Finding aid for the Doris Cook Federal Theatre at Golden Gate International Exposition Collection, 1937-1940 (bulk 1939)

Finding aid prepared by San Francisco History Center staff.
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**Title:** Doris Cook Federal Theatre at Golden Gate International Exposition Collection,

**Date (inclusive):** 1937-1940

**Date (bulk):** 1939

**Collection Identifier:** SFH 44

**Creator:** Cook, Doris

**Physical Description:** 1 box (0.5 cubic feet)

**Contributing Institution:** San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

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**Abstract:** Papers from Doris Cook's tenure with the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Theatre on Treasure Island, where she served as Assistant Director of Information from Jan. 20-July 14, 1939. Types of material include reports, production calendars, programs, research notes, clippings, articles, correspondence, publicity documents, and a small amount of ephemera. Some materials are issued by or pertain to the Federal Theatre at the national level.

The collection is stored onsite.

**Language of Materials:** Collection materials are in English.

**Access**
The collection is open for research.

**Publication Rights**
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**Preferred Citation**
[Identification of item], Doris Cook Federal Theatre at Golden Gate International Exposition Collection (SFH 44), San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

**Provenance**
Gift from nephew of Elizabeth Morcombe, 2002

**Related Materials**
San Francisco History Center's Vertical Files: Fairs. Golden Gate International Exhibition.

**Biographical/Historical note**
The Federal Theatre Project was one of four Arts projects set up in the late summer of 1935 under the Works Progress Administration as a work relief program to employ thousands of jobless writers, artists, musicians, actors and others in the theatre. Informed by the changing politics and shifting social order of the day, the Federal Theatre sought to create theatre that was not simply entertaining, but also relevant to all Americans. This aim resulted in such unusual productions as *The Swing Mikado*, *One-Third of a Nation* (an expose of housing conditions in New York City) and the topical "Living Newspaper" plays. In keeping with its grassroots precepts, the organization formed regional units in cities and states all over the country, and presented its productions not only in city theatres, but also "in Catholic convents and Baptist churches, circus tents and university halls, police stations, showboats and CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camps." The Federal Theatre's repertory consisted of children's plays, Shakespeare, O'Neill, new African-American plays, Yiddish musical theatre, Gilbert and Sullivan, circus performances, puppet shows, and productions in French, Spanish, Italian and German. Inherent in the Federal Theatre Project's threefold design --as a relief measure, a work program, and an artistic experiment-- were unresolvable conflicts that led to the project's demise in June of 1939 when appropriations committees in Congress did not approve continued funding.

The Federal Theatre Project came to San Francisco early in 1936, when it began to mount productions at the Alcazar Theatre. In mid-February of 1939, the Federal Theatre Project began its Treasure Island "run," occupying the entire south end of the northeast wing of the large Federal building (designed by Timothy L. Pflueger) at the Golden Gate International Exposition. This wing consisted mainly of a fully-equipped theatre designed both for the Federal Theatre Project and the showing of government-produced motion pictures. While the theatre's seating capacity was only 473, it played to consistently full houses: a total of 75 performances to some 16,817 paid admissions during its five months' residence. After the Federal Theatre Project was closed down nationwide on June 30, 1939, the theatre on Treasure Island was devoted
entirely to the presentation of documentaries produced by the government; the same program was carried during the GGIE's second season in 1940.

Doris Cook, who compiled these papers, served as Assistant Director of Information for the Federal Theatre on Treasure Island from January 20, 1939 until July 14, 1939. The June 30 shutdown of the Federal Theatre Project is ironic in light of the Treasure Island unit's success, particularly with the "Swing Mikado" show, which newspaper reviews not two weeks earlier had hailed as a production that would turn around the fortunes of "that sick man of Treasure Island show business, the Federal Theatre."

**Scope and Contents**

Nearly all of the materials collected here date from Doris Cook's tenure with the Federal Theatre on Treasure Island. Folder 1, "Weekly Report January 15, 1939" consists of a typed draft of the first such report to National Director Hallie Flanagan, issued by the Supervisor of the Federal Theatre on Treasure Island. "Weekly production calendars" in folder 2 were created by the Federal Theatre Project's National Service Bureau and issued by the Northern California District office; these show the productions in progress at the various venues or units around the country. Folder 3, "Programs with casts and credits," contains printed programs for presentations and exhibits in the Federal Theatre Playhouse and the Alcazar Theatre, plus typed versions of other programs, and schedules and lists of motion pictures shown. Folder 4, "Programs - special events," includes printed programs, plus posters, press kit materials, invitations and other items. Folders 5 and 6 were taken from the same folder; folder 5 contains data used to create programs and program notes for Federal Music Project productions on Treasure Island, while folder 6 contains similar data used in creation of program materials in folders 3 and 4. Folder 7, "Living Newspaper' research and synopses," contains six pages of research and a synopsis for a play about the Golden Gate Bridge plus data for program notes on another "Living Newspaper" play titled "Give Us This Day." Folder 8 consists mainly of clippings regarding the Federal Theatre on Treasure Island; also included are reprinted articles, speeches and reports that were distributed at the national level by the Federal Theatre Project. Folder 9 also contains clippings, but these are items not dealing directly with the Federal Theatre; many are about the GGIE, and some appear to have been kept as sources of possible ideas for promotional tie-ins. In folder 10 may be found press releases and other publicity documents created and distributed by the Federal Theatre on Treasure Island, by the Federal Theatre's national office or by the Press Division of the GGIE. Folder 11 contains short announcements about the Federal Theatre that were created by Doris Cook's office and read periodically over the GGIE's public address system. Folder 12 contains correspondence, notes, clippings, telegrams, draft materials, forms and personal items created by Doris Cook during the course of her duties as Assistant Director of Information for the Federal Theatre on Treasure Island. Among the notable items in this folder are Ms. Cook's beginning and ending employment forms (sardonically labeled "The shortest story ever told"), as well as several items signed "Aunt Blanche" and "Cousin Blanche" on the personal letterhead of Mrs. George Creel (George Creel was the U.S. commissioner to the GGIE, in charge of the United States pavilion and its exhibits).

**Arrangement**

Arranged by type of material.

**Subjects and Indexing Terms**

Federal Theatre Project (U.S.). -- Archives
Golden Gate International Exposition (1939-1940 : San Francisco, Calif.). -- Archives
Theater--California--San Francisco
Treasure Island (San Francisco County, Calif.)

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Box 1, Folder 1

**Weekly report for week ending January 15, 1939**

Box 1, Folder 2

**Weekly production calendars, February - March 1939**

Box 1, Folder 3

"Programs with casts and credits"

Box 1, Folder 4

**Programs - special events**
Box 1, Folder 5
“Program data” - Federal Music Project April - June 1939

Box 1, Folder 6
“Program data” - Notes, text, lists, drafts of programs Feb.-Apr., 1939

Box 1, Folder 7
“Living Newspaper” research and synopses

Box 1, Folder 8
Clippings, tearsheets, reprints, etc.

Box 1, Folder 9
Other clippings
Box 1, Folder 10 Press releases and other publicity office documents

Box 1, Folder 11
Public address announcements, February - April 1939

Box 1, Folder 12
Doris Cook files