



Writing and photography | SUSAN DRAGOO

Kings of the Stone Age

ONE ROCK AT A TIME, TWO PUBLIC WORKS PROJECTS BUILT A LASTING LEGACY OF CABINS, BRIDGES, PICNIC SHELTERS, AND SCHOOLS THAT HAVE BEEN THE FOUNDATIONS OF THEIR COMMUNITIES' PUBLIC SPACES FOR GENERATIONS.



THE PALATIAL AND elegant Pawnee Bathhouse graces a hillside just north of town. Built of native stone in 1939, its elaborate stairway and multiple landings show the degree of artistry and craftsmanship often seen in WPA structures. The bathhouse and pool, both listed on the National Register of Historic Places, were used until 1978, when they were closed in favor of a modern swimming facility. With fundraising support from Pawnee High School alumni, the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, and private donations, the City of Pawnee restored and reopened the bathhouse and pool in 2003.



❖ LIKE US, THEY BELONG TO THE LAND. ❖

NATIVE STONE AGAINST a backdrop of red dirt and blackjack, some abide so comfortably in the natural environment it's easy to forget they were taken from the earth by human hands. Instead, they appear to have risen from it stone by stone. Some stand tall, fortress-like—sentinels of their communities now and in memory. Many bustle with life, while others are gone or in ruin, returned to the land and reclaimed by the elements.

They are stadiums, schools, armories, cabins, picnic shelters—the products of men put to work through the New Deal relief programs of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. Between 1933 and 1943, thousands of public buildings and recreational facilities were built in Oklahoma—along with roads, bridges, dams, and other public works—under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Their labor left an enduring mark on Oklahoma.

“As I walk my kids to school, we pass a storm sewer bearing the WPA insignia,” says David Wrobel, a history professor at the University of Oklahoma. “We see the WPA’s legacy each day without really seeing it.”

The built environment in Oklahoma, Wrobel says, owes much to the New Deal. Together, the output of the WPA and the CCC forever changed the state’s appearance and infrastructure.

While the physical legacies of the two agencies have similarities—and some projects used labor from both—their philosophies differed. The CCC came into being in 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, to furnish jobs and training for young men and to provide labor for conservation projects intended to revitalize overworked agricultural land, reverse soil erosion, and develop state and national parks. By 1941, Oklahoma had five thousand men working in twenty-six CCC camps and would ultimately host eighty-two camps.

In 1935, the WPA started giving work to unskilled men and women on public relief rolls. At its peak, it employed approximately 119,000 Oklahomans.

“These programs were of exceptional significance to Oklahoma,” says deputy state historic preservation officer Melvena Heisch. “The amount of construction resulting from them stimulated local economies and improved our transportation system, educational facilities, and quality of life.”


Federal law required communities to sponsor local WPA building projects, and because money was scarce, that often translated to providing materials. In CCC construction of state parks, the National Park Service required that buildings be made of stone or masonry and blend into the landscape. As a result, locally quarried stone was common in CCC and WPA structures.

The Oklahoma WPA constructed an estimated 2,178 playgrounds and athletic fields, twice as many as any other state. WPA workers also built 1,010 new schools in Oklahoma, 12.5 percent of those the program created nationwide. Each structure symbolized the struggles and victories of Oklahoma’s poor during the Great Depression, says W. David Baird, coauthor of *The Story of Oklahoma*, published in 1994.

While a history professor at Oklahoma State University in the 1980s, Baird led an extensive survey for the State Historic Preservation Office to identify the WPA structures remaining in Oklahoma. Of nearly two thousand evaluated, more than half were determined to be intact and appropriate for nomination to the Oklahoma Landmarks Inventory and National Register of Historic Places. Sixty-seven properties were added to the register then, more in the years since. The exact number of those that remain in use today is unknown, but the presence of so many is a continuing reminder of their relevance.

“When I think of a single project that embodies the WPA, I think of the armory at Hugo. The western exterior wall is a work of art,” says Baird. “When I was photographing it, an African American man came up beside me and said, ‘I helped build that.’ He had lived ten miles east of Hugo, walked to and from the job site every day, and was paid a dollar per day. It was the difference, he said, between life and death.”

There is no comprehensive list of CCC and WPA projects in Oklahoma. Visit okhistory.org/shpo/thematics.htm for a list of thematic surveys, some of which include CCC and WPA sites. For a list of the CCC camps in Oklahoma, visit cclegacy.org/CCC_Camps_Oklahoma.html.

 THE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION of the Hugo Armory’s masonry—which includes stonework patterns like this arrow on the west wall—makes it one of the most beautiful Depression-era buildings in southeastern Oklahoma. Constructed in 1936 of native sandstone in multiple colors, the privately owned armory is one of more than 50 the WPA built across the state.



MEMBERS OF THE National Park Service saw manmade structures as intrusions into the natural environment. If indigenous materials were used appropriately, they believed, buildings would appear to be part of a rock outcropping or look as if they were growing out of the ground. When developing Oklahoma's first state parks, members of the Oklahoma Parks Commission widely adopted the National Park Service "rustic" style, evident in this 1938 CCC picnic shelter at Roman Nose State Park.



TO ACHIEVE THE appearance of antiquity, the WPA built the Gateway to Jerusalem at the Holy City of the Wichitas with native granite and little or no exposed mortar. The Easter pageant production, one of the longest-running in the nation, predates the 1934-1936 construction of several elaborate sets on the sparsely vegetated, rocky hillside, a scene intended to be reminiscent of Judea. The Holy City is inside the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge off State Highway 49.

THE MASSIVE SPILLWAY at Lake Okmulgee is a scenic masterpiece that also serves the utilitarian purpose of floodwater protection. The 40-by-250-foot structure was built by the WPA in 1940 of limestone quarried from a hillside east of the dam. After heavy rains, the cascade is at its most impressive, taking on the sound and appearance of a natural waterfall. It is located 10 miles west of Okmulgee on State Highway 56.





OPEN ARCHES ADORN the outside of the baseball stadium grandstand at Okemah's Pecan Bowl, a large athletic facility completed by the WPA in 1939 and still used by local school teams, Little League baseball, and a minor-league football team. The structure includes a native stone fence 257 feet long on one side that surrounds the football and baseball fields. During World War II, the Pecan Bowl served as a POW camp.



THE CCC HAD a major influence on the creation or improvement of national wildlife refuges. The Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, set aside as a national forest in 1901 and designated a game preserve in 1907, has the largest number of CCC structures still standing among national wildlife refuges. Dating to 1941, the Jed Johnson Observation Tower was the last CCC structure built at the refuge. It is accessible on foot from a parking lot off the Holy City/Rush Lake Road exit from State Highway 49, though public access to the tower's interior and observation deck is prohibited.



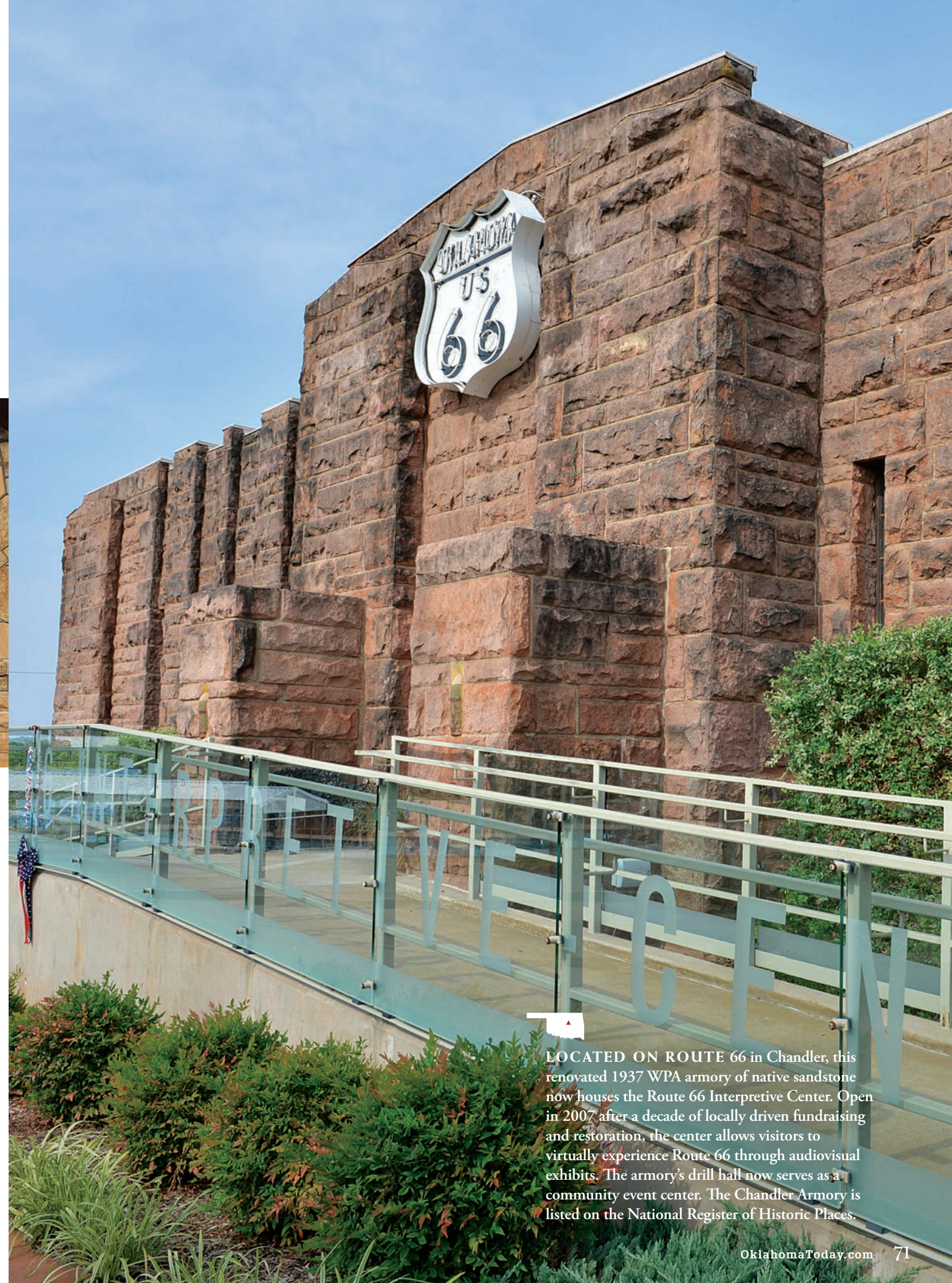
GREENLEAF STATE PARK near Braggs is home to a number of cabins the WPA built in the 1930s. All feature the characteristic rustic style in which the edifice appears to be a part of its natural environment. Cabin #11 achieves that effect with stairstep flanges of boulder-size flagstones at each corner.



WPA WORKERS USED darker rock to embed these initials in the native stone walls of the fieldhouse at Harmon Stadium in Okmulgee. The athletic field was completed in 1936 and is notable both for its workmanship and for a grandstand that measures 99 by 239 feet.



"THE DEVELOPMENT OF our state parks is a significant long-term benefit of the New Deal for Oklahoma," says Sterling Evans, a professor of history at the University of Oklahoma. "In the early 1930s, we were still a new state, lacked the infrastructure of other states, and had very little money. This was a way for Oklahoma to get a focus on conservation, and the CCC provided a boost." Near Pawhuska, Osage Hills State Park, built by CCC Company 895 between 1936 and 1940, is an excellent example of CCC workmanship. The park's bridges, including this keystone arched bridge on the main park road, are so sturdy that engineers cannot measure their maximum load capacity.



LOCATED ON ROUTE 66 in Chandler, this renovated 1937 WPA armory of native sandstone now houses the Route 66 Interpretive Center. Open in 2007 after a decade of locally driven fundraising and restoration, the center allows visitors to virtually experience Route 66 through audiovisual exhibits. The armory's drill hall now serves as a community event center. The Chandler Armory is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



ORIGINALLY INTENDED TO be a summer home for Oklahoma governor William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray, Tucker Tower was completed by the WPA in 1938. The iconic five-story structure at Lake Murray State Park sits atop a rocky ridge that juts into the lake. Recently renovated, the tower now serves as a museum that pays homage to the WPA and CCC workers who built the park. Lake Murray is Oklahoma’s oldest and largest state park and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

