

WPA Projects in Santa Cruz County

The Works Progress Administration (1935-1943) was a U.S. government agency created during the Great Depression to provide jobs for unemployed workers. It funded projects throughout the country, including Santa Cruz County.

To find out what WPA projects there were in Santa Cruz County, Library staff spoke with the WPA archivist at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. We learned that the WPA recorded information about its projects on cards, and arranged them by year and then geographical location. The National Archives microfilmed the cards and sells the microfilm through the National Archives Trust Fund.

Based on the microfilm, we have compiled a list of some of the projects in this county. It should not be considered complete. For a fuller list of projects and more information, consult the microfilm rolls. To compile a complete and detailed list, other sources would need to be checked--newspapers and perhaps records of other agencies. Seemingly inconsistent information needs to be cleared up. For example, the creation date of Post Office murals and the date of the Civic Auditorium.

The employment projects fall into three groups: public works, social services, and clerical and professional occupations. The listings are transcribed from the project descriptions on the cards. The dates after the listings are also taken from the cards. Dates on this list should not be considered definitive. Many projects spanned more than one year; there were often several similar projects in other years that are not listed here.

Some Projects that Provided Employment in Public Works

Construction/Improvement of Buildings and Bridges:

- Completion of the Valencia Bridge and approaches (1935)
- Make improvements and additions to the Division of Forestry Headquarters in Felton... (1938)
- A non-federal project to develop a City Corporation Yard in the city of Santa Cruz...[We do not know what is meant by a "non-federal" project] (1939)
- A non-federal project to improve buildings and grounds at schools throughout the city of Santa Cruz...(1939)
- Improve roads. ...construction new bridges; constructing sidewalks, paths, boardwalks... [Sponsor is the County of Santa Cruz] [An old, unverified reference file lists Zayante Creek bridge and Glen Canyon bridge as a WPA projects. Could these be the bridges referred to?] (1941)
- Construct school building at Scotts Valley School... (1941)
- Construct facilities and improve grounds at Camp McQuaide... (1941)

- Construct fire station and community hall... [Sponsor: City of Santa Cruz] [This may be the Civic Auditorium, usually dated as 1940, and Fire Station #1 on Center Street] (1942)
- Make alterations and construct new addition to the Santa Cruz County Hospital and improve grounds... (1942)

Other Public Works:

- Improve school athletic equipment (1935)
- Improve recreational facilities in city owned parks in and near the city of Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz County, by landscaping, grading and leveling grounds, installing sprinkler systems (1937)

Roadwork:

- Construct fire trail and motorway on Coast Road (1935)
- Improving various roads not in the Federal Aid System (1935)
- Rocking roads in vicinity of Soquel (1935)
- Surfacing with crushed rock and fuel oil Front Gulch and Larkin Valley Road near Aptos (1935)
- Brushing, clearing, widening, drainage structures, and oiling Zayante Road, beginning at Lompico Creek (1935)
- Improving 7.45 miles of Soquel-San Jose Road (1935)
- Improve Empire Grade Road (1936)
- Improve Lockhart Gulch Road (1936)
- Improve Escalona Drive in the city of Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz County, including clearing, scrubbing widening, grading, oiling, installing culverts (1937)
- Improve Center and Church Streets... (1938)
- Improve streets in the vicinity of and through Natural Bridge Park...(1938)
- Construct public road on San Andreas Road to Camp McQuaide... (1942)

Sewers and Drains:

- Construct sewer main, laying sewer pipe and construct manholes (1935)
- Construct drainage system for flood control (1936)
- Community sanitation-the elimination of insanitary [sic] devices by the construction of sanitary privies in rural areas and suburban territories where sewer systems are impracticable (1937)
- Construct water mains and sanitary sewers in North Branciforte Avenue, Escalona Drive and Center Street... (1937)
- Construct sanitary sewers, with manholes and other necessary appurtenances, in and near Soquel... (1938)
- Construct sanitary sewers, with manholes and other necessary appurtenances, in and near Watsonville... (1938)

Some Projects that Provided Employment in the Social Services

- Employ women to make clothes for the needy (1935)
- "Sewing rooms" (1935)
- Handle surplus relief commodities (1935)
- Transient work camp in lieu of direct relief. Redwood State Park [Exact description. It is unclear if this project was to provide a camp or to build one or both] (1936)
- Provide public health nurses for needy families (1936)
- Provide leadership in public recreation and leisure time activities (1936)
- Provide employment for needy persons in furnishing free home assistance in housework and in the care of children (1936)
- Provide employment for needy professional, educational and clerical person in the maintenance and operation of free nursery schools for the needy (1937)
- Provide training courses for persons desiring household employment (1938)
- Maintain and operate free nursery schools for children from needy families and other low income groups (1938)
- Provide matron service for girls' rest rooms in public schools throughout Santa Cruz County (1938)
- Supervise and operate shops for producing, repairing and renovating garments and articles for free distribution to the needy, public institutions and public agencies, or for use on other WPA projects.[The sponsor is listed as the State of California. Dept. of Social Welfare] (1942)

Projects Providing Clerical and Professional Employment

- Make property maps of mining districts (1935)
- To transcribe, catalog, cross-index, and prepare a new file of records in the public library in Watsonville... (1936)
- Provide employment for needy professional, educational and clerical persons to index and prepare a new file system of records of vocational handicapped persons for the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (1937)
- To provide employment for needy professional, educational, and clerical persons to assist in organizing and operating library services for the Santa Cruz public school libraries...(1937)
- Sort, transcribe, and file police case histories...[city of Santa Cruz] (1938)
- Nationwide: A professional project for the employment of needy unemployed artists; painter, sculptors, graphic artists, craftsmen, art teachers, art lecturers, ...who are qualified by training and experience to perform a function in the field of art activity... The program to be carried forward in the field of mural painting...[There is no specific mention in the cards of the downtown Santa Cruz Post Office murals, which would seem to fit under this WPA-funded project. However, the information posted in the Post Office states that the murals were painted by Henrietta Shore (1880-1963) in 1936-37 and installed in 1937. The funding came from the Treasury Relief Art Project, a branch of the WPA] (1938)

- Nationwide: A professional project for the employment of instrumentalists, singers, and other concert performers, piano tuners, instrument repairers, music binders, and those participating in social and rural music, music education and recreation. [Not known if there were any programs in Santa Cruz under this program] (1938)
- Nationwide: A professional project for the employment of writers, editors, historians, research workers, art critics, architects, archaeologist, map draftsmen, geologists, and other professional workers for the preparation of material for the American Guide Series...[a publication in this series that covered California was, Federal Writers Project. *California: a guide to the golden state.*] (1938)
- Nationwide: A professional project for the employment of actors, playwrights, vaudeville and variety artists, circus entertainers....to produce various kinds of theatrical entertainment... [We do not know if there were any local or visiting productions in Santa Cruz] (1938)
- Arrange, transcribe and classify data contained in estate records and inventories filed for probate...(1939)
- Transcribe and code all active venereal disease case records for 1939 in public clinics (1939)

Source

U.S. Works Progress Administration. *Location Project File, 1935--1942*. U.S. National Archives. Microfilm.

It is the library's intent to provide accurate information, however, it is not possible for the library to completely verify the accuracy of all information. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the library.