

The National Youth Administration in Texas

by Scott Sosebee

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(July 10, 2022) The Great Depression was one of the most transformative and significant events in U.S. history. The economic catastrophe not only devastated the nation's economy, but it left huge sectors of the population destitute and almost hopeless for relief. It also forever changed the American people's relationship with their governments, particularly with the federal regime. When the full breadth of the Depression hit by the second and third quarters of 1930, the Herbert Hoover administration was ill-prepared to deal with the economic downturn that had gutted the manufacturing and financial segments of the economy, which in turn had led to rates of unemployment unprecedented before or since that era. At least thirty percent of Americans of working age were out-of-work—a percentage that was almost certainly undercounted since it only dealt with men and relied on private and state reporting—and as high as eighty percent of all people who remained employed were “under-employed,” which meant they either had their hours or wages cut. As state relief efforts—the only such remedies available at the time—went bankrupt, the federal government failed to move with alacrity and, given President Hoover's reluctance to provide adequate direct relief, any funds available to help families hit by the Depression grew sparse to non-existent. The result, by 1932, was a nation that teetered on the edge of financial insolvency and a people who had come to believe that the nation's institutions not only had no solutions but seemed to lack any compassion for their plight.

Depression conditions led the vast majority of U.S. voters to abandon Herbert Hoover and the Republicans—who had yielded national power for the greater part of the years after the Civil War and held the Presidency and Congress for the twelve previous years—and turn the nation's government over to the Democrats. The central figure in the Democratic resurgence was the new president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. FDR had promised the nation a “New Deal” if he was elected, although during the campaign he had offered few specifics about his plan. However, when he took office in March 1933 he brought a vigorous

and active federal plan to deal with the Great Depression, programs that consisted of new agencies that offered new strategies and procedures in all segments of the economy, from agriculture, through work programs, and new regulatory agencies designed in the present to give relief to the consequences of the Depression and in the longer term to find ways to “smooth” some of the ravages of capitalism—the ones that often left large parts of the population impoverished with little means of escape—while also retaining the framework of the nation’s economic system.

One of the initiatives that FDR established was the National Youth Administration (NYA). The NYA’s primary intent was to keep young men and women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five from competing for jobs with older men and women and to also provide another avenue to help impoverished families. The President created the NYA with Executive Order no. 7086 in June 1935 and placed it under the authority of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. Roosevelt’s New Deal had created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1933 with many of the same intentions, but the NYA was designed to fill needs the CCC did not: employ young women and create a system of job training in a variety of skills and professions that would be needed in the future. The NYA provided part-time work for youths who were in school (and they were required to remain in school) but who needed financial assistance to continue their education, and for young people who had already left school but were needy and unemployed.

The first director of the NYA in Texas was a young man from the Hill Country who would use his experience and visibility of the position to launch one of the greatest political careers in U.S. history. Lyndon Baines Johnson had left Southwest Texas State Teacher’s College for a position as a teacher and principal in the poor city of Cotulla in 1928. He only stayed there for a year before he returned to finish his degree, but the encounters he had with the majority Latino residents of that South Texas city would stay with him for his entire career. When he graduated, he set his sights on a political career and became an aide to Representative Richard Kleberg. He remained with Kleberg for four years until FDR appointed him head of the NYA in Texas.

The NYA enlisted young people in Texas to work on public works projects, usually as clerks or maintenance workers as well as helping to build highways, roadside parks, playgrounds, schools, and public buildings throughout the state. They made ten to twenty dollars a month (older workers were paid the higher wage). Importantly, they also received job training. There was an agricultural training center for men in Luling, a teaching program in stenography and general office skills at Blinn College in Brenham, and the Junior Employment Service which worked with state agencies to train and place youths in full-time jobs. Later, beginning in 1939, there were training programs in welding, sheet-metal work, and radio repair. However, the NYA in Texas was reflective of its political geography. While there was a separate entity of the

NYA for African American youths, it was—like so many other things in the “separate but equal” era—underfunded and largely ineffective. Tejano youths also participated in the NYA, but as they were not listed separately it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of such an outreach to that community.

The program accomplished its major goals in that young workers did not compete with heads-of-households for a number of private jobs, and NYA trained young people became key components of the economic growth in Texas and the nation at the end of World War II. The NYA finally ended in 1943. Lyndon Johnson left his position as the State Director in 1937 to run for Congress. He won that race and began a career that would eventually result in the highest office in the land.

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