

Rose Wilder Lane and Thomas Hart Benton: A Turn toward History during the 1930s

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The 1930s, a decade of crisis and challenge surpassing almost any other in American history, provided the setting for many profound changes and transformations in the United States. At the same time, many Americans also grasped at history, partly for reassurance during a time of stress and discomfort, partly in order to search for solutions and alternatives that might relieve at least some of that strain and hardship. Congressional funding for Mount Rushmore, the opening of Greenfield Village, the restoration of Williamsburg, and the construction of the National Archives during the late 1920s and early 1930s all testified to a growing sense among many Americans that history could provide guidance, that it could undergird morale and point a way out of the many dilemmas then confronting American society.¹ The general turn toward history in the thirties manifested itself in a variety of ways, including W.P.A. murals in public buildings, historical novels from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) to John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy, the writings of the Southern Agrarians centered at Vanderbilt University, and the concerted effort of researchers like Constance Rourke to collect folklore and folk art.²

Among the best-known examples of the Depression decade's historical turn was Thomas Hart Benton's 1936 mural, "The Social History of Missouri," covering all four walls of the House Lounge in the state capitol in Jefferson City. Instantly famous, the bold and energetic artistic rendering of Missouri's historical

development elicited both extravagant praise and vitriolic scorn, polarizing viewers along political and aesthetic lines. Benton himself came to consider it his masterpiece, and art critics and historians, while hardly unanimous in their estimates, have generally concurred that it ranks among the significant works of twentieth-century American art.³

By coincidence, at the same time that Benton, bathed in the light of publicity, was researching and painting his Missouri mural, a somewhat less famous Missouri artist was engaged just thirty-five miles away, in a room in the Tiger Hotel in Columbia, on another state history project. Rose Wilder Lane was writing a book intended to address the historical development of the state for the benefit of the common reader, just as Benton's mural was aimed at a common lay audience. Its focus, too, was on social history.⁴ She had no direct connection with Benton, and their simultaneous efforts to interpret the history of the "Show-Me" state might have amounted to nothing more than an interesting coincidence were it not that each of them reflected a deeply-felt impulse, encouraged by the thirties environment, to call upon history for inspiration, morale, models of behavior, and ideological underpinning. Examining the resulting works in juxtaposition can help to illuminate the historical impulse that flourished during the Depression decade. By looking at their motives, assumptions, techniques, and ideologies, we might better understand why Benton's masterpiece established itself as a work of permanent significance while Lane's manuscript failed even to find a publisher.

The contrasting receptions received by these works should not obscure the fundamental similarities that tied the two artists together. Both of them, though working in different mediums, spent considerable time researching their subjects, focused their attention on social developments, aimed at popular audiences, presented their ideas in simple, easy-to-understand terms, and brought well thought out—though contrasting—ideological assumptions to their work. Both had earlier left Missouri for more cosmopolitan climes, then returned during their forties to establish a regional setting for their art. For both, history functioned as a form of myth, embodying deeply-felt and fundamental assumptions and values.⁵ Benton brought a populist vision to his art, casting ordinary people as heroic pioneers and community-builders, often in opposition to the evil forces of bigotry, provincialism, and economic exploitation. Lane's version of the myth cast different villains—tyrannical government and anything that restrained individual freedom—while glorifying the individual rather than the community.

Benton was fresh from three other major mural projects completed during the previous five years (done for the New School for Social Research and the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City in 1930 and 1932 and for the Indiana building at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition in 1933) when he was invited by the Missouri state legislature in 1935 to paint a mural depicting the history of the state. His innovative style of mural painting was bound to offend many people and certain to generate controversy.⁶

Not the staid, conventional, ancestor-worshipping depictions so common among mural painters for him! Both content and form stretched the limits of



Figure 1: The boldness and energy of Benton's painting style are evident in this view of the north wall of the House Lounge, which depicts pioneer days and early settlement. Huckleberry Finn and friend Jim are portrayed in the center. Courtesy of Missouri House of Representatives.

convention. His subjects included prostitutes, nightriders, and hooded Klansmen along with farmers, workers, and politicians. They were rendered in bold—even garish—color, in unusual perspectives, and in strange juxtapositions. The Missouri legislators knew they would get something brash and challenging for the \$16,000 they offered to pay him, but they seemed willing to take the risk. For Benton it would provide another platform from which to express his ideas about the true function of art and the role of the artist in modern, twentieth-century American society. More than that, the assignment entailed an opportunity to further his career and put some money in the bank. (In the end, two-thirds of the money went for materials.)⁷

Like Thomas Hart Benton, Rose Wilder Lane also hoped that her historical labors would boost her career, improve her finances, and say something useful about history. Her career, unlike his, was on a descending trajectory by 1935, though probably not as precipitously as she herself feared that it was. In fact, her novel *Let the Hurricane Roar*, based heavily upon her grandparents' lives and serialized first in the *Saturday Evening Post* during the Fall of 1932, had received strong reviews and sold well. It, along with *Free Land* (based upon stories about her parents and serialized in the *Post* in 1938), would constitute her two most lasting achievements as a popular fiction writer who ranked among the best and most popular in America during the 1920s and 1930s.⁸

Her stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Country Gentleman*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and other national magazines continued to bring in top payments during the 1930s, but at less frequent intervals than before and at lower rates, because of the Depression. Divorced, and feeling responsible for taking care of her parents, she worried constantly about money. More seriously, concerns about losing her looks, growing old, and suffering from bad teeth and other health problems no doubt were a factor in bringing on frequent depressions and sometimes even suicidal tendencies. Although only forty-eight years old in 1935—two years older than Benton—she acted and felt like someone older than that and needed a change of scenery if she was to pull her life together and get her career back on track.⁹

Thus, when she was notified by her agent in New York, George T. Bye, that the McBride Publishing Company was offering her a \$1,500 cash advance to write a volume about Missouri for a series of state books that it was doing, she snapped the offer up immediately and quickly set to work on the task.¹⁰ For seven years she had been living near her parents on Rocky Ridge Farm, just outside of Mansfield, Missouri, a quiet little Ozarks town fifty miles southeast of Springfield. Much as she cared about and felt responsible for her aging parents, she found it a constant struggle to live nearby and get along with her mother; at times she poured out her feelings of resentment and suffocation in her journal.¹¹ She had built her parents a new house on the property, moving into their old one herself, and she continued to provide them with an annual income subsidy from her own earnings as a free-lance writer. By this time, however, her mother, Laura Ingalls Wilder, was beginning to acquire greater financial security on the basis of the

success of her first three children's novels—*Little House in the Big Woods* (1932) *Farmer Boy* (1933), and *Little House on the Prairie* (1935).¹²

Lane, through continued prodding and encouragement, had provided the incentive for her mother to start writing the books in the first place, and as the series continued to grow in popularity, she played a major role in reshaping and rewriting her mother's manuscripts for Harper and Row, a contribution that she never acknowledged and that few people suspected at the time.¹³ Thus, her mother's career was taking off just as her's seemed to be going on the downswing, the irony being that she received none of the credit she deserved for her contribution to her mother's accomplishments.

How could she escape the vice holding her in its grip, preventing her from leaving Rocky Ridge and stifling her creative juices? Lane began to dream about a grandiose history project that might bring her wealth and recognition—a huge novel in ten volumes chronicling the westward movement of the United States from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific coast. The effort would require “an enormous canvas, covering horizontally a continent, vertically all classes.” Lane's gaze was as much on the present as on the past; she hoped to explain the current situation in America by going back to its historical roots. “American history,” she noted in her journal, “therefore our life now, is a swirl of currents across the landscape. Cultural currents deflected, altered, by economic (based on geographic?) and geographic conditions.”¹⁴

The invitation to do the Missouri book, when it came, fitted naturally in with Lane's growing interest in history. She had read Charles and Mary Beard's *Rise of American Civilization* in January, 1933, and five months later was reading Spengler's *Decline of the West* at the same time that she hammered out a prospective outline for her grand novel.¹⁵ She never got properly started on the project, but the work she did on her mother's “Little House” novels served as a partial substitute for it, as they chronicled life on the last agricultural frontier during the late 1800s. Conversations with her mother and father about their own and their parents' experiences provided her with material that she imaginatively incorporated into her own historical novels set on the Dakota frontier.

Two months of reading up on Missouri history at Rocky Ridge led Lane to decide that, to do her assignment right, she would need access to a large research library. That led her in July, 1935, to drive from Mansfield up to Columbia, setting up operations downtown in a room in the Tiger Hotel. It was a short walk from there to the State Historical Society on the University of Missouri campus. She started reading county history books, personal memoirs, specialized monographs, and anything else that might feed into the scheme developing in her mind.¹⁶

Before getting fairly started at the task, however, she accepted an invitation from her writer friend Gareth Garrett to accompany him on a trip through Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska to collect material for a *Saturday Evening Post* assignment he had been given on New Deal farm policy.¹⁷ Lane, whose antipathy to Roosevelt and the New Deal had grown steadily since the inauguration, not

surprisingly managed to unearth considerable evidence to support her own jaundiced view of the New Deal while she traveled around the Midwest with Garrett. People's tax dollars were disappearing down a rathole of misconceived government bureaucracies, in her estimation, and her direct observations seemed to confirm that. Back in Columbia, more than ever convinced of the bankruptcy of Roosevelt's programs, she wrote an article entitled "Credo," an impassioned polemic against the direction that the "crowd" in Washington was taking the country. "I'd like you to understand why I'm a Jeffersonian Democrat," she wrote George Bye, "and will vote for anybody—Hoover, Harding, Al Capone—who will stop the New Deal."¹⁸ After being rejected initially by the *Saturday Evening Post*, the article was given the lead position in the *Post*'s March 7, 1936, issue, generating some of the most intense reader response ever experienced by the magazine's editors.¹⁹

Lane's intensifying conservatism also vented itself in her Missouri manuscript. Researching the book in 1935 and early 1936 afforded her a time for escape and reflection—escape from the dullness of Mansfield and a welcome relief from her mother's constant and sometimes suffocating presence, reflection on the state of the nation and her own political views and on what her future course should be. Parallels with what was happening to Thomas Hart Benton, laboring away in Jefferson City, were almost uncanny. He, too, was in the process of escape and re-examination. While remaining politically left-of-center and firmly pro-New Deal, his general orientation, like Lane's, had shifted to the right. While they were in their twenties, Benton and Lane both had gone through radical phases in their lives, though his commitment to the socialistic and communistic ideas that were being preached in Greenwich Village had been more unqualified and long-lasting than hers. Both Benton and Lane spent time in Paris and traveled in Europe after leaving home (he from Neosho, she from Mansfield—small towns in the Missouri Ozarks connected by Federal Highway 60). But his living in New York City for over twenty years, until his departure in 1935, brought him into fuller contact and association with left-wing radical politics during the teens and twenties. Lane spent a brief period in Greenwich Village hobnobbing with the likes of John Reed, Floyd Dell, and Max and Crystal Eastman. Her intellectual transformation was much more thorough than Benton's, leaving her by 1935 a rabid anti-New Dealer on the way to an extreme right-wing conservatism that would surface prominently by the 1940s, when she took over as editor of the National Economic Council's monthly *Review of Books*. Benton's rightward shift stopped somewhere to the left of Roosevelt and the New Deal, as he rejected his former Communist friends and assumptions but retained a firm belief in the efficacy of state action to remedy social and political injustices. Thus, when Benton called himself a disciple of Thomas Jefferson, it meant something far different from Rose Wilder Lane's application of the term "Jeffersonian" to herself. Whereas "The Social History of the State of Missouri" reflected Benton's faith in New Deal-type liberal reforms, Lane's version of history repudiated those very beliefs and values.²⁰

Similarities between Lane and Benton, however, did not end there. Both displayed like personality traits, being self-styled independent thinkers, willing to offend people and to stir up controversy, if necessary, or if it drew attention to themselves. Words like “cantankerous,” “controversial,” and “outrageous” easily fit Benton; he seemed to enjoy the publicity that his outspoken statements generated. Severing his ties with former colleagues, he left New York City in 1935, terming it “provincial,” denouncing the Marxists there as “dogmatic, self-righteous, and humorless,” and asserting that its artistic community had been invaded by homosexuals. “The great cities are dead,” he pronounced. “They offer nothing but coffins for living and thinking.” Making her points with similar forcefulness in “Credo,” Lane included left-wingers—a classification that would have included Benton himself—among her targets. Like him, she was also in the process of burning her intellectual bridges behind her as she began identifying with a small coterie of extreme conservative thinkers. Both Benton and Lane also came to see the Midwest as a nurturing environment for their respective arts, Benton calling it “the least provincial area of America. It is the least affected, that is, by ideas which are dependent on intellectual dogmas.”²¹

Their research procedures also linked Benton and Lane. Both omnivorous readers, they boned up on Missouri history.²² They also recognized the importance of physically venturing out and actually seeing the state. Benton, who had reacquainted himself with Missouri when he came back home at the time of his father’s death in 1924, now spent weeks traveling around from place to place, sketching people and scenes which he later incorporated in his mural design. In the Thomas Hart Benton Trust in Kansas City there survives a notebook that he used to jot down ideas for organizing the mural and to list themes and subjects to be included and connections to be made.²³ Most of the planning for the mural, however, probably went on in his head and never got put down on paper.

Lane also hit the road, purchasing a second-hand Ford and embarking on a three-week trip around the state with her Mansfield friend Corinne Murray, before returning to Columbia for further work in the archives of the State Historical Society. There she spent week after week, filling notebooks with minutiae of Missouri history, including names, dates, anecdotes, statistics, topographical descriptions, and factual details about the counties. She also took notes on the heroics of early Spanish and French exploration, the fur trade traffic on the Missouri River, episodes in St. Louis, St. Charles, and Ste. Genevieve, Civil War battles, and the rise of industry.²⁴

Lane’s notebooks indicate that her self-defined task differed considerably from and posed more difficulties than Benton’s. This explains, in part, why her efforts turned out to be less successful. Employing words for a narrative history dictated different strategies and considerations than did the assignment to do a wall mural depicting that same history. Detailed and complex as it was, Benton’s painted history could contain, by the nature of the medium, only a small fraction of the information entailed in Lane’s narrative account. The multitude of





Figure 2 and 3: Historical references to farming, mining, logging, railroads, small town Main Streets, lynchings, the Pony Express, a James gang holdup, and a political rally (where the speaker is his Congressman father) abound on the east wall on Benton's Missouri mural. Courtesy of Missouri House of Representatives.

anecdotes, facts, and background information she collected apparently were intended to be integrated into her story. What her publisher was looking for, however, was a contemporary travelogue of Missouri, making only occasional references to history, not a heavily detailed historical narrative. Topography, not chronology, was McBride's major concern. Ultimately, Lane's manuscript turned out as good as it did because she largely ignored most of her voluminous notes, focusing instead on stories that lent themselves to her considerable dramatic skills. She fashioned a kind of geographical history of the state, lingering at various points along the journey to recount the history of the area. Much of the resulting manuscript was intriguing and highly readable. Yet there was nothing especially striking or unique about her treatment that was unobtainable in other standard sources. Eventually the manuscript was rejected by two different publishers.

After the McBride company turned it down as out of keeping with its series' intent, Lane's agent offered it to Longmans, Green & Co. Maxwell Aley wrote Lane an encouraging letter in August, 1936, assuring her that while he thought she had placed too much emphasis on the early French and Spanish periods, this defect could be rectified in a revised draft. "But this book brought back to me the fact that, By God, Madam, you can write!" he exclaimed. "There are passages in the book that are extraordinarily beautiful and carry a thrill that I seldom get from any contemporary work."²⁵ In the end, however, Longmans also rejected the manuscript, and, after making desultory efforts to induce several other authors to join with her in doing a series of state books along the lines of the one that she had done, Lane abandoned the project as a wasted effort.²⁶

Despite the failure of the Missouri history to find its way into print, it is worth paying attention to, for it stood out as one of many Depression era efforts to call on history for guidance and support in addressing contemporary problems and dilemmas. As an abortive effort of a popular and successful writer, it raises the question of why it failed. In part, at least, Lane's failure and Benton's success can be attributed to the changing political tenor of the times. Experimenting in a genre that was unfamiliar to her, unlike Benton, who was working in a well-practiced medium, certainly put Lane at a disadvantage. And Lane's right-wing ideology, while still attractive to a major segment of the public, appealed less to the general populace than did Benton's progressivist-New Deal political stance.

Both artists depicted Missouri and its history in their works, but their descriptions partook as much of myth as of "scientific" or unbiased observation.²⁷ In a note attached to the manuscript she informed the reader, "It is not my intention to make this a guide-book nor a story of any definite journey in Missouri. Rather," she wrote, "I would take the reader's imagination along the outlined route, dropping back into the historical events of the past when the present scene suggests them." Good journalist that she was, Lane effectively chose scenes and historical anecdotes for their ability to attract her readers' attention and served them up in a colorful and sometimes exaggerated prose style. A description of the Missouri River in an early version of the manuscript revealed her approach:

The river that flows through this land is unlike any other river of America. On earth only the Yang-tse resembles it, a yellow river that seems less like water flowing than like a living serpentine thing. It is not possible to be indifferent to the Missouri river; one loves it or hates it, and to look at it long is to be fascinated, loving or hating, ever after. The fascination of this sluggish, muddy, powerful and monstrous river is not imagined. All men who know this river hate it, love it, fear it, and can not leave it. Look for one hour at the Missouri river, and forget it if you can."²⁸

This is not the language of "objective" history, journalism, or science; it is the language of myth. Lane herself suggested as much. "This is not a history of Missouri," she informed her readers. "We speak a language here too rich in memories and meanings to explain to those who do not know it. The land itself speaks with a thousand tongues. The hill, the spring, the tiniest stream, is a word and a volume." Everything about Missouri was different, strange, unique as Lane described it. "The charm of these hills and valleys that rise above the continent's great plains is a mysterious charm, reticent, subtle," she wrote. Missouri stood at the center of everything—a place "to which men come and from which their children go to come back again."²⁹ While the notion that the state displayed more of this and exhibited more of that than its neighbors was part of the myth that Lane expounded, the central myth in her narrative was the theme of freedom. If she could not develop it in a ten-volume novel about the entire American frontier, she could at least use a single state—her own Missouri—as a case study of how human liberty evolved and triumphed as the dominant value here in America.

"All Americans are born to personal freedom, an individual independence, unknown to other peoples," Lane observed in the section on the Missouri Compromise, but the independence and loyalty of Missourians possessed a special quality. Again, in describing the new American government, she happily observed that the "mad radicals" at the Constitutional convention of 1787 had formed a polity based on the principle of "All power to the individual." What excited her about historical figures like Moses Austin was the way in which they exemplified the principles of freedom and individual autonomy: "Here was action, release, freedom. A man could do anything legal and much that wasn't, without asking anyone's permission."³⁰ The myth at the center of her narrative, then, was one regarding individualism and freedom from all constraint, especially governmental.

Lane was drawn to historical subject matter as a means of describing and interpreting her contemporary Midwestern milieu. Benton, in his native Missouri, Wood in Iowa, and Curry in Kansas and Wisconsin all naturally developed historical themes as they tried to evince a sense of place that would stand against, in a way, the forces of industrialism and urbanization that were apparently

undermining traditional values and ways of living in the Midwest.³¹ Lane also turned to history as a logical outcome of her interest in the region she lived in—Dakota as a child and Missouri as a mature adult. After having written serialized biographies of major figures such as Herbert Hoover, Henry Ford, and Jack London and having drawn upon her experiences in Paris, Albania, and elsewhere for story themes, Lane increasingly turned to local Ozarks material as the basis for her popular magazine fiction during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Her wide reading habits had always included a heavy smattering of history, but now her historical inclinations were reinforced by the work she did on her mother's autobiographical children's novels and by her own desire to write a big historical novel of the frontier. Reading Spengler and the Beards was just one small indicator of her serious interest in history. Unlike some pessimistic Europeans, however, she clung to much more optimistic notions about history's direction, believing that if people were allowed to live up to their true potential, without excessive government intervention, they could better themselves and improve society in the process.

Unfortunately, the state history format that she had to work with did not afford her the scope she needed to develop her grand themes of opportunity, personal initiative, self-improvement, and creativity. The book, to be sure, contained interesting and eloquently written passages, but in many ways it lacked balance and perspective. Lane devoted so much time to describing the early French and Spanish settlements that little space was left for later developments; most of the important transformations occurring after the Civil War were left out. There were interesting vignettes of lead mining at Potosi, French culture in Ste. Genevieve, and the wanderings of artist George Caleb Bingham, but they could not compensate for the omission of large social and economic developments.

Lane's treatment of the state's geography likewise suffered from a lack of balance. She managed to get almost two-thirds of the way through the text before moving outside of a fifty-mile radius around Portage des Sioux, St. Louis, Ste. Genevieve, and the Potosi mines. She apparently originally intended a more comprehensive approach, but in the final manuscript it was not until the fifth of seven sections that she got to "The Boone's Lick Trail" (roughly the same route taken later by U.S. Highway 40), leading to Columbia, Jefferson City, and Boonville (near Old Franklin). The last two sections about the Santa Fe Trail and the Ozarks finally brought her home to the area she had grown up in around Mansfield.³²

Lane relied upon several methods for telling her story: direct reporting of places and scenes that she had observed during her travels; biographies about leading figures of the type that filled the textbooks; autobiography (the introductory section recounts the story of her coming, at the age of six, with her parents from South Dakota to Missouri in 1894); historical accounts of events and developments like the rise of the fur trade, the persecution of the Mormons, and the New Madrid earthquake; social history of a sort (confined primarily to

descriptions of the Osage Indians and the French aristocrats who lived along the Missouri River); and even something resembling anthropology in her final observations about dances and “frolics” in the Ozarks region near her parents’ place. But while parts of it worked well, as a whole the manuscript fell flat. It was too idiosyncratic, lacking any easily recognizable logic of inclusion and exclusion. It suffered from a wild imbalance of subject matter and chronology, and it failed to develop a central historical theme that could tie it all together. The one feature that lent it a certain continuity was the ideological gloss that Lane frequently imposed on events. In her interpretations, certain episodes served as lessons pointing to the need to protect individual freedom and to restrict government activity. Ultimately the effort failed as history, however, because it lacked a framework encompassing its frequently absorbing scenes and vignettes within some sort of coherent whole.

Lane’s work was weak exactly where Benton’s was strong. No matter how observers reacted to particular features of his mural, most would have agreed that the artist had put them all together with consummate skill. Its mirror images, narrative progression, juggling of three different modes of presentation (social history, episodic history, and mythological history), and symmetry of overall design impressed celebrants and detractors of the work alike. They might disagree about its garish colors, its exaggerated features, its unorthodox subject matter, its interpretive principles, or its political implications. But Benton’s skill in putting it all together was never in doubt.

The architectonic greatness of the Missouri mural resulted from the extreme care that Benton exercised in preparing for and planning it, as well as from the experience which he had picked up while doing his three previous major mural assignments. The Indiana mural, especially, which had been on display at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition in 1933, had taught him what he should avoid and what he should concentrate his energies upon. Not the least of his tricks was the skill he had acquired in handling people whose politics differed from his own and irate critics who questioned the accuracy of his judgment or his motives.³³ The most difficult episode during the painting of the mural occurred when a black politician took offense at Benton’s depiction of the maltreatment of a group of slaves working in the lead mines before the Civil War. Not desiring a confrontation, Benton informed the man that he had been searching for a model for a black onlooker at a political rally in another scene and that he appeared to be perfect for the task. Would he allow his face to be incorporated in the mural? Quickly mollified, the aggrieved pol agreed to pose, and soon his likeness was up on the wall. His protest died aborning.³⁴

Benton carefully thought out which subjects to include in the mural. This was a daunting task. It was not difficult to find enough stories or historical developments to depict. The challenge lay in finding a way to incorporate as many themes as possible in the small space that was available. Benton later acknowledged that “it was a considerable technical problem to get them all in there.”³⁵ Except for

four panels on the west wall, separated by windows (which he devoted largely to depictions of oil derricks and cornstalks), Benton had available on the north and south walls of the room spaces 25 feet long and 16 feet high. The long east wall extended 55 feet. Complicating the assignment was the presence in the middle of each of these walls of a large door, reaching about halfway up to the ceiling, which he had to work around.

Benton decided to divide each wall into three different types of space: above each door he painted a mythological scene (Huckleberry Finn and Jim on the Mississippi River, Jesse James and his gang staging holdups, and the legend of Frankie and Johnnie); flanking each door were two small panels depicting some episode or historical situation (e.g., slave labor in the lead mines, the Pony Express, and entertainment in a twenties speakeasy); the main wall space pictured broad social developments that had transformed Missouri between the days of early European settlement and modern urban-industrial civilization, as exemplified on the south wall by mirror image scenes of St. Louis and Kansas City. For Benton, the true challenge of the mural lay in discovering how to encompass this multiplicity of subjects in a coherent, meaningful framework. He succeeded better than Rose Wilder Lane for several reasons: he provided a more balanced temporal and spatial image of the state's history; he covered a wider range of subjects and time periods; he managed to depict both the energies and accomplishments of ordinary Missourians while also providing a critical commentary on social evils such as slavery, political corruption, and violence; and he presented his material in a distinctive artistic style that was immediately recognizable to those who were familiar with his earlier mural commissions.³⁶

Lane's ideological commitment was more to freedom and individualism, abstractly considered, than it was to real people in all their varied tints of humanity. Benton, on the contrary, despite his sophistication and experience, was able viscerally to identify with the types of ordinary people he painted, and this came through convincingly in his mural. Authentic subject matter fused with a vigorous style to produce a powerful aesthetic statement. Benton's leftist New Deal predilections shone through in a number of places, from the positive portrayals of hard-working farmers and laborers to the negative depictions of Ku Klux Klanners and corrupt politicians and businessmen. For him, as for Lane, history fused with myth, but his version of it differed considerably from hers. Progress consisted not simply in lifting the weight of authority from individuals and granting them absolute liberty but in forming stronger bonds of community in which "the people" collectively could strive to progress to higher levels of production and a better quality of life, aided, if necessary, by political institutions.

Benton devoted much time and thought to what subjects to include in his composition and how to arrange them in such a way that they would tell a meaningful story about the state. The result was a masterpiece of American art that stood the test of time and ranks as one of the most important murals done by a twentieth century artist.³⁷ Flawed as the painting may have been in some of its



Figure 4: On the south wall Benton featured city life, from the shoe factories and breweries of St. Louis on the left to the beef processors and art galleries of Kansas City on the right. Political boss Tom Pendergast serenely looks on in the lower-right-hand corner. Courtesy of the Missouri House of Representatives.

details, it stood out on the walls as a coherent whole, accomplishing what Benton had intended. That intent had been made very clear from the outset, and had, in fact, been written into his contract with the state legislature. This was to be a *social* history of Missouri. That largely determined the kinds of subjects to be depicted, although it certainly did not solve the whole task of inclusion and exclusion. "I wasn't so much interested in famous characters," Benton later recalled, "as I was in Missouri and the ordinary run of Missourians that I'd known in my life. The better part of that mural is stuff that I had actually experienced myself."³⁸

Like Lane, his work was in part autobiographical, and his political views influenced his methodology. Concerned about and committed to the betterment of the "common man," it was this type of ordinary American that he was bent on depicting. When critics objected to the exclusion of such figures as General John J. Pershing and namesake Senator Thomas Hart Benton, he shot back that "in the social history of Missouri, General Pershing was no more important than an ordinary bucksaw, and my grand-uncle, Senator Benton, was of far less importance than a common Missouri mule."³⁹ His midwestern brand of populism, learned at his Congressman father's feet, led him to this position along with his commitment to an art that would be understood by and that would accurately depict "the people." Referring to the Frenchman Hippolyte Taine's theories about the social motivation of art, Benton made the Missouri mural the crowning achievement of his brand of midwestern regionalism.⁴⁰

Subject in hand, Benton went one step further before rendering his design on the wall. He modeled his conception in little clay figures and then painted them before projecting the desired image onto the walls. This process, too, involved several steps, requiring an outline drawing or "cartoon" of the mural on a smaller canvas and then the transferring of that image to the walls before finally painting them while standing or sitting on scaffolding.⁴¹

The social history of Missouri, as Benton conceived it, included the early settlement period (on the North Wall); the nineteenth-century transformation of the state from a rural, agrarian society to an urban, industrial one (on the East Wall); and the emergence of a modern, technological society dominated by big business and large institutions, as exemplified by Kansas City and St. Louis (on the South Wall). In its large configurations, this narrative line turned out to be more satisfactory than the one presented by Rose Wilder Lane in her book manuscript, because it was more inclusive and because it better explained how modern industry and agriculture in the state had come to be. But the compelling interest—and the major source of controversy—of the mural lay in its details. It included scenes of fur traders plying Indians with whiskey, steamboats on the rivers and trains riding the rails, a baptism by a river and a political speech in front of a courthouse, loggers fashioning boards and miners drilling ore, farmers in the field and housewives in the kitchen, a jury in a courtroom, butchers in a meat plant, typists in an office, printers at their trade, schoolchildren and society matrons at a museum, and patrons in a nightclub.

Generating considerable criticism at the time were depictions of a bare-bottomed baby having its diaper changed at a picnic, a lynching of a Negro, a Jesse James holdup, Frankie getting her revenge on Johnny, and Kansas City political boss Tom Pendergast serenely attending a dinner meeting. Many observers also objected to the alleged inaccuracy of some of it, including a cow being milked and a mule pulling a plow. Real cows and mules didn't look that way at all, it was said. Some observers didn't appreciate allegedly "modernist" distortions in Benton's style, although art critics generally viewed him, as a leading regionalist during the 1930's, as being in opposition to the trends of high modernism.⁴²

What many viewers missed at the time were the deeper meanings that Benton encoded in his painting. Boss Pendergast's presence at the dinner was hardly as important as the sinking of the level of political discourse to a much lower level than it had been at the time that Benton's father (depicted in the scene in front of the courthouse) had been active. The posture of Col. M. E. Benton in delivering his extemporaneous (or memorized) speech to a rapt group of listeners was exactly the same as that of the businessman reading his speech at the Kansas City luncheon attended by Pendergast (who, one might infer, had dictated the contents of the speech). The audience of the latter is deeply bored and obviously not partaking of the same spirit of Jeffersonian democracy as is the first one.

The art that a society produces constitutes a telling commentary on its deepest values and ideas. During the Depression decade, social and intellectual fissures deepened to crisis proportions in the United States. The historical works of Thomas Hart Benton and Rose Wilder Lane—joined in time and space by experience and history—provide an unusual window through which we can look a half-century later to trace some of the intellectual history of the period, especially its turn toward the past to locate values and principles that could sustain them and guide them on their journey into the future.

Like many other artists during the period, Benton and Lane looked to the past for insight into the future, but the lessons they derived were at a far remove from each other. Benton sought neither an idealized past nor a return to a Jeffersonian agrarian society but rather hoped for a reinvigorated democratic community, helped along by New Deal-type reforms.⁴³ Lane drew exactly the opposite conclusions from her historical musings, calling for the establishment of a *laissez-faire* individualism untainted by the "communistic" schemes of New Deal liberalism. She took her stand with rugged individualists, who could stand alone, in either a rural or an urban setting. Ultimately, however, the former succeeded and the latter failed in their Missouri history efforts, not so much because of the ideologies they espoused but rather because of the artistic approaches they took. Both, however, in their own separate ways, contributed to one of the major phenomena of that tumultuous decade in American life: a turn toward history.

Notes

1. On the growing interest in history during the 1930s, see Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York, 1973), 314-16; Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984), 175-76; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991), chap. 11.
2. John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992), 126-35; Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis, 1982), chap. 4.
3. General works on Thomas Hart Benton and on his Missouri mural include Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* (New York, 1989); Erika L. Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago, 1991); Karol Ann Marling, *Tom Benton and His Drawings* (Columbia, 1985); Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton* (New York, 1973); Baigell and Allen Kaufman, "The Missouri Murals: Another Look at Benton," *Art Journal* 36 (Summer 1977), 314-21; James Gordon Rogers, Jr., "Thomas Hart Benton's Mural *The Social History of Missouri*" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri, 1989); Bob Priddy, *Only the Rivers Are Peaceful: Thomas Hart Benton's Missouri Mural* (Independence, Mo., 1989); Nancy Edelman, *The Thomas Hart Benton Murals in the Missouri State Capitol* (Jefferson City, 1975). Benton himself published two autobiographies: *An Artist in America* 4th rev. ed. (Columbia, Mo., 1983) and *An American in Art* (Lawrence, Kan., 1969).
4. Information on Lane and her Missouri history book was obtained from William Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane* (Columbia, Mo., 1993); William T. Anderson, *Laura's Rose: The Story of Rose Wilder Lane* (De Smet, SD, 1976); and materials in the Rose Wilder Lane Papers at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa (hereinafter cited as Lane Papers), which contain two typed manuscript versions of the book and notebooks she compiled while doing the research for it.
5. Highly influential essays by Carl Becker and Charles A. Beard on history as a construct led many of their fellow historians toward a more relativistic view of their subject during the thirties. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (January 1932), 221-36; Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *American Historical Review* 39 (January 1934), 219-29. See also Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 252-58 and James O. Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York, 1980).
6. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 258-76; Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, chaps. 8-10, 14.
7. Edelman, *The Thomas Hart Benton Murals*, 8.
8. Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, 240, 269, 272-73, 280.
9. *Ibid.*, 239-41; Rose Wilder Lane, *Journal*, April 29, May 20, 23, December 29, 1933, Lane Papers.
10. Rose Wilder Lane, *Diary*, May 10, 1935, Lane Papers; Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, 258-59.
11. Rose Wilder Lane, *Journal*, January 25, April 10, July 9, December 29, 1933, Lane Papers; Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, 239, 243-45, 264.
12. Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, 194-95, 244-45, 263-64, 293.
13. Holtz's biography of Lane goes furthest in documenting the collaboration between mother and daughter, but others have also developed the point. See Rosa Ann Moore, "The Little House Books: Rose-Colored Classics," *Children's Literature* 7 (1978), 7-16 and "Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: The Chemistry of Collaboration," *Children's Literature in Education* 11 (Autumn 1980), 101-9; William T. Anderson, "The Literary Apprenticeship of Laura Ingalls Wilder," *South Dakota History* 13 (Winter 1983), 285-331 and "Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: The Continuing Collaboration," *Ibid.* 16 (Summer 1986), 89-143; Janet Spaeth, *Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Boston, 1987), 1, 34, 86, 93-95.
14. Rose Wilder Lane, *Journal*, January 11, 1933, in American Novel Outline file. See also her diary for June 25, 1933 and her regular *Journal* entry for June 26, 1933, Lane Papers.
15. Rose Wilder Lane, *Journal*, January 30, 1933, *Diary*, January 15, June 7, 10-11, 16-18, 1933, Lane Papers.
16. See the dozen or so notebooks that Lane used in the Missouri Book file of the Lane Papers.
17. Rose Wilder Lane, *Diary*, July 23-Aug. 9, 1935 (passim), Lane Papers; Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, 260.
18. Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, 261.
19. Rose Wilder Lane, "Credo," *Saturday Evening Post*, March 7, 1936, 5-7, 30-35; Roger MacBride, ed., *The Lady and the Tycoon* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1973), 340.
20. Matthew Baigell, ed., *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany* (Lawrence, Kan., 1971), 33; Baigell and Kaufman, "The Missouri Murals: Another Look at Benton," 314, 319-20; Adams,

Thomas Hart Benton, 79-80, 225-34; Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, 235-37, 246-47, 260-63, 267-68, 270-71, 325.

21. Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 241, 243; Benton, *An Artist in America*, 259-62; Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, chaps. 16-19; Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 126.

22. Kansas City *Journal-Post*, Feb. 2, 1937; Rose Wilder Lane, *Diary*, May-July, 1935 (passim), Lane Papers.

23. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 273; Kansas City *Star*, June 18, 1936; The notebook is 7" by 8 1/2" and contains 15 pages. The Thomas Hart Benton Trust is at the United Missouri Bank of Kansas City. See also Priddy, *Only the Rivers Are Peaceful*, 43-45.

24. Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, 259; Rose Wilder Lane, notebooks in Missouri Book File, Lane Papers.

25. Maxwell Aley to Rose Wilder Lane, Aug. 28, 1936, Missouri Book File, Lane Papers.

26. Maxwell Aley to Rose Wilder Lane, Nov. 9, 1936; Walter D. Edmunds to Rose Wilder Lane, May 22, 1938, Missouri Book File, Lane Papers; Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House*, 285-86.

27. On the interpenetration of history and myth, see Peter Heehs, "Myth, History, and Theory," *History and Theory*, 33 (1994), 1-19.

28. Rose Wilder Lane, *We Say Missouri*, draft, version one, p. 3, Missouri Book File, Lane Papers.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 242 and Lane, *The Name Is Missouri*, draft, version two, p. 38, Missouri Book File, Lane Papers.

30. Rose Wilder Lane, *We Say Missouri*, draft, version one, p. 76 and Lane, *The Name Is Missouri*, draft, version two, pp. 160, 215, Missouri Book File, Lane Papers.

31. Benton himself explicitly linked the regionalist movement with a historical turn of mind in *An American in Art*, p. 70, where he associated his and the work of Wood and Curry with the popular histories of Charles Beard and James Truslow Adams.

32. See Lane's manuscripts in Missouri Book File, Lane Papers.

33. Thomas Hart Benton, "The Thirties," in Priddy, *Only the Rivers Are Peaceful*, 233.

34. *Ibid.*, 254-56.

35. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 212.

36. Observations about the mural are based on personally viewing it and on detailed accounts of it in Rogers, "Thomas Hart Benton's Mural"; Priddy, *Only the Rivers are Peaceful*; and Edelman, *The Thomas Hart Benton Murals*.

37. Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 261; Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 2.

38. Quoted in Priddy, *Only the Rivers Are Peaceful*, 175.

39. *Columbia Missourian*, Apr. 15, 1937.

40. Priddy, *Only the Rivers Are Peaceful*, 243.

41. *Ibid.*, 272-75.

42. Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 259-60; Edelman, *The Thomas Hart Benton Murals*, 1-4; Benton, *An Artist in America*, 271-73.

43. Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 126.