

[Back to index](#)

"American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940"
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/wpaintro/wpahome.html>

by

Michael Dittman
Butler County Community College (USA)

American Life Histories is as encyclopedic a website as one would expect from the Library of Congress, but nonetheless well ordered and not overwhelming. It provides a directed tour through an overview of some of the Federal Writers' products (a tiny sampling of the mountain of volumes that the projects actually produced): the oral life histories transcribed by the staff of the Folklore Project of the Federal Writers' Project for the U.S. Works Progress (later Work Projects) Administration (WPA) from 1936-1940. With an intelligent and short background as to who the workers within the folklore project were and what they did, the Library of Congress provides a user-friendly introduction. Much of the editorial work seems to have been done by Ann Banks, author of a pioneering book on the Life Histories Project entitled *First Person America*. The selections of the actual life histories provide an accurate representation of the texts, which deal with "the informant's family, education, income, occupation, political views, religion and mores, medical needs, diet and miscellaneous observations." However, the site's essays steer clear of controversy by failing to mention the fact that the writers who transcribed these histories often rewrote the voices of educated, well-spoken African-Americans and Native Americans into hokey Hollywood dialect. The interviews are presented as pure expressions of lived experience, which just isn't so.

Technically, however, the site is a gem. All the information is searchable. A clear chart details the sources of information. Also helpful is the technical information about how the site was built and the best ways to utilize it. The background on the Federal Writers' Project itself is split up into 16 short sections, with accompanying photographs kept small so as not to bog down downloading time. All in all, the site is well thought out, making it accessible to all, no matter the primitiveness of the computer or the glaciality of the Internet connection. Most helpful about the site is the search-by-keyword feature, as well as the clear e-mail link, allowing one to send questions directly to the people in charge of the American Memories series. Ideological qualms aside, American Life Histories is a good introduction to the work of the Federal Writers' Project.