about this. And so, just let him—You do what you think's best about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And that's how we got started on it. Of course actually there had been this group of artists working for some time under PWA and FERA.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: So—but under the new program there became much more administrative responsibility.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: To that time it had just been kind of loose.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You said there were four professional projects in the —

MARY PERRY: Yes, the four professional projects were the Art Project, the Music Project, theater, and writing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And with the help of—there was a field staff, of course, from the federal government that used to come in and work with us. But I actually made the appointments on the basis of recommendation from the local people here. And Mr. Vernon Hunter was appointed head of the Art Project. And Mrs. Helen Ryan of Albuquerque was head of the Music Project. And somebody ought to do a book on that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Fascinating thing, I think, really, in some ways, because it was so new to New Mexico. Ina Cassidy started out to be in the Writers' Project. And for the love of me I skipped the name on whoever did the theater thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY PERRY: I know the field man at that time was Mr. Baker [ph] from Pasadena Little Theater. And maybe Clair can [inaudible]—it's gone [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well, can't be expected to remember all those names. [Mary Perry laughs.] This is a long period.

MARY PERRY: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What year was this, do you remember?

MARY PERRY: Well, I—it was the first year of WPA. And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Probably was 1935.

MARY PERRY: I think it was 1935 and beginning of '36 that I was—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —head of the WPA there—Women's Work division.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what exactly was your activity or your job in this?

MARY PERRY: You see, there hadn't been any program for women as such in the states. There had been only engineering projects, and road projects, and that kind of thing. And this was the first time women had any recognition. New Mexico had some terrific, very simple problems.

For instance, they couldn't preserve any food in this area without drying it because the altitude is so high that just cooking didn't kill the bacteria and so forth. We were able, under this program, to start a lot of community kitchens for the preserving of food. We had victory gardens, everybody did—or community gardens I suppose you'd call them. And they were raising loads of produce and beautiful stuff and it couldn't be—they used the—what they could locally. But the business of preserving it became very important. And we established actual canneries in all these little communities.

[00:05:15]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And under what auspices was this?

MARY PERRY: This is under the WPA—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It was? I see.

MARY PERRY: —Women's Work direct—director. We'd hire a person in the community, usually your home economics teacher, or somebody who had had some skills in this. And we were able to buy pressure cookers—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —and tin cans with sealers and taught the women how to can. It was really fascinating.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Then the second thing, of course, that needed doing was clothing. And there had been no clothing issued except on emergency relief orders and they were very scanty. We—as I remember it, we were furnished materials from the federal WPA. And I remember, in another job of mine, the long time that material lasted after this was over. But we set up sewing rooms in the communities, and unemployed women or those who were eligible for relief and help came in and learned to sew. Power—some power machinery, some of it was electric sewing machines, and so forth.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: I always felt that these were two very important things in this state because, in the first place, women had not gotten out of the homes in the small communities. And they were so lonely, and so tied in, and this gave them a chance as nothing had before to get together. And, of course, we could do little educating, trying to get them some better idea of what the world was about. We did lots of funny things. I remember one of our projects—and, you know, we had to write these up as projects—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —and get okayed and so forth. Then, we were able to pay them regular wages. And then we had storehouses provided with—for the food and the clothing that could be issued to these people.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, was this going on simultaneously with the Art Project?

MARY PERRY: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: This was the basic thing that the Women's Work program did. I just had kind of the other thing to add it [laughs] on. Just because Mr. Rowland didn't know anyone else to take it on. And for quite a long time I was also head of NYA [National Youth Administration].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

MARY PERRY: I got that started.

Although that was a bit later—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —as I remember it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, now as you—then you turned over the responsibility to these four directors—

MARY PERRY: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —of the art projects. And—

MARY PERRY: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —the art, and music, and theater, and writing.

MARY PERRY: [Inaudible.] And the writing project. And they managed their Projects. When their district field men came in they usually called on me, and we went out and saw the Projects and worked with them on it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: We were—we were very closely knit because we were—this was a very small state. And you could know people and you could get close to them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, now was the structure such that the WPA itself came under this Women's Work division? I mean, as long as there was—

MARY PERRY: No—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —so many men in the—

MARY PERRY: The—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —WPA.

MARY PERRY: —Women's Work division was a division like the engineering division or the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: —civil works or some of the other things. We were—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, this was—

MARY PERRY: We had equal status with—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —the men project [laughs]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, yes.

MARY PERRY: —if you want to call it that way.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And, of course, in New Mexico there was a tremendous amount of road building and public building and—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah.

MARY PERRY: —that kind of thing that carried on. But we had—and we had the help. I remember the help of the engineers in setting up these cooking rooms, and—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —helping us get the supplies that we needed [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But your work, then, with the WPA projects was sort of unofficial. Is that right? I mean if it—

MARY PERRY: No—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: If it wasn't directly under the Woman's Work division, and it was—and Mr. Rowland asked you to take over this aspect of the WPA work—

MARY PERRY: Well, what—this would be true in most of the states, I believe. The four professional projects were under separate directors who would have had equal—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —status with a Woman's Work director.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah.

MARY PERRY: But here, this was a part of the Woman's Work division's—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: —assignment.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I—that was the connection that I wasn't—

MARY PERRY: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —quite sure about. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, how did you get involved in it?

MARY PERRY: Well, I never did really know. This was a chan—a time when WPA came in was the time very radical change in the whole set up. Margaret Reeves had been fired and we had to have several directors—one of whom was Clinton Anderson [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: He's been a senator for many years.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:13]

MARY PERRY: And I had been employed in—as a social worker in, charge of districts.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: By whom?

MARY PERRY: By—under Margaret Reeves' program, which was the public health and welfare.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, of the state?

MARY PERRY: Of the state.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: And then, when the federal began to send in money—when federal government sent in money at first she was responsible for the programs.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: And I just was one of the women that had been here and that knew the state very well because, by this time, I had been assigned in pretty nearly every district.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Wow.

MARY PERRY: Except up around the north.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY PERRY: And I didn't know the north at all. Had headquarters here, but I wasn't here very much.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And I was asked to head it up. I don't know—I never knew that I had any special qualification maybe? Although you see I'd had a lot of very varied experience before I came to New Mexico. Just guess I was the one they picked. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Did you—had you had any art experience before this?

MARY PERRY: No, not a bit.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I see. So that when Vernon Hunter took over the direction of the WPA Art Program, then were you involved with him anymore?

MARY PERRY: Oh, yes. You see, Vernon had been working on a special project. And this is how I got interested in it. He had been working with a vocational—on a vocational project down in Puerto de Luna.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Which was considered the stinkiest hole in the whole state. And it must have been under the FERA, and then been taken over by WPA. But he had done a simply amazing job down there. Virginia probably told you about—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MARY PERRY: —that. That's where they went when they got—that's where they spent their honeymoon. And there were people who were interested in Vernon. When—I didn't have, as I remember it, a—an advisory committee. But there were always people you called on for advice and help. And I'm sure that some of the artists' groups who recommended Vernon to me—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —because I wouldn't have known enough. And, of course, I had to get this cleared through Mr. Rowland and then through field staff, and so on. I remember particularly Mrs. Ryan's appointment on this score because I had had her recommended to me by a certain group of people, and I had met her, and realized that she was truly a musician, and a great organizer. But there was some opposition to her appointment because politics came into this [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY PERRY: And I believe she was a Republican and this was, of course, a Democratic regime. I remember this very distinctly because the district director of the Music Project came out of Los Angeles. He was a fascinating gentlemen named David Ruell [ph] Usher who had been a composer and a conductor. And he came out to help with the appointment, as all of—the head of—the district head of each of these divisions would come in and confer with him. And he told me that there had been opposition to Mrs. Ryan and that he didn't know if he could get her appointed or not. But she came up at this point and completely persuaded him—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —because she was a musician, you see, and really was. Other person who's been recommended was somebody who had maybe like—as I remember it, a school musical person. But not a real musician.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Mrs. Ryan was. So, that we had a recommendations and we considered them and Mr. Rowland would make decisions in relation to who he wanted, or who he thought was best. Then, that went—got cleared through the regional—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —or district person.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then I suppose it was eventually cleared in Washington?

MARY PERRY: I imagine it was eventually cleared in Washington.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: And I'm sure it was 'cause nothing I think [laughs] [inaudible]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MARY PERRY: that didn't get cleared in Washington—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All the—end up there—

MARY PERRY: Yeah [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —sooner or later.

MARY PERRY: That's right [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, how long were you involved in this?

MARY PERRY: Well, I was involved in it until I got fired, as I told you, in—late in January of, it must have been '36. And I, more and more, as the days went on through this period, had turned over the actual management of the—of the Art Projects to the art—to the director—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MARY PERRY: —locally here. Because, after all it—they were the experts and—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —we were kind of housekeeping for 'em in the Women's Work division. And so, I—the details of the running of it became more and more their function.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

[00:15:27]

MARY PERRY: But in relation to the Art Project in particular—because Vernon was here in Santa Fe and this was, obviously the center I was more familiar, I felt a little closer to it than I did to some of the others.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Why were you fired?

MARY PERRY: Well, [they laugh] it's a good story.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: I always assumed it was because one of the very important political women wanted the job. She was on a project. And thought she ought to have been more important. It was kind of funny because I'd been offered a job just a week or two before as head of the Harwood Foundation in Taos.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And I was very anxious to do it because anybody with a half an eye could see that this—[side conversation] no, I—doctor won't let me smoke anymore—and Dorothy Neiswanger [ph], who was the regional person for the overall Women's Bureau Group, or Women's division of the WPA Group, came in, and I explained it to her and told her what I wanted to do. And she told me that she didn't—she felt I shouldn't leave. In fact, she [laughs]—well, we had an appointment with Mr. Rowland. And he just said, Can't. No two ways about it, Mary's got to stay. Then, two weeks later, he called me in and said they could dispense with my services. That was a real blow—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah.

MARY PERRY: —'cause I didn't understand. I understand now and this is something you can ask Clair about it if you want to because he knew much more about it from Washington. I assume, from what he said, that I was considered more or less of a radical by Mrs. [Ellen]

Woodward, who was the head woman in WPA for Women's Work division.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY PERRY: And I don't know why, because I didn't think I was doing anything [inaudible] but she was a southern woman and needed all the amenities of life. And I'm a good westerner and [inaudible] people stand on their own two feet.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Do what they wanted to do.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, you weren't radical in a political sense [inaudible]—

MARY PERRY: Not in a political sense at all, I don't think. As I say, I always have said—and half-heartedly—because I wasn't a good local Democrat. But—and the other woman, whom I knew wanted it—the job, and who had on occasion made some remarks so that I knew she was aware of this—was very important Democratic person.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did she—

MARY PERRY: Very important connections.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did she get the job?

MARY PERRY: No—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY PERRY: —she didn't get the job, which, you see, kind of destroyed my feeling about this.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah.

MARY PERRY: My theory. Who got the job after I left was Mr. Rowland's secretary. And—but she only lasted a very little time. And then, Miss Eckles—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was it Bell [ph] [Isabel] Eckles?

MARY PERRY: Bell [ph] Eckles.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

MARY PERRY: Who had been here, and been in the schools.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: But I didn't know anything about it, actually[laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.] I see. [Mary Perry laughs.] And then, what did you do after that?

MARY PERRY: Well, Miss Dorothy Neiswanger [ph] made—was terribly upset about this. And she made it possible for me to go to California as head of the camps for unemployed girls there. See, this was one of the things we did with NYA was to have this camp for unemployed girls in this state down in the Ruidoso country. And it had proved to be one of the outstanding camp projects. So I went to California, and did the groundwork. They hadn't had any camps for unemployed girls there, and we did that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, now during the time that you were here in New Mexico and working with Vernon Hunter, do you remember about how many artists were employed?

MARY PERRY: No, I'm sorry I can't give you a real number because, you see, they were set up in a variety of projects. They'd be localized projects. There was a project in Taos, and one here, and one in Albuquerque. And probably in other areas that I'm not too familiar with.

[00:20:12]

But I think the Santa Fe Project had about 40 artists in it, at the time I remember it best.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And now, I wonder if you'd tell us something about the art program of the NYA.

MARY PERRY: Well, the NYA and—worked very closely with the—with all of the projects as far as that matter went. And when we had youngsters come in who had special talents, we would see that they got their chance on things they were particularly interested in. I didn't handle the NYA for very long. Tom Popejoy, who is now president of New Mexico University, was appointed soon after we'd gotten it pretty well going.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And he really was the person, although as long as I was here I carried the camp program because that was a girls program.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And if you know New Mexico, you know the sexes—are separated. [They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, certainly.

MARY PERRY: [Laughs.] [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MARY PERRY: —wonderful ways [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, every so often I come across some reference to some old card, furniture, or a tin work, or something of that sort that was done by the NYA, and also by the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps].

MARY PERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you have anything to do with that?

MARY PERRY: I didn't have anything to do with CCC. We had—we didn't, in the—in the girl's camp was we used to call it the "She She She" camp [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY PERRY: [They laugh.] To separate it from the boys.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: We did a lot of art things in tin work and so forth in that—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —camp. And Vernon kind of helped us and got materials, and so forth. But as I remember it wasn't exactly a part of the Art Project itself.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, it wasn't. But—

MARY PERRY: It was a part of the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —apparently they dipped into it every—

MARY PERRY: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —once in a while.

MARY PERRY: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And it would have these special projects on which the young people would work.

MARY PERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I wasn't aware of the girls camp, but only the boys.

MARY PERRY: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But—

MARY PERRY: Oh, the girls camp did a lot of things like this. I will never forget the first time I went down there after it had been established, really. We had a very interesting director who was a very unusual person to find in New Mexico, Mrs. Lucy Shaw who's still living down in Albuquerque. And Lucy and her husband, Kay [ph] [Arthur Knight Shaw], who was an auditor—and they were health seekers. As you know many of the people you found in New Mexico were. And they maintained a camp. Well, I went down. We had a wonderful time setting it up. Oh, such fun. And all kinds of crazy leftover things from transient camps and the army. Fort Baird had given up an officer's quarters at one point. And we got all the furniture.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: We went racing down to Silver City to get it, and stuff like that. And I went down to the camp and found the girls just madder than hops. And there was great indignation going on. And so, I said—asked Mrs. Shaw what was going on. And she said, Well, the local priest—who was a poor, ignorant guy and has about 17 parishes that he wanders around and has mass in—felt that he couldn't—he'd be glad to come up and give mass for the girls here, which is one of the things that we'd arranged for, but he'd want them to give him 50¢ a week. And this was all the spending money they had. They were allowed 50¢ a week. And they were just madder than hops.

So I told them that I was sorry and I'm sure the man hadn't understood. But, in the meantime, we would allow them to fix a shrine anywhere they wanted it on the grounds, in the buildings, or outside. And that this would be very special for them, and pray at. And, Oh, they said, Miss Perry, we don't need that. You come and see us. So, I went down to the barracks that night and they were sleeping. And there was old transient barracks, long, long halls that were beds. And every single one of those little kids had made herself a shrine out of tin in the tin working class.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And it was just a sweet thing. I had—this is off the subject, but I think you'll be interested in the end story on this. And I went up and down the long hall and talked to the kids. And pretty soon the bell rang and they—one of the girls said, Miss Perry, you stay. You stay. We'll show you.

[00:25:07]

So, the lights went out and I stayed, and [inaudible] come sit over here. They said, We'll show you what we do. We don't need that priest. And Angelina [ph] says the mass. So they all lay on their little beds with their rosaries in their hands. And Angelina [ph], who was about an inch high, walked up and down the corridor in this place and said the mass and the kids repeated it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Lovely.

MARY PERRY: It was one of the real thrilling moments.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I should say.

MARY PERRY: But—oh, [inaudible] of course we got to fix the priest up, but—to come up and not have kids have to pay for it. But—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —these were the kinds of things—these kids—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah.

MARY PERRY: —had never been a home—away from home.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Little New Mexican girls in this period were very protected.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. About how old were they?

MARY PERRY: They were 16 to 25, by the national standard. And we had about 200 of them in this camp.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And then, we did [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where did they get their instructors for these classes?

MARY PERRY: We got them—we had projects. We got them through the various—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —projects of people who were on relief. And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. It didn't—you didn't draw on the WPA Art Project for instructors?

MARY PERRY: As I remember it, we didn't, although we may very well have. But, you see, that was in the very isolated area.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where was it?

MARY PERRY: It was down in the Ruidoso country.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Out at Carrizozo and out of Lincoln. And Roswell would have been your nearest center.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And, at this point, all the artists that had [laughs] been in Roswell had come to Santa Fe.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: So, they could be nearer together. But we had instructors and we must have had an excellent woman with tin work because I remember we all saved all the tin cans. And she just used the materials at hand.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And taught those kids [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, aside from the things that you've mentioned, what do you think was accomplished by the Federal Art Projects?

MARY PERRY: Well, of course, I had been terribly interested in what was accomplished because I think the contribution to New Mexico was something that would never have happened any other way. The contribution to public buildings in the way of paintings and sculpturing and—was something that—New Mexico just had never had. I'm thinking about, oh, some post offices that were built during this period with WPA money. And had some beautiful things. Fort Stanton was one of them. I think Vernon has some stuff in there. And you'll find it all through the capitol buildings and in a great many of the schools now. I've gotten so I can almost spot 'em because—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY PERRY: —there's was a characteristic something or other about them. Then, things like the *santos* that were falling into decay all over the state. Most of them native wood and the wood-carvers copied them. And this is something that would—and is fast. The old ones are just almost—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, almost gone now.

MARY PERRY: They're just only antiques in museums. But you'll find the churches still have *santos*. And they're the ones that were copied.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

MARY PERRY: Made by the people.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was this done on any other project except the Art Project, the WPA Art Project? I mean, like the NYA boys doing that?

MARY PERRY: I don't think so.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They didn't?

MARY PERRY: I think this was all Art Project. And that was one of the things I said to you when we talked briefly. One of the things I think Vernon was particularly skilled at was the drawing into the Art Project people who had some skills, but maybe weren't recognized as outstanding artists. And my Barela [ph], which I'm very fond of is—was one of his very first ones, you see?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And the Irene Emery ones, at this point, when she was not a recognized artist in the sense that she had become later.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, you say that it gave a start—

[Cross talk.]

MARY PERRY: I think it gave a start—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —to a good many artists.

MARY PERRY: —and some recognition to artistic effort—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —by a lot of people who probably—and, I mean, I remember some of the artists were really quite perturbed about this because some of the people who were working in the Art Project weren't what they considered artists. And probably would have had any recognition except that—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —they had—want—they wanted to do things.

[00:30:08]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah.

MARY PERRY: And Vernon set them up so they could. That meant they got materials, you see?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And as well as wages, when they turned things in. Well, I've always felt this was a very important thing. It—now, the *Lady* [Statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Miss Perry's home. -Ed] is done by a man Sanchez [ph], I think. It's on the back bottom over there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And, at this point, he was just a young man, hadn't done any particular amount of wood carving. And yet, he went on to become one of the most outstanding wood-carvers in New Mexico. I believe he's dead now, he came from Raton.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He did original work too, besides—

MARY PERRY: He did original work—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —the copying.

MARY PERRY: —besides copying.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes. And he—wasn't he the crippled boy?

MARY PERRY: Yes, I think he was the crippled boy. And then there was—then, some of them did some paintings of the *santos*. But—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, there was a portfolio—

[Cross talk.]

MARY PERRY: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —of Spanish Colonial design—

MARY PERRY: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —that came out.

MARY PERRY: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And they did quite a few samples in that, I remember.

MARY PERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: These are very important historical parts of New Mexico. And they were—this prolonged their life, I'm sure.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MARY PERRY: I mean, this was very important.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And the—and do you think that it helped the—to educate the public about—

MARY PERRY: Definitely.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —art?

MARY PERRY: Definitely.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: I'm sure of this.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And I think—I'm thinking about—maybe it was part of the Art Project tin—the tin work. Vernon had a man who made tin—did the tin work for them and made beautiful, beautiful frames. I have one out in the—in my guesthouse. And when I came back to New Mexico, I tried to get some—that needed repairing and I tried to find somebody to do it. And they told me about—that the man who had done the original work was still alive. He was an old, old man, arthritic and senile and everything else. But his family's pride in the fact that he was the outstanding tin—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was Eddie Delgado—

MARY PERRY: —work—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —wasn't it?

MARY PERRY: Yeah, that's Eddie Delgado.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And his daughter's carrying on, did you know that?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I know.

MARY PERRY: Fascinating—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I've seen her work.

MARY PERRY: —people.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Very nice things.

MARY PERRY: The other day, I—when I was working up at the Interior [Interior Accents - an interior design shop in Santa Fe. -Ed.], a man came in and said he was a tin worker and showed me a lantern that he had done. And he ultimately fixed my picture out there. Did the work on it. But he tells me that it's practically a lost art.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I know. There are very few doing it now.

MARY PERRY: Very few doing it now. And we—and, well, the Art Project did some beautiful pieces.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MARY PERRY: Really wonderful. But these are the things I mean. They probably weren't maybe a great contribution to national art, but they were a great contribution to the real down to earth things here in New Mexico that are part of its heritage that would have been lost.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And this, incidentally, is one of the things that disturbed me having come back now, 30 years later. I think we're doing a better job on Indians. We're helping get them amalgamated into the communities and all. But I don't feel that—I think we've lost that push that we had [laughs] during this period with the Spanish-Americans.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think so too. I'm very much concerned about it.

MARY PERRY: I'm very much concerned about it. I—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —it seems to me tragic to have lost it. And we didn't lose it during the time of the—of the Project. This is one of the things that was really exciting about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, it certainly gave it an impetus—

MARY PERRY: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —at the time. And—

MARY PERRY: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —from some of the other interviews I've had, I've learned that it came at a time when it actually helped to preserve it—

MARY PERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —that, otherwise, a great deal of it would have been lost.

MARY PERRY: It would have been lost.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And people would have lost their appreciation for it.

MARY PERRY: Right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But because of this impetus, they took a much greater interest in it. I know the native market was not a WPA project as such, but I know that was another method by which some of the people who were interested in preserving the old Spanish-Colonial arts had taken to help, well, employment and also to revive the arts.

MARY PERRY: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Could you tell us anything more about that native market? Did you have any connection with it?

[00:35:01]

MARY PERRY: Well, it actually was opened, I think, after I left. But I know I—Vernon and others and I talked about it a great deal because, obviously, the thing that we could foresee was the Art Project wasn't going to go on forever. And if the crafts end of this kind of a program was going to be of benefit it needed to be something that people could carry on in their economic life.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And as—I came back after—well, after the Project was over but the native market was still here. Or else it—I can remember the native market very vividly.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: It may have started before I left. But, you see, that gave these workmen and these skilled craftsmen a chance to bring in their things. And they had a very high standard.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And I have a little blanket that I remember I bought for mother in—a while ago at that market. And it's a beautiful little thing [inaudible]. And they had—they did lovely things. And I think—I'm not sure about this, and somebody probably knows more than about New Mexico in the intervening [laughs] 30 years than I, but if—it seems to me that that gave the impetus to this crafts interest that's now in all of the little shops.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: I don't remember those things when I was first here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that right?

MARY PERRY: I'm thinking about—well, the things that Mr. What's-his-name does up in Cordova, the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Lopez?

MARY PERRY: Lopez.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: He's Lopez too, isn't he?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: His beautiful little carving things.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And some of the pottery things that the native people were doing and have done. Now, these are getting in probably where they belong into the tourist shops and the kind of places like that. But, as I remember, there wasn't any of that before.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When were you in New Mexico first? Or in Santa Fe?

MARY PERRY: Well, I must have come in in the spring of '34, as near as I can figure it. And when did—would you say WPA started, in '35?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: '35, yes.

MARY PERRY: Well, then I was here before that in '33.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Because I came in, originally, as a—as a social worker. And I'm not a social worker. See, I'm a backdoor social worker.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And—but they were having a terrific time finding people who knew how to read anything, or almost. We used to say the only people we could hire to come on the staff—and I worked on personnel at that point, this is one of my background things—were either adults and had to get out of town, or they had illness in the family and, for some reason or other, wanted to come to the desert sort of thing, or they were adventurers. And as for getting social workers, they just did—they're just the saddest bunch of people [inaudible]. [Sylvia Loomis laughs.] They were. I had a very good [laughs] friend who was here. And I was working in Milwaukee, hating it 'cause I was working in a department store and it wasn't my kind of a job. And I came out as a supervisor, you see? I had the first six counties, and then they'd shift us around [inaudible]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —to supervise the actual workers in the field. And I suppose I didn't [laughs] need to know so much about case work. [Laughs.] But at least I knew how to make out relief orders—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —and boss the show a little bit.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: It was wonderful. I wouldn't give anything for that year.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And then, I—and then, I—from that I stepped into this WPA thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, you said a little about the partisan politics that were involved as far as your job was concerned. Did you notice much evidence of it elsewhere?

MARY PERRY: Well, there were certain places where—oh, well, after all, New Mexico's—they used to say that babies learn to play politics at their mother's breast. And there wasn't any place where you didn't have a certain amount of it. Who were recommended for relief often —

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —came through a senator or a whatnot of this kind. Well, one of the first jobs I had in New Mexico, they assigned me to go up to Rio Arriba, Tierra Amarilla, to—because it was reported that the county commissioner up there was taking a rake off on the WPA wages.

[00:40:10]

And they had a federal man out here and he wanted somebody who was young and attractive, because this old boy was supposed to be susceptible and I wasn't known, you see? And I wasn't so young, but I had red hair, and this was something [inaudible]. So, I went up there and met up with the federal man. And he felt that we'd probably have difficulty with this old man admitting it.

And we went down the next morning to Tierra Amarilla to call him, and he was a great big old fat gentleman with a cigar going around his mouth. And we palavered along. And, finally, this man said to him, Well, what do you know about this? Why, he said, "Of course I get a rake off on every paycheck. Why would I have given them a job if I didn't get it? They're all

good friends of mine. They work for the party. Why, and they haven't any way of cashing their checks but through here. So, oh, sure I take it." He'd sign his name on the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Wow [laughs].

MARY PERRY: —thing just like that. And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What happened to him?

MARY PERRY: Well, I never did know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY PERRY: I imagine he just went [laughs] on being the county—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: —commissioner.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: The fact of the matter is I'm sure he did because he may have had to pay a fine. Maybe it's still pending in the courts. You know how those things dragged out. Later on, I went up to get him to sign a [laughs]—we had—we had a privy project. And they didn't have privies, you know, in the county schools or anyplace in the state. And I don't know why I was along, but anyway I was. And we got him to sign it. And he laboriously signed his name and his cigar going back and forth. And then, he leaned back and put's his thumb in his overcoat, "Well, gentlemen, I'm sure you can build them. But I'll be damned if you can get the kids to use them."

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. [They laugh.] Well, that really is quite a picture of New Mexico. [They laugh.]

[Cross talk.]

MARY PERRY: That's really a—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But—

MARY PERRY: —picture of New Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that wasn't too very long ago either, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Gee. Well, it's come miles since then but—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: —there's still so much to do.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well—

MARY PERRY: But it was fun, you know? This was really plain fun for me.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Mary Perry laughs.] Well, are there any other comments that—particularly on the art phase of this, that you'd like to make?

MARY PERRY: I don't—can't think of any at the moment. I must say that I, personally, was terribly proud to have been even a little bit part of it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And I think Vernon Hunter did simply miraculous job out of—in pulling—This thing had been going, but it hadn't had any focus.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: And some of the real good prominent artists in New Mexico had been turning out just dribble. Just getting by with anything and turning it in, and getting credit for it, and

getting their \$40 a month. And Vernon made 'em produce. And got some criticism going, and he got some feeling of pride in this thing, not just that they were beating the public, so to speak, with some of the—of the well-known artists around here, and this was true.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you say that they got \$40 a month?

MARY PERRY: Well, that was WPA wages. I think they—the Art Project may have gotten \$45, I can't remember. WPA wages were \$40 a month. And you would have thought we were ruining—well, this brings me to another story. You may not want me to tell these stories. But we're—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, they're very interesting.

MARY PERRY: —having fun.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: [Laughs] But—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, I'm enjoying them very much.

MARY PERRY: The time I met Clair was in Topeka, Kansas. And that was the beginning of the WPA. And the chief engineers, and the Women's Work director, and the directors were there. And a woman out from the headquarters—WPA headquarters for Women's Work, field work—was there. And all of the men in the group were cattlemen. And we'd had an awfully good time. They were darling people. The chief engineer from Wyoming and all. And Colorado and Nevada and all these wonderful people. So about the third day, and we'd gotten to know each other pretty well, they were fussing about the \$40 dollars a month that these people were getting. It's going to ruin this wage scale in these states for what they really were talking about were common laborers.

[00:45:06]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Well, at this point I could stand it no longer. So, I got up and made a passionate speech for sheepherders. And I said that—which was true—that because of the drought we didn't have a sheep—a lambing season in three years. Really, the trouble with New Mexico was not unemployment, it was the drought and the dust. And that the wages had gotten as low as \$12 or \$13 a month, which was true. Well, I felt that it was about time we did something about a wage scale, and that this was the way to do it. And I didn't think wages could ever go back to as low as they did.

Well, after the meeting, all this bunch of engineers who were all commenting stood around me said, "You're off our list. Anybody that stand up and talk for sheepherders—[beat it (ph)]. Well, just about this time this fussy little old lady from Washington—she wasn't so old but she was fussy—came waddling her way in said, "Miss Perry, I'm so much interested in what you had to say about those sheepherders, and the fact they hadn't had a lambing season in three years. Didn't they have the proper paraphernalia," she said [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh [laughs].

MARY PERRY: Well, a bunch of the men all gathered around to get—took their hats off and bowed very deep and said [laughs], "Okay, you can belong."

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh [laughs].

MARY PERRY: Cowmen's reaction to—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY PERRY: —the sheepherder [laughs] story.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

MARY PERRY: But it was a really, you know, very—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well—

MARY PERRY: —exciting period to have been working here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: That's off the subject. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it was very interesting. [Mary Perry laughs.] Because it does help to give a picture.

MARY PERRY: Well, it does.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The context, I mean, in which—

MARY PERRY: It really does. They're—the—you can't imagine the kinds of—I think I remember we had a—and this one's, again, not a very nice story. But we had a woman working as a—the assistant up in one of the cow counties. And she had been a public health nurse up in this county. And she was a real westerner. She knew her stuff. And I was—when I getting—I was kind of a—we used to say, half bird and half flea, could you run in and cheer people up and then get out and—before you had to do anything very much. Anyway, she talked about it and how terrible it was. And these awful easterners, they were bringing out to work in these counties and how the poor girl ever stood it, I'll never know. She said, "Why, we've got a public health nurse in this county right now that doesn't know enough to use a shovel for a bed pan." [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, my. [They laugh.]

MARY PERRY: And this—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see what you mean.

MARY PERRY: She wasn't what you call [laughs] down to earth.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I should say so.

MARY PERRY: But they didn't have—they didn't have the slightest kind of [idea of what to do -Ed.]. One of the projects we had in WPA that I've always been terribly proud of was a project of making scrapbooks for teachers. They didn't—they were teaching English out of Sears Roebuck catalogs. And most of them were nuns, of course, in the little outlying communities, particularly in this area. And we got women's groups to—[side conversation] hello there, doll baby. Now, be good, you're on a—you're going to be on the air. The—they didn't have—they didn't have the least concept when we got the women around town to give us their magazines and cut them out and pasted them onto cloth, as a matter of fact. And I—you know I think that was an NYA project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I was just wondering which—

MARY PERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —on that that was, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: Be good.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, as long as Mr. Laning hasn't returned—

MARY PERRY: He's returned.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, he has?

MARY PERRY: Because he had her with him.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see. Well, maybe we could get a few comments from him. We still have a little tape left.

MARY PERRY: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But I'm extremely grateful to you for—

[Cross talk.]

MARY PERRY: Well, I'm afraid I'm not very logical or anything. But it—

[Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's given a picture.

[Cross talk.]

MARY PERRY: [Inaudible.]

A broad picture of—

MARY PERRY: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —the situation in New Mexico that we haven't had before. We've had—well, they've emphasizing more the art aspect of it.

MARY PERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But to see it in this—

MARY PERRY: Yeah—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —broader concept is very—

MARY PERRY: —it ties on sort of this—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —helpful.

MARY PERRY: —with the—this was such a backward community.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY PERRY: With all the health things and the—just the simple—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, there—

MARY PERRY: —sanitation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, they were human problems that certainly—

MARY PERRY: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —which didn't exist in the cities of the East, or even in the rural communities. But I'll stop the tape now, and maybe we can—

MARY PERRY: Yeah—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —get him to come in.

MARY PERRY: —maybe he'll come in.

MARY PERRY: Did—

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:50:05]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: A friend and neighbor of Miss Perry's, Mr. Clair Laning, is also present and has agreed to tell us something about his work as a WPA administrator at the national level.

CLAIR LANING: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: As I am a little vague about this, Mr. Laning, would you explain what your job was and give us a rundown on the chronology of the various federal projects?

CLAIR LANING: Well, first of all, you ought to get the administrative picture. Roosevelt was

elected in '32 and inaugurated on March 4, 1933. And Hopkins, as far as I remember, came to Washington in May, or within the first 100 days of the Roosevelt administration. And Hopkins' arrival on the scene put the relief picture rather prominently in the administrative framework. And in November, I believe, CWA, the Civil Works Administration, was started. And it continued through until—it was disbanded, finally, in March of '34.

And in November, it was for in—it was superimposed, I believe, on the framework of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which was grants and aid to the state. CWA was a strictly federal operation. And it was inaugurated to get money circulating. And Hopkins always—or for some time, had insisted that he could have stopped the Depression if Roosevelt hadn't got cold feet and curtailed CWA in March. And then after CWA was curtailed or ended, FERA came back in the picture and continued until the Works Progress Administration was started July 1, 1935. And what else do you want me to say?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, then you said that there—that the name of that was changed later on.

CLAIR LANING: Later the Works Progress Administration was changed to Works Projects—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CLAIR LANING: —Administration. But I don't—I don't know exactly the date. It was after Colonel Harrington, I think, became administrator. Then Harry Hopkins became Secretary of Commerce.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CLAIR LANING: And I'm not sure how long—I don't remember how long Colonel Harrington was administrator. At one time, Howard Hunter was the administrator and he—that may have happened after [Francis] Pink Harrington died.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CLAIR LANING: Or in the interval before Pink Harrington became administrator. I'm not sure. I'd have to look it up. But I think it was probably after Harrington's death.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, now what was your role in all of this?

CLAIR LANING: I went to Washington in February of 1934 just as CWA was ending. And I was assistant director in the Professional Project section, which was a section set up to organize jobs for white collar and professional workers on relief.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was that nationwide?

CLAIR LANING: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CLAIR LANING: And then, as part of our planning on this we had to organize plans for Arts projects within the Professional Project structure.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CLAIR LANING: Later, all the professional projects, white collar projects, and Art Projects, came under Mrs. Woodward who headed up the Women's Division of the Works Progress Administration. And in this planning stage for WPA, we were concerned about getting projects for professional people. And this included writers, artists, musicians, theater people.

[00:55:05]

And then, there was sort of a fifth one, which was a catchall, it was called Recreation [Community Organization for Leisure]. Ed Lindeman headed that. And then, there was another one, which was also sort of a catchall, under Luther Evans, called Historical Records project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CLAIR LANING: But, basically, there were four Arts Projects. I think the Historical Records

operated in all states, which was mainly copying old records that were lying around in courthouses and various depositories and getting them in shape for preservation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I wonder if you could straighten out which of the employees, in these various projects, had to be on relief and those who did not in order to get jobs.

CLAIR LANING: I'd have to look up the material on that. But they were set up, of course, for relief people. But there was a rather high exemption for administrative personnel because you couldn't operate without it. In parenthesis, I suppose one should inject at this point that PWAP started much earlier than the other Arts Projects, with CWA money, or federal money. And that was administrated—administered by Ned Bruce under the Treasury Department.

So, when WPA came in, the Art Project was in much better shape than any of the others, which were still in the tentative or planning stage.

To go on with my job, which you asked me about earlier and I never answered, after WPA came in, I was again assistant director of the Motion Picture Division, which was keeping a historical record of the whole, sort of, WPA activities. And because I worked a good deal on the art—or the Professional Projects, as I recall, I later became assistant director of the Federal Writers' Project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What happened to those documentary films?

CLAIR LANING: They were released in theaters throughout the country. I suppose many of them are in the archives now. There were dozens of them.

MARY PERRY: You came to New Mexico and did one here, didn't you?

CLAIR LANING: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, what was your relation to the work that Miss Perry did here?

CLAIR LANING: Well that was back in the—in the FERA days. And, at that time, she was doing planning for the coming WPA program. And because of the reservoir of talent in New Mexico, and her interest in getting established at a fairly high administrative level, her program probably had more shape and form than most state programs outside the major cities. And I came here, as I recall, to help with some of the administrative matters in relation to the Art Project because, actually, there was no Music or Theater or Writers' project here yet.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CLAIR LANING: Well, we were very interested in getting one started. Does that cover it?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, so that was the—your relation, then, to the Art Project here was similar then to the work that you did throughout the country?

CLAIR LANING: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And you went to other states. Did you go—

CLAIR LANING: To all of them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You went to all of them.

CLAIR LANING: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: To help get the Art Project set up, specifically, or the Professional Project—

CLAIR LANING: Professional Project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

[01:00:02]

CLAIR LANING: The white-collar projects. There was a good deal of resistance to white collar projects, always, because relief still related pretty much to the Elizabethan poor laws, and

even people at the administrative level, many of them saw relief, or work relief, in terms—in the simplest terms. And it could be ditch-digging, you know, manual work, whatever.

I think it was always a great stumbling block for an administrator in the state to try and get projects initiated that would actually use the skills of people who were on the relief rolls. And Miss Perry was trying to get a good representative group of projects going that would use the skills of the people available. And I don't recall particularly any projects—the Art Project, I suppose, the most outstanding in one's memory, because there were more artists here. But there were many other white-collar projects that you were trying to get initiated here without too much help from your local administration.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Would you say that Ned Bruce's attitudes and his ideas and ideals had a good deal to do with setting up these Projects the way they were set up?

CLAIR LANING: Oh, yes, yes. He saw it in terms of art, and of using of people skills and was much less interested, actually, in the means task than he was in the qualifications of the artist.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was the impression I had from—

CLAIR LANING: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —some of the correspondence that I've read.

CLAIR LANING: Oh, I think his Project was very good. After WPA took over the PWAP, there was a good deal of worry that a lot of the better-known artists wouldn't be able to continue. And the challenge was, of course, to carry forward with lesser-known people. And art, after all, is rather relative. What makes a reputation?

SYLVIA GLIDDEN LOOMIS: Yes, that's true. Well, I know also from my research so far that, I've discovered there are a good many of these young artists that really got their start on WPA and have since been doing real well.

Well, we're just about at the end of the tape, and this does at least give me a clearer picture of all those various government organizations that I never had straight in my mind before. So, I'm very grateful to you, and we may come back and ask you some more things.

CLAIR LANING: Well, we can fill in the personal things, always much more interesting. And I'm—my memory, I don't trust my memory too much, but you do have to get in your mind the administrative framework, in a sense, because after all, it's what sort of kept the thing going and did make it a national thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that was that framework that I've always been very vague about, so I'm extremely grateful to you for this information. And as I say, we may be back to get some more from you, because we are also very much interested in the personal anecdotes and the reactions of the people that were involved in that Project.

CLAIR LANING: In Santa Fe, one of the problems, it seemed to me here, during that visit we spoke of in 1935, well, there were such ridiculous measurements for judging an artist's work. How long does it take to do a painting? Would they pay on a time basis? Many administrators— they thought artists—you know, they were always very suspicious that artists would waste time. Others could do work very quickly. The big fight, as I recall here, someone, not necessarily unique to New Mexico, someone decided that they would pay by the inch.

[01:05:01]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

CLAIR LANING: And so, your mural painter was in very good luck. He could do quite a few inches. Whereas the miniature painter, and there were some, suffered a good deal.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I would think so.

CLAIR LANING: And that was part of the basis of this mass meeting that we went to in [Will] Shuster's house, because I remember, because there were several mural painters there who were very smug about the amount of money they were getting under this inch—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Square inch basis?

CLAIR LANING: Square inch basis. Whereas the poor miniature painter, and there were one or two there that were most unhappy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I would think so. How long did that last, by the way?

CLAIR LANING: Well, I don't think it really—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Wasn't very long.

CLAIR LANING: It didn't—I think it was probably the state administrator's notion, and it was overruled. And, of course, the only way to do it was on a weekly stipend.

SYLVIA GLIDDEN LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, thank you again, both you and Miss Perry, for these very interesting interviews.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]