

# Of Hoods and Canaries: Profiles from the Federal Writers' Project

BY PAT WILLARD

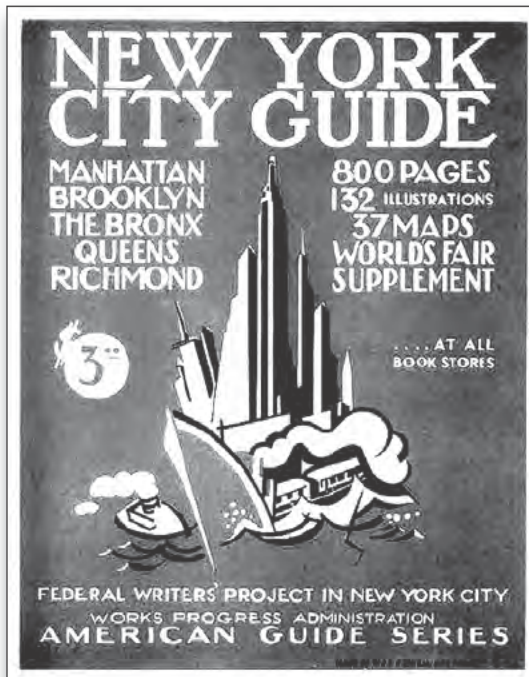
If you were a writer in New York City in the 1930s, your best hopes of surviving the Great Depression was to get a job in The Federal Writers' Project (FWP). Part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which grew out of the 1934 Civil Works Emergency Relief Acts, the Project employed thousands of laid-off reporters, fledgling novelists, and poets across the country. After a lengthy, and what many considered a personally invasive financial screening process to certify a candidate was sufficiently poverty-stricken, a writer was furnished with a desk and a typewriter, then assigned to produce copy on topics as varied as histories of local institutions and communities, nature guides, and, most famously, state travel guides and oral histories of former slaves and general laborers—from stone cutters to circus dancers.

With all the hard-luck writers in the city, the New York office was one of the most prolific. The New York office also paid the best at \$103 a week, and many Federal Writers tried to be reassigned to the office for the pay alone. But with a surfeit of local talent (John Cheever, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, among them), the office could afford to be picky. From 1935, when the office opened, to 1943, when Congress pulled funding for the entire Project with the onset of World War II, the New York City writers produced over twenty-five books, among

them the classic WPA travel guide to the city and *The Film Index*, a 780-page bibliography. Several manuscripts were near completion as the doors were being locked, including "Famous New York Trials" (which Ralph Ellison worked on) and ethnic studies of the city's Jews, Irish, and Poles. The Federal government directed that all the material from the FWP offices—research and writers' notes, drafts, and edited manuscripts—were to be boxed up and sent to the Library of Congress for storage.

But not all treasures of the New York office were shipped. Many were kept for the city's Municipal Archives where they remain today, preserved on microfilm. Every now and then, an attempt is made to publish the manuscripts but most efforts have failed. Few people, other than scholars and the curious, have enjoyed these important works.

The following profiles, taken from "Famous New York Trials" and "New York Portraits," are typical of the treasures to be found at the Archives. The first profile (about Durable Malloy) may have been written by Alvin Moses. The second one (*Portrait of a Canary*) was written by Clifton Cuthbert. The profiles describe events in the lives of two uncommon New Yorkers of Irish decent (or seemingly so). They are, in turn, creatively told, funny, heart-breaking, and evocative—as fresh today as they were when they were written nearly seventy-five years ago.



**Illustration:** The New York City Guide was written as part of the Federal Writers' Project and published by the Works Progress Administration in 1939. It has since become an important source for well-written information about life in the city during that period. Originally published copies have become collectors' items.

Pat Willard's most recent book is *America Eats! On the Road with the WPA: The Fish Fries, Box Supper Socials and Chitlin Feasts that Define Real American Food* (Bloomsbury USA, 2008). Her previous books are *Pie Every Day*, *A Soothing Broth*, and *Secrets of Saffron* (nominated for an IACP award as best cookbook). She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, Chris Finan, and their two sons. ©2008. Published with permission of Pat Willard.

### THE MEAN TALE OF DURABLE MALLOY (From "Famous New York Trials")

Here is a tragic-comic case well worth the telling, perhaps for no other reason than that it has no justification whatsoever in plot, in interest of locale, in its principals, in its motive, in the methods in which the perpetrators were apprehended, or in the trial in General Sessions Court in 1933, in which four men were charged with the cold-blooded murder of Michael Malloy. While the public shivered deliciously for several weeks, lush-mouthed journalists described the sorry crew as a devilish and widespread "Murder Trust," and again, as the "Bronx Murder Syndicate."

Yet this miserable band would never have come to trial if the fastidious Eddy "Tin Ear" Smith, arrested for a robbery unconnected with the murder, had not, in the vernacular of the underworld, "sang" and sang loudly—and with embarrassing effect. So bare, so mean, so sordid is everyone and everything that touches upon the case, that it becomes by virtue of these things almost a social statement.

One day early in 1932 one Michael Malloy, a shabby and disreputable figure, shambled into Anthony Marino's speakeasy. The proprietor looked him up and down with a sharp commercial eye. For it was said by the police in court, though never proved, that Marino had at that time just collected on the insurance of one Mabel Carson, an unemployed beautician. He had befriended this Carson woman by housing her, feeding her, and giving her hooch, by placing a \$2,000 insurance on her life, by drugging her and putting her to bed, by pouring water on her bed clothes and opening the window to let the

night air blow upon her in that condition. Mabel Carson died of pneumonia on March 17th.

After appraising Malloy, Marino called a conference of his underworld associates—the subject for discussion, Michael Malloy. It was agreed by the assembled that Michael Malloy would be a good investment—that he could be finished off in two weeks or so. The group would then benefit from an insurance policy taken out by them, naming one of their members beneficiary. Frank Pasqua, the undertaker, was delegated to take care of that question.

A few free drinks from Pasqua, as a sort of social introduction, and Michael Malloy regarded the underground specialist as an angel from heaven. It was not

long before Malloy received shelter in his 116th Street undertaking establishment, ostensibly as Pasqua's caretaker. Then began the happiest period, no doubt, of Michael Malloy's life.

It was subsequently brought in evidence at the trial, that Frank Pasqua insured the life of Michael Malloy in the amount of \$1,290, with double indemnity clauses raising the benefits at death to \$1,780. It would seem from the gingerly testifying insurance agents that it is a practice, albeit one not boasted of, for insurance agents to strike up the acquaintance of undertakers, if not for social reasons than perhaps because of their professional attitude toward life expectations. Perhaps they act as antidotes for one another! Be that as it may, quite by chance of course, various agents found themselves in the cheerful company of Senor Pasqua, and quite inadvertently discussing the life expectancy of Michael Malloy. It later developed in court that the highly ethical Metropolitan Insurance Company, perhaps fearing the double jeopardy of an undertaker as the



**Photo:**  
*Taxi cabs, like many autos in the 1930s, were heavy vehicles but were not easily maneuvered. Hershey Green made three attempts to hit Durable Malloy. Pictured is a taxi cab near the Grand Opera House, northwest corner, West 23rd Street and Eighth Avenue, Manhattan (September, 1937). Courtesy New York Public Library.*



insurer and beneficiary, and a chronic alcoholic as the insured, balked against the investment.

The Prudential Insurance Company, however, was more sporting and immediately agreed to place a couple of bets on Malloy's life.

"It's woi it," he declared, and pointed to the added risk involved in doing it with his own car. They failed to come to terms.

Harry "Hershey" Green, sometimes employed as a taxi-cab driver, was found to be more amenable to reason and to the lure of a \$150 fee. A clause in the verbal agreement stated that the money would be forthcoming only if the accident was successfully fatal.

## INSURANCE MURDER CHARGED TO FIVE

**Dr. F. A. Manzella, Ex-Alderman, Accused of Signing False Death Certificate.**

### TALE OF HORROR IS TOLD

**Police Say Gas Was Used After Auto and Bad Liquor Failed to Kill Derelict Man.**

Five men were charged with murder, Dr. Frank A. Manzella, former Republican Alderman from the Twentieth District in Harlem, was held in \$10,000 bail as an accessory after the fact and two others were detained as material witnesses yesterday after an inquiry into charges that a derelict man had been murdered to collect \$1,788 for which the defendants had had him insured.

A story of horror was unfolded by the police and District Attorney Samuel J. Foley of the Bronx. It concerned a man who proved so hardy of life that another man, with a false identification card, almost was done to death as a substitute. The authorities were admittedly skeptical two weeks ago when they were informed of the plot, but their first search for proof not only uncovered the murder of Michael Malloy, a former station-

Murphy, who was named beneficiary in the policies, then hired a furnished room for Malloy at 1,210 Fulton Avenue and on Feb. 22 killed him with the gas. Murphy sat up all night with the corpse, it was said, and next morning Dr. Manzella was called to write the death certificate. Mr. Foley said Pasqua the undertaker, made the arrangements with the physician. That same day, the 23d, Malloy was buried. Pasqua wrote out a bill for more than \$400 for funeral expenses to impress the insurance companies, the police said, but the derelict was placed in a plain box worth \$10 and buried in a \$12 charity grave. The box was found twelve feet under ground, and it had caved in from the weight of the earth.

Dr. Hochman said that there were two black bruises around Malloy's eyes that Dr. Manzella should have reported immediately to the Medical Examiner's office, because no physician is permitted to issue a death certificate where signs of violence are found. The police said Malloy did not leave the Bronx during the eleven days prior to his death, although Dr. Manzella was alleged to have told them that Malloy had been to his office in Harlem on two occasions and complained of suffering from the grip. According to Dr. Hochman, grip and bronchitis were listed on the certificate as contributing causes of death. Mr. Foley said Dr. Manzella denied having received \$100 of \$150 reported to have been promised for the certificate, but said he got only the regular fee of \$5.

This tiresome but necessary business out of the way, the partners turned to the more pleasant and lucrative problem of realizing upon their investment. The best way to get rid of Malloy, it was callously decided, would be to run him over with an automobile. Thus he would be found dead on the road, having been struck by a car while blind drunk.

Now Eddy "Tin Ear" Smith, a confidante of the firm of Marino-Pasqua and Company, was offered the opportunity of running down Malloy for a \$200 fee. Mr. Smith, however, maintained stoutly that \$500 was usual in such transactions.

So on a night in January, 1933, Malloy was re-saturated with booze and assisted into "Hershey" Green's car. The rest of the friends piled in and Green stepped on the gas. In a deserted street in northeast Bronx, the cab was stopped and Malloy was carried out and stood spraddle-legged in the middle of the street. Green turned his machine and drove back several blocks in order to acquire sufficient momentum for a clean and effective knock-out blow. Then, just as he was careening full speed toward the undulating Malloy, "Tough Tony" Bastone noticed a woman looking out of a window in a house nearby. So Malloy was pulled away. The cab stopped and the group proceeded to a more secluded spot.

Once again Bastone and Murphy propped Malloy up in the middle of the street and Green's cab bored down upon him. Yet, blind drunk as he was, Malloy saw the car approaching and leaped instinctively out of its path. The conspirators were nothing if not patient, and on their third attempt their efforts were crowned with success.

After a rapid consultation they decided it would be best to run over him a couple of times "just to make sure." A passing car however made this precaution unwise.

That night the business men celebrated. But on the morrow came the morning newspaper which, despite careful reading, failed to reveal any mention of a departed Malloy. Three days passed. Finally Murphy was appointed to inquire solicitously of the public hospitals for a patient named Michael Malloy.

A cheerful voice from Fordham Hospital announced the sad news: "He is doing very nicely."

*Illustration:  
The plot leading to  
the murder of Michael  
Malloy was reported in  
the New York Times  
for May 13, 1933.  
Courtesy of the  
New York Times.*

Meanwhile the group was faced with the payment of insurance premiums. Malloy luxuriated in the hospital, suffering a broken collarbone, concussion of the brain, and various bruises and contusions. Another conference was held. It was decided that since the insurance company had no idea what Malloy looked like, another individual might well be substituted for him. The understudy was one Joseph Patrick Murray, who was also afflicted with an incurable thirst. He was groomed for his debut at the Marino speakeasy on Third Avenue, taken for a taxi-cab drive and given a drink calculated to make short work of all his troubles. Murray, alias Malloy, took one swig and passed out, and was run over with the cab. He was left for dead. The next morning the associates again scanned the newspapers. In vain. Murray had been badly injured, but he too survived after a two-month period in a hospital.

Much sooner than anyone expected the real Michael Malloy reappeared at the speakeasy, exhibiting lusty health and an unquenchable thirst. He had been given nothing but milk and coca in the hospital and his system cried out for its normal requirements. The now desperate conspirators tanked him up with hooch and went into a huddle: Malloy must die. But how?

Marino had a dandy idea. They slopped Malloy up with liquor and took him out one very cold night to Crotona [sic] Park. There they undid his clothes and doused him lavishly with water, leaving him to freeze to death.

On the following morning in walked Malloy to the speakeasy. He had the sniffles.

"Gimme a drink," said he in his loudest voice. "I must have caught a chill last night."

The brain-trusters mulled over the problem again of how to get rid of this tough fellow and how to get their hands on their investment. After much painstaking research, they discovered a sure-fire and scientific method of disposing of him: they would feed him raw oysters soaked in denatured alcohol. After being plied with several drinks, this tempting dish was placed before Malloy. He fell to with gusto.

"Got some more of them things?" questioned the hungry Malloy. "They're very tasty."

But the conspirators were not to be gain-

said. They ingeniously opened a can of sardines, exposing the contents in the can for a number of days to be thoroughly poisoned. They ground the can into fragments and served this mess to him in sandwiches.

Result: Malloy only suffered a mild heartburn.

The now well-nigh frantic killers began giving Malloy large quantities of wood alcohol, with the effect that Malloy passed into comatose states more rapidly, but his vital organs functioned as effectively as before.

At last Frank Pasqua, the undertaker, thought of a peachy idea. They rented a room, got Malloy good and soused, took him upstairs, put him to bed and placed a rubber hose into his mouth, the other end of which they fastened onto an illuminating gas jet. Kreisberg and Murphy watched while Malloy turned bright pink and then to a beautiful purple. Positive that the man at last was dead, they removed the hose and returned to join their friends at the speakeasy—and rejoiced.

Malloy was "found" next morning by Murphy and a Dr. Frank Manzella, former Republican Alderman from Harlem. The medico obligingly signed a death certificate, stating the cause of death as "lobar pneumonia." Pasqua removed the remains to his undertaking parlor and thoughtfully gave them a decent Christian burial in Grasslands Cemetery in Westchester.

Several days' later \$800 insurance was collected. Subsequently, an application was made for the \$490 from the Prudential Insurance Company. This company declared, however, that a company rule required that a week must elapse before payment could be made. Before a week had elapsed "Tough Tony" Bastone, one of the conspirators, became rather ugly declaring to his colleagues that \$65 was insufficient recompense for his services. During the unbusiness-like disagreement that followed, "Tough Tony" managed to get himself shot to death in front of the speakeasy. The gentle Maglione submitted meekly to arrest, admitting the unfortunate incident, but claiming self-defense.

Marino the "master mind," disappeared. Murphy was arrested and held as material wit-



ness. When, after some time had passed, Eddy "Tin Ear" Smith was arrested for robbery, the case took an embarrassing turn, for he promptly "ran off at the mouth."

Whereupon the body of Michael Molloy was exhumed for the edification and the expert probing of the specialists. The color of the cadaver mutely testified to gas poisoning. With prompt dispatch, Marino, Pasqua, Keisberg, and Murphy, were indicted for the murder of Michael Malloy. Harry "Hershey" Green was held for felonious assault. Dr. Manzella, in keeping with his more esteemed position in society, was held on a false certificate charge. Meanwhile, Maglione was still incarcerated and held for disposing of the lamented Bastone.

The completion of the trial was routine. And as routine was the finding of the jury, the sentencing by the judge and the pulling of the switch,

Indeed, as we started out to say, this is a mean tale, unrelieved in its sordidness, except for the dubious quality of the humor which may be derived from the durability of Malloy and the patent inability of the murderers.

There are mean streets in all five boroughs, where Michael Malloys still shamle in, to be served by Marinos, Pasquas and insurance agents. There are district attorneys and courts that will find them guilty. There are newspapers to lift them momentarily from the anonymity which they now enjoy. There are millions who will thrill to the graphically described hum of the electric current which society exacts in payment for their existence. And as long as this complex exists, the responsibility for which belongs nowhere and to no one, to everywhere and to everyone, just so long will this sordid tale of Michael Malloy belong in a gallery of New York Crime.

#### **PORTRAIT OF A CANARY** *(From "New York Portraits")*

Hazel Norman is twenty-two years old and she was born with a name like Mary McGee

or Mabel Jones or, possibly, Vera Polinsky, some place in Pennsylvania. Three years ago she discovered that she could sing jazz songs with a fair amount of professional competence and got herself a job in a roadhouse near her home town, throwing up her work as slave to a machine in a textile mill. A year later she left to try the big city, not too confident about how it'd pan out. Since then she has grown fast, all in one direction. She'd had about three dozen jobs, mostly in small neighborhood spots all over Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn; occasionally, when the rent got far behind, she has gone to work as hostess in clip joints where the suckers come in and get cornered into buying colored water for the girls. She's had five or six different singing styles, picking up a trick here and another one there whenever she's heard one of the high-paid canaries do something she could use. By now she's got together a style that's pretty much

her own, and it's not bad at all. It couldn't be bad or she wouldn't be working, even in a dive, because there are ten thousand girls around town all trying to do what she's doing.

She gets paid about twenty dollars a week, with a few tips from drunks that don't amount to much, but she likes what she's doing and wouldn't think of going into anything else. She enjoys singing and during the past two years she's carefully formed a living-and-thinking routine that she wouldn't exchange for a tone-deaf stock broker with ten thousand a year income and a twenty-room suburban home. If you play the middle of a record made by one of her favorite bands she can tell you not only which band it is but the name of the individual player who happens to be taking a chorus. A few months after landing in New York she smoked her first tea [marijuana] and found that it agreed with her, that it increased her natural rhythmic sense and made her feel generally cozy, with no ill effects that she could discover, all of which proved that she was a viper. Consequently she never touches alcohol,



**Photo:**  
Jazz vocalist Anita O'Day started her career in the 1930s and enjoyed a career that lasted over 50 years in American popular music. Like "Hazel Norman" (born Mary McGee?), she changed her name (from Anita Belle Colton). "O'Day" may have been chosen because it, or a variant "oday," had become an American slang term for money.

except now and then a little sweet wine, and she professes to have a great contempt for lusher, meaning people who drink.

Her oval...face is beginning to show faint lines, although probably no worse than if she stayed in the textile mill, and men consider her pretty. Generally it doesn't do them any good, for she's romantic enough to have decided long ago that gold digging bores her. What she goes for is passable looking young men who can improvise hot choruses on any kind of horn and who share her habits with her. Usually there's been one around during her two years in New York, not many, say three or four in succession. George Barckus is her biggest passion so far because he's in one of the most famous bands [Benny Shaw] in the country and she thinks his trombone is as good as any white man's living except possibly Jackson Teagarden's. She's very proud of the fact that she formed this opinion first, and then managed to meet him later.

She can dance as good as anybody, going as far as to shag and do a mean lindy when she gets in the mood. But there's always the danger that too much dancing at the wrong time will lead people to think she's a jitterbug, and that would be bad. All her musician friends have agreed that the thing to do when fine hot music is being played is to sit down and dig it with both ears, just moving some part of your body in time to the rhythm. To her, jitterbugs are not bad kids, but they have a lot to learn. She can tolerate them a lot better than she can ickies, who are people with no appreciation at all for hot music.

Neither Hazel nor George are bashful what they do with people around, and when they meet in the crowded hotel lobby at five o'clock they go into a long, lingering kiss before they say a word. The fact that everybody stops their conversation right in the middle to stare worries them about as much as a cheering audience annoys a member of the Players Club.

George has got himself up sharp by putting on his loudest brown check suit, with a blue striped shirt, brown tie and light yellow shoes. In every other way he looks and acts like he's

glad to come back to Broadway and everything connected to it, including herself. As soon as they start heading toward the restaurant he begins to talk, telling her everything about the city of Pittsburgh that he was able to find out.



He looks not only pleased with life but high on it. This keeps up until Hazel feels suspicious, and after he sits down and orders a large meal and begins putting it away, she feels more than suspicious. She knows that one of the affects of marijuana is to give you a fierce appetite. "You sure haven't been losing any time," she tells him, with a touch of accusation. "How's that?" he asks, all innocence. "Baby, you've been sittin' there sendin' yourself for the past half hour. Don't tell me you knocked yourself out just with that jive you've been givin' out about Pittsburgh." "Don't be like that, honey," he says genially. "I'm just feelin' good about being back with you, that's all." "You went uptown, didn't you?" She's beginning to look mean now. "I said I was going up. And did that Spick sell me some good tea! I told him I didn't want any of that stuff like he gave me last time, and I just stayed there sampling what he brought out, just sittin' there kinda shakin' my head every time he showed me something new and telling him he'd have to do better than that because I was planning to have a big time tonight until

**Photo:**

*Jack Teagarden was an innovative jazz trombonist whose career, beginning in the 1920s, lasted more than forty years. Playing with popular musicians like Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, and Glenn Miller, he achieved a national reputation during the 1930s.*



finally he went back somewhere and dug into the bottom of something and he came along with this real special stuff, and I looked at him and I said, 'Pops, that's a killer.'" "Well," she says, half-appealed, "you didn't have to sample so much of it." "Honey, just wait till you blow some of this!" With a little more fast talking

he makes her see that she never had a grievance in the first place, and by the time they're upstairs in the hotel she's ready to forget the whole thing. Teddy's Tavern is a small sized bar in the West Forties where the drinks are cheap and even at that the patrons mainly order beer. A four-piece band sits on a platform in the back room playing dance music from nine to four at way below union scale and every twenty minutes accompanying Hazel in a song.

It's not the kind of place that appeals to George, being just a shabby neighborhood dive, but he's here tonight to see Hazel come along all right. They sit at a table next to the bandstand.

"Son," he tells the waiter, "make mine Pepsi-colas. I believe the lady will take the same."

After a few minutes Hazel gets up to do her first number, even though the place is almost empty. She knows that she's in good form tonight as she stands singing into the microphone, the tea helping and George's presence doing the rest. She hasn't felt so good in weeks, and she astonishes the plump Italian owner by singing twice as often as the rules require on a busy night.

Each time she returns to the table George greets her with enthusiasm: "Mama, that was solid!" or "That time you really sang back!"

Every half hour he goes to the men's room to light a stick of marijuana and take three or four drags on it, and a little less often she makes a trip to the women's room for the same

purpose. In between they sip their beverage and talk about the one subject that interests them. Politics is something that doesn't exist for them and they never notice the weather, but they can go for a good twenty minutes on why So-and-so's band doesn't sound as good as it did last year.

When they've found the answer to this, Hazel does another song. Then George suddenly announced that he's too high to sit still. He climbs onto the stand, borrows the trombonist's instrument and goes

through a couple of wild choruses with the band. At the end the proprietor rushes over to say how fine it was, and Hazel has no trouble getting the rest of the night off.

In the cab going across town she's about as happy as she ever gets. They'll have time to look in at a few swank spots, the kind of places George is always telling her she'll be singing in just as soon as she gets the right break. It's true that the cover-charge joints are always looking for a new face and, who knows? Maybe sometime they'll find hers. But these days nobody looks ahead much and she never counts on anything. She's all right the way she is now.



**Illustration:**  
The use of marijuana in the 1920s-30s, especially among jazz musicians and their audiences, was commonplace and widespread enough for the government to produce "scare-tactic" films like *Reefer Madness* to try to stem the rising levels of drug use.