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The New Deal had lasting effects across New Mexico

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On Saturday, the city will recognize many of the works completed with funding from the New Deal, which helped grow Santa
TOP LEFT: John Chavez, 67, helps his son practice for the upcoming senior league at Fort Marcy park, which was a WPA project during the New Deal era. TOP RIGHT: Thomas Walker looks at a display about President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal in the New Mexico Supreme Court library, which was built during the New Deal. Walker's grandfather was a New Deal coordinator. BOTTOM LEFT: While it predated the Great Depression, the National Cemetery received landscaping and other improvements as a New Deal project. BOTTOM RIGHT: The New Deal funded artists all over the country through public art projects, which advanced the careers of many, including Randall Davey who's *At the Polo Field* hangs in the State Capitol.

Jim Weber/The New Mexican

New Mexico really didn't have a choice in 1933.

It was New Deal or no deal.

Peering into the maw of a Great Depression that was bringing the nation to its knees, the state happily capitalized on President Franklin D. Roosevelt's acronym-heavy assistance programs of the 1930s. In doing so, New Mexico avoided catastrophe and was transformed — physically, culturally, educationally.

Whether it was a courthouse in Fort Sumner, a set of murals in downtown Santa Fe, or countless bridges, auditoriums, schools and roads from Mountainair to Mosquero and Stanley to Springer, the New Deal and New Mexico were a seamless match.

But not timeless.

Kathy Flynn, who may know more about the New Deal than anyone in the state, worries people are forgetting its influence. That's why she and the New Mexico chapter of the New Deal Preservation Association are holding programs this weekend to remind people that 90 years ago, FDR's fearless innovation was a nation's salvation.

“Somebody said, ‘Well, I don't want to mess with the 90th anniversary, we'll wait 'til the 100th,’ ” the irrepressible Flynn, 86, said. “And I said, ‘Well, shoot, nobody will be around that knows anything about it in the 100th [anniversary]. They'll all be dead.’ ”

True, most of the people who lived through the Great Depression are gone. But the results of the New Deal are ever-present for their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps built roads, dams, bridges — and in the process gave meaningful work to people choking in the economic cataclysm of the time.

The New Mexico of the 1930s, wrote current State Historian Rob Martinez, suffered from the kind of poverty that still afflicts it today. But the New Deal's impact at the time was undeniable — and in retrospect, foundational. Some of Roosevelt's pushes, like the Civilian Conservation Corps, were famed for their ability to build and grow things — and keep people employed while doing so.

But even lesser-known efforts, including the Rural Electrification Association and Works Progress Administration subsidiaries bearing names like the Federal Arts Project, Federal Music Project, Federal Theater Project, Federal Writers' Project and the Historical Records Survey, were critical for the state, then and now.

“While there were some challenges in implementing these programs because of politics and bureaucracy, these New Deal programs resulted in treasure troves of art, music preservation, and cataloging of local state, community, civil and church archival documents pertaining to New Mexico’s rich history,” Martinez wrote in an email.

For her part, Flynn has devoted much of her time to uncovering and cataloging many New Deal treasures in New Mexico. She wrote a book, *Public Art and Architecture in New Mexico, 1933-1943*, which details much of the timeless work created during the decade.

To truly assess the effect the New Deal had on New Mexico, consider this: According to the preservation association, New Mexico had a population of 433,000 in 1930. By 1935, about half worked in one or more New Deal programs. During that period, which ended about midway through World War II, 15 courthouses, 400 schools and countless other projects — post offices, airports, parks, monuments, water systems and more — were constructed. While it predated the Great Depression, the National Cemetery also received funding for improvements as a New Deal project.

In addition, the Civilian Conservation Corps made its mark on now-beloved staples of the state, including Bandelier National Monument, Elephant Butte Recreation Area, Carlsbad Caverns, White Sands National Monument and Hyde Memorial State Park in Santa Fe.

Martinez suggests the net effect of all these projects wasn’t just in what could be seen and touched and enjoyed. They also provided a critical emotional lift to a remote state that needed one.

“The WPA programs most certainly gave New Mexico an added psychological boost, certainly after the health catastrophe of the Spanish Flu, which hit New Mexico particularly hard in 1918, just six years after statehood,” he wrote. “That event led to the establishment of the New Mexico Department of Health. So, support from New Deal programs must have lifted spirits in New Mexico, rural areas needing support for agriculture and towns and cities for arts programs, music events, theater, and of course, the preservation of historical documents for future generations.”

Spurred by New Mexico’s anything-but-bashful governor at the time, Clyde Tingley and his wife, Carrie, the state pushed hard for New Deal assistance. Flynn says Carrie Tingley’s relationship with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was critical in at least one project at a time — a great ace in the hole in a bygone time when a phone call could trump red tape.

Warming to her subject, Flynn can almost point to something that came out of the New Deal in every New Mexico hamlet.

“Like Fort Sumner,” she said of the small Eastern New Mexico crossroads in DeBaca County. “What would they do without the courthouse, for crying out loud? And the schools and the lake. ... I mean, it’s the same in every little town. You know, the schools were built all over the state, even in the little towns. Every town was greatly, should be greatly, appreciative of the social benefits of the New Deal. But most people don’t know how come those schools got there.”

Born in Texas but raised in Portales, Flynn became a New Dealophile by accident. For a time, she was the deputy secretary of state and while editing versions of the state’s vaunted *Blue Book*, a sort of encyclopedia of all things New Mexico, she began using photos of New Deal public art to break up the gray.

As her fascination with the period grew, she talked her boss, former Secretary of State Stephanie Gonzales, into convening representatives from other states to talk about New Deal treasures that existed around the country. Together, they created the New Deal Preservation Association, with the lady from New Mexico as its head.

“They said, ‘Kathy, you get to be the director,’ and that’s what I’ve been doing ever since,” she said.

Flynn and others will join Mayor Alan Webber on Saturday at the downtown public library, where he is scheduled to proclaim March 4, the 90th anniversary of Roosevelt’s inauguration as president, a “New Deal Day.” Interestingly, the mayor’s current office space, what now is Santa Fe’s City Hall, once was Santa Fe High School, a New Deal project.

To Flynn, it’s all tangible evidence of a nation bonding together to save itself.

“It gave life and hope to the nation,” she said of the New Deal, “but certainly to this state.”

Remembering the New Deal

Remembering the New Deal

Saturday: *Mayor Alan Webber will observe the 90th anniversary of the inauguration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt with a proclamation at 10 a.m. at the downtown public library. Information about the New Deal and its effect on the Santa Fe area will be available.*

Sunday: *A live program on the Civilian Conservation Corps in New Mexico will be held at the Santa Fe Women’s Club at 1616 Old Pecos Trail at 4 p.m. To learn more visit nndpanewmexicochapter.org/richard-melzer-the-ccc-in-new-mexico*

Monday: An online presentation will take place about President Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, credited with helping create Social Security. For information visit nndpanewmexicochapter.org/frances-perkins

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