

## Chasing Bay Area artifacts of the New Deal

John King, Chronicle Urban Design Writer

Monday, September 1, 2008



**(08-31) 18:41 PDT** -- A stream tumbles down a rocky outcrop behind Lake Temescal's log-cabin-like boathouse, passing through shaded pools before flattening out on its way into the lake.

The stream looks as natural as the Oakland hills that rise to the east. In fact, it was built by federal workers in the 1930s - just like the boathouse, and just like hundreds of other Bay Area landmarks that endure as part of the region's physical and cultural heritage, even though they were spawned by an economic crisis.

"Millions of people enjoy these things all the time who have no idea where they came from," says Gray Brechin, a visiting scholar in UC Berkeley's geography department. "I think of it as a buried civilization."

Brechin is founder of the Living New Deal Project, a 4-year-old effort to catalog how California's landscape is marked by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's response to the Great Depression.

The goal was to have a definitive map finished this year, the 75th anniversary of FDR's first year in office. Instead, much of the state remains uncharted, especially rural areas. But what started as a personal mission has become a systematic endeavor. The California Historical Society manages the effort and is reaching out to members to find local caches of information that may exist; the Web site is maintained by UC Berkeley's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Library.

"Gray would give talks, everyone would get excited, but it's hard to sustain that without an organization," says Richard Walker, a Cal geography professor who has been pulled into the effort. "We're trying to get people out in the hustings, have them find things we wouldn't know of ourselves."

The Bay Area legacy extends geographically from San Jose Civic Auditorium to buildings at Santa Rosa Junior College. The manicured romance of the Berkeley Rose Garden is part of the picture; so is a water pipe supplying Pacifica's Sharp Park Golf Course.

## **City's impressive murals**

In San Francisco, the best known of the dozens of New Deal projects include the murals that adorn Coit Tower and the Beach Chalet, and the former bathhouse at Aquatic Park that looks like a streamlined white ocean liner and now is home to the National Maritime Museum.

Brechin no longer hopes to nail down everything: "There are sidewalks and sewers and trails and retaining walls. We'll never get to the bottom of it."

One reason is the haphazard nature of the New Deal, the informal name given to FDR's efforts to attack a national unemployment rate that was 25 percent when he took office in 1933.

He responded with a flurry of job-creation agencies, each with its own set of initials and marching orders. The Civilian Conservation Corps was charged with improving parks to make them more accessible to the public, while the Public Works Administration funded major projects such as the statuesque Alameda County Courthouse on the shores of Lake Merritt in Oakland.

## **Creating wealth**

But the broadest mark was left by the Works Progress Administration, created in 1935 and renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939. The goal wasn't simply to put people to work; it was to deploy them in a way that, FDR said at the time, "creates future new wealth for the nation."

Eager to thin the jobless ranks - and tap federal funds - local politicians dusted off long-stalled plans or concocted projects that would pass muster in Washington.

The result in the Bay Area was a stream of initiatives that reshaped the region in lasting ways.

The school buildings and post offices are variations of projects seen across the country, as are road improvements such as the Caldecott Tunnel. But much of the region's New Deal inheritance could exist nowhere else - such as the Mountain Theater at Mount Tamalpais with its terraced rows of locally quarried stones amid aged oaks. Or Treasure Island, formed from delta mud to become the setting for the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition.

The Living New Deal Project is unique. A survey of buildings and public artwork exists for New Mexico - a state that in 1940 had 531,000 residents, compared with California's 6.9 million - but FDR scholars say no other state is the subject of an attempt to record the full scale of public works.

Participants hope the approach being taken here will be used as a model elsewhere.

"There's been no peacetime period where the government has left such a diverse physical record of involvement in peoples' lives," says David Crosson, executive director of the California

Historical Society. "It symbolizes a philosophy that government has a role to actively provide for the well-being of its citizens."

Before exploring FDR's legacy, Brechin wrote "Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin" - a book that decries the environmental and cultural impacts on Northern California in the aftermath of the Gold Rush. He admits to qualms with such 1930s programs as putting pipes in creeks for flood control and filling in portions of the bay for airports.

But he's also an architectural historian who cherishes Woodminster Amphitheater in Oakland above Highway 13. The 1,500-seat venue is wrapped in a choreographed landscape of plunging drama: water bursts from fountains set into the amphitheater's wall and cascades more than 100 feet through a redwood grove before filling two enormous reflecting pools.

It's Lake Temescal's waterfall, enlarged to Wagnerian scale.

"This is operatic," Brechin says of the project built by the WPA and dedicated in 1940. "Can you imagine the federal government doing something like this today?"

For more information on the Living New Deal Project and an interactive state map, go to [livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu](http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu).

**Clarification:** The above story includes an accompanying map that shows Bill Graham Civic Auditorium as an example of "the landscape created by federal workers during the Great Depression." In fact, the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco was built from 1913 through 1915 and opened in 1915. It was renovated during the New Deal era by the Works Projects Administration.

E-mail John King at [jking@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jking@sfchronicle.com).

Hadar Leibushor, 5, of Oakland plays next to a reflecting pool at Oakland's Joaquin Miller Park, a legacy of FDR's New Deal. (Lance Iversen / The Chronicle)



Lance Iversen / The Chronicle

The Alameda County Courthouse was built during the Great Depression. (Paul Chinn / The Chronicle)



Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

The Pulgas Water Temple in Redwood City is a picturesque artifact of the New Deal. (Lacy Atkins / The Chronicle)



Lacy Atkins / The Chronicle

The Martinez Post Office, a New Deal project, features a painting over the postmaster's door by Edith Hamlin and Maynard Dixon. (Lance Iversen / The Chronicle)



Lance Iversen / The Chronicle

Mill Valley's City Hall and firehouse have a Tudor-style look, but they opened in 1936 thanks to federal job-creation programs. (Linn Walsh / Courtesy to The Chronicle)



Linn Walsh / Courtesy to The Chronicle

## A Bay Area legacy

Anybody who has driven over New York's Triborough Bridge or stayed at Phantom Ranch in the Grand Canyon has encountered portions of the landscape created by federal workers during the Great Depression. In the Bay Area, examples are found in almost every county.

