

Solving the Leisure Problem

Recreation and the WPA

by Ginalie Swaim

"POVERTY OF PLAY has been as great, if not greater, than poverty of work."

That's not a complaint one would have expected to hear during the job-starved Great Depression, but social critic Katherine Glover was not alone in declaring that Americans needed to enrich their lives by learning the right ways to play.

Concerns over the "problem of leisure," as social reformers called it, arose well before the Great Depression. Technology and mechanization were transforming the work day (in factory, office, farm, and home), and

leisure time was becoming part of the American way of life, and not just for the leisure class. Efforts were under way to transmit social mores and values through recreation. In congested urban areas, the playground movement created and staffed play areas to assimilate and Americanize immigrant children. In factories, management sponsored sports teams, family picnics, and social activities as ways to instill loyalty. Unions did the same to build solidarity.

Enjoying free time, of course, was not the problem. What alarmed social critics is that Americans were fill-

ing their newly acquired free time with the wrong kinds of activities—for example, movies, radio, and spectator sports (one critic labeled the problem “spectatoritis”).

What was so wrong about listening to the radio, or driving to a movie, or cheering in the stands for your favorite baseball team? Plenty, according to a cascade of sociological studies and books claiming that passive, commercialized, mass entertainment was undermining morals and destabilizing society. “Leisure became a battleground for widespread ambivalence about technology, social change, economic change, and new social habits,” writes historian Susan Currell in *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression*. Then, as the depression cut jobs or reduced work hours, critics feared that Americans with time on their hands and despair in their hearts were now even more vulnerable and attracted to activities considered “wasteful, exploitative, and morally questionable.” The repeal of Prohibition and gambling laws added new concerns.

Reformers were already concerned that changes in society were emasculating American men. Sitting at an assembly line or pushing papers at a desk didn’t support the traditional image of a strong male possessing authority and autonomy. In the home, women were grabbing the purse strings as they bought into the trend of mass consumption. The depression eroded male self-esteem even more as the traditional breadwinner in the family took his place in a bread line. Sociologists warned that American men must “‘avoid stagnant loafing. It is not good for man to bite his nails and think over-much on his troubles.’” The right kinds of recreation, they preached, could restore balance to the individual in a tumultuous world.

Reformers called for the government to step in. As one charged, a federal government that could “prevent the sale of unwholesome food” could also prevent “the sale of unwholesome recreation” by providing recreation facilities and guiding Americans to morally appro-

priate activities. “Pressure increased for a government response,” Currell writes, “which eventually led to an unprecedented federal policy to promote the ‘better’ use of leisure.”

The federal response came in the mid-1930s. The Works Progress Administration’s recreation program partnered with willing communities in every state but Maine. In Iowa, the *Muscatine Journal and News-Tribune* explained how it worked: “The plan as now administered, provides for the salaries of the recreation leaders, paid by the Works Progress Administration while the equipment, materials and facilities are provided by the municipal government. [Its] share of the financing is set at 20 per cent of the amount provided by the [federal] government.” Communities were expected to call upon citizens, service clubs, and businesses for support. In Dickinson County, a local paper assured its readers that the recreation leaders hired would “be chosen from among those eligible on the Dickinson county WPA certified list. All will be young persons with clean character records and a capability to learn the supervision [and leadership].”

Although Italy, Germany, and Russia all had recreation programs directed at the masses, the U.S. veered away from fascist and nationalistic models. Instead, WPA recreation programs set out to democratize leisure—encouraging individuality, promoting exercise, celebrating American traditions. As Helene Amling, chair of Mason City’s WPA recreation program, explained in 1939, “We are still only at the beginning of the creation of a democratic program of leisure-time activities for the American public, but the WPA recreation program has turned a new page in social history by teaching thousands of communities how to procure for themselves the benefit of public recreation, and Mason City is one of these communities.”

Solving the leisure problem meant preserving American values in the face of a transformed society. “‘Bad’ leisure was urban, industrial, commercial, and disintegrated the home as a unit,” Currell writes, “‘whereas ‘good’ leisure reintegrated the community and family, was simple, and involved social interaction or proto-industrial artisan skills.’”

Working with your hands, learning new skills, expressing yourself through music or drama, throwing horseshoes with your neighbors—this is what the WPA recreation program envisioned. Here’s how it played out in Iowa.

Left: Deliberating over a card game, Burlington, 1940. Photographers for the Works Progress Administration captured scenes of Americans participating in the WPA recreation program. According to leisure experts, playing games was useful for building social skills. “Life knows no greater testing medium for conduct and character than the game,” Ted Brewton, a WPA recreational director in Mason City, told townspeople in 1940. The WPA recreation program activities fell into four categories: physical, cultural, social, and therapeutic (for those with disabilities or in institutions).



Recreation Institute, Ames, 1941.

To operate local WPA recreation programs, leaders attended training institutes to learn the basics of various activities and tools for leadership.

"The principal aim of the recreation program," a Muscatine newspaper explained, "is to keep the younger children and adults off the street, get them in close contact with organized groups, [and] teach them sportsmanship and crafts, which may be of great value to them in later years."

Below: Gymnastic skills, learned at a WPA recreation program, Des Moines Jewish Center, 1939.

Right: Fitting costumes for the gymnastics performance.







Painting plaster casts at the Community House in Sioux City, 1938.

Crafts like this one were believed to especially appeal to women. Recreation reformers worried that American women needed guidance in using their leisure time productively, rather than flocking to the movie theater. Too many movies, they believed, featured immoral women wearing elegant clothing and living in luxurious settings. Better that women return to the hearth, and enjoy sewing clothes and decorating the home on a reasonable budget.



A class in marksmanship, Des Moines, 1941.

The class may represent an additional focus of recreation—national defense, as the nation edged towards war. Programs also offered model airplane clubs and classes in aeronautics for boys.

Instruction in drawing and painting, Waterloo, 1940.





This page, top: Young virtuosos, on harmonicas and guitars, a washboard and a glass jug, at Ottumwa's Garfield Grade School, 1936. Below: Musicians in Burlington, 1940.

Listening to music on the radio was extremely popular in the 1930s, but recreation experts considered it too passive and commercialized. Instead, they encouraged Americans to make their own music and reap the social and cultural benefits.



Right: Perfecting woodcraft skills with hand tools, Council Bluffs, 1940.

The WPA recreation program coincided with the 1930s craze for hobbies. Clubs, magazines, and radio shows devoted to hobbies sprang up across the nation. Hobbies were considered an appropriate use of free time, writes Susan Currell. "The married man 'puttering' about the house with an absorbing hobby . . . kept him happy and indoors, near his family and head of the household." As a WPA brochure advised, for a man without a job, a hobby kept "his mind from rusting and his personality from growing crabbed." Buying hobby supplies also gave a slight boost to an ailing economy.





Teenagers' dance in Burlington, 1940.

Supervised dances in well-lit recreation centers were considered a wholesome alternative to dark roadhouses. The WPA project saw benefits of socialization through certain types of dance—ballroom, tap, square, and folk, but definitely not jazz.

Right: Beading a necklace, Des Moines, 1941.

Arts and crafts were categorized as cultural recreation, along with music and drama, and the study and appreciation of folklore, art, and literature. Leisure experts believed that personal expression through the arts honored the individual and her choice of leisure activities—but the same experts were adamant that “good” leisure should also improve oneself and better society.







Negro Community Center, Ottumwa, 1938.

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Above: Puppetry class, Sioux City, 1938.

"Puppets, in the last few years, have come into their own," stated Archer McMackin, of the state WPA recreation department. McMackin taught 30 north-eastern Iowa WPA supervisors to build and operate puppets and to stage shows. The classes were part of an effort to bring the art of puppetry back to Iowa.

Right: Woodcraft class, Cedar Falls, 1940.

Learning traditional skills of working with wood, leather, and tin was an "opportunity to discover just what [a boy] can do with his hands and with good tools," according to the *Muscatine Journal and News-Tribune*. New hobbies "bring out new skills or latent skills in the individual which will help him along in later life."





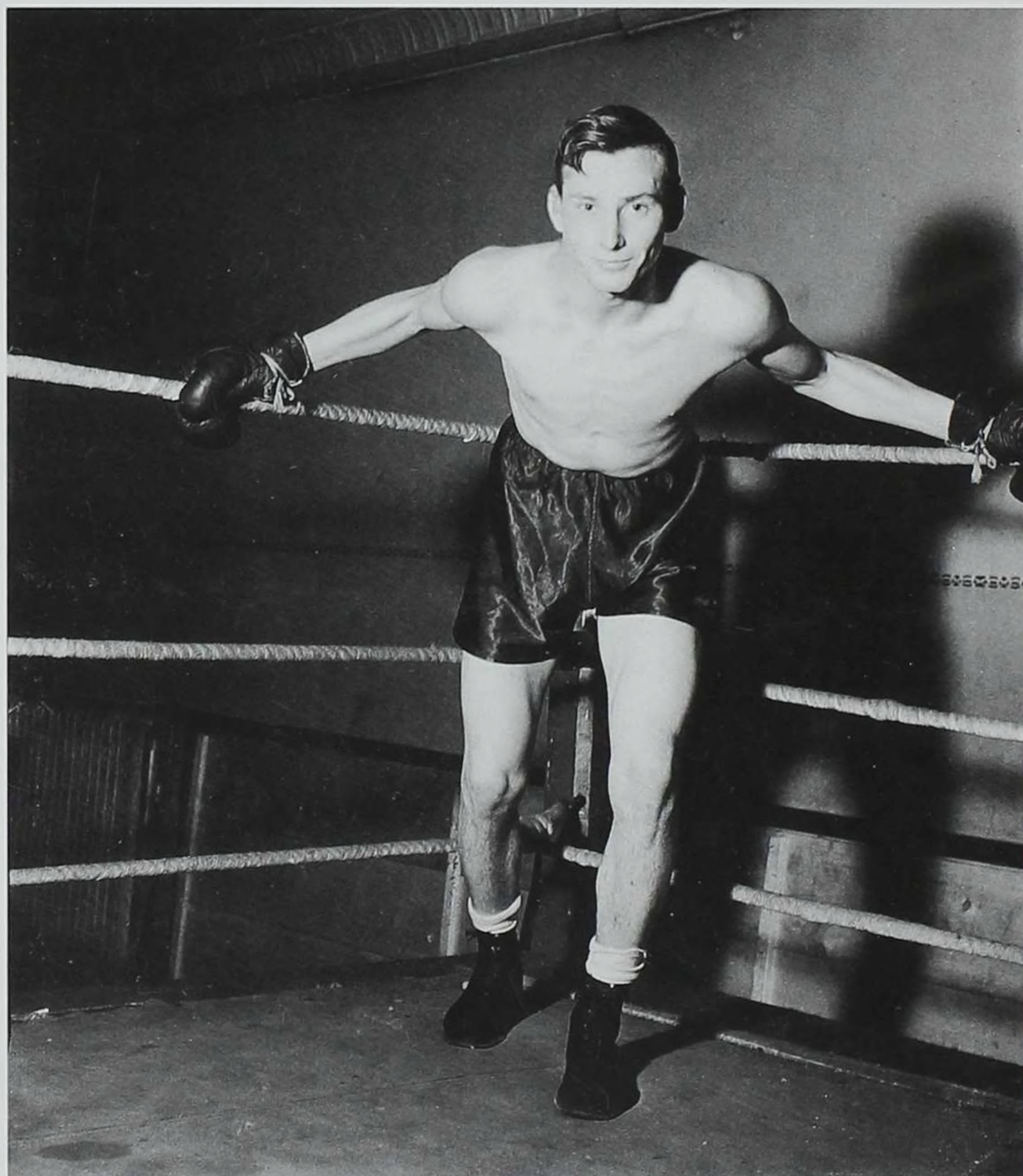


Children, some barefoot, playing a circle game, Polk County, 1939.

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Try-outs for Golden Gloves competition, Gilmore Center, Fayette County, 1939.

Setting up and maintaining WPA recreation programs in smaller communities, like Gilmore City, was challenging. At a 1938 meeting in Spirit Lake, a representative from Terril (population 400) announced that his town was "extremely anxious for the supervision and instruction necessary to keep a project going. . . . The various civic groups and women's clubs have started a project there, but now lack the proper supervision and training to keep it going."

Right: Croquet players, Des Moines, 1939.

In Oelwein in 1937, the newspaper outlined its summer recreation program: "A lovely new croquet set, horse shoes, and sand box are available," plus a busy schedule of picnics, carnivals, sports tournaments, dog races, pet shows, parades, handcraft exhibits, and an overnight hike for boys. In February, the paper reminded readers that "the Ping Pong tables . . . are proving a big drawing card for business men and women who are looking for wholesome amusement."





Playing horseshoes, Muscatine, 1939.

Adult and youth participation in Muscatine's WPA recreation program climbed from 20,000 in 1937 to over 56,000 in 1939. The local paper reported in 1937, "Muscatine is fortunate in having one of the programs as there are a great many cities standing in line awaiting the chance to install such an activity. The government does not plan on taking any such project away from a city in which it has taken a foothold if the program is given the support of the city and the project itself is reaping the result for which it was intended. With a trained corps of workers here, state and area officials . . . have voiced their complete satisfaction . . . and point to the Muscatine program as one of the outstanding in the state."

"With the outbreak of World War II," historian Susan Currell writes, "increased productivity and full employment put concerns with leisure into the background while workers entered the real battle with fascism. What remained, however, was a commitment to the notion of a self and society defined not only by work but also through leisure." ❖