

STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

VOL. 3, No. 2

July, 2017

GREAT LAKES OR MIDDLE WEST: THE 1936-37 GREAT LAKES EXPOSITION AND REGIONAL IDENTITY

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During the 1930s regional identities were especially pronounced as the ravages of the economic collapse encouraged the reevaluation of national, regional, and local identities. Often linked with Franklin Roosevelt's appeal for unity and as a way to better understand and distribute the largesse of federal aid money that came with the many New Deal programs, after 1933 there was considerable discussion about remaking the country along regional lines, creating what Edward Barrows called the "United Regions of America." Given the complexity of modern society, the idea that the country would be reorganized along more rational lines was both "inevitable" and the result of "natural, orderly social growth."²

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² Edward M. Barrows, "United Regions of America: A New American Nation," *New Outlook* 161 (May 1933), 17-21. Quotes from 17.

Meanwhile a series of six international Expositions or World's Fairs took place in the United States between 1933 and 1939. The first was the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago in 1933, followed by San Diego and Texas in 1935, Cleveland in 1936, and San Francisco and the New York World's Fair in 1939. All of them outlined their region's connection to the larger goals and aspirations of the United States. One of the more interesting of these events was held in Cleveland, Ohio, during the summers of 1936 and 1937, branded as the Great Lakes Exposition (GLE). This event, the brainchild of local business and civic leaders with the assistance of the federal government, was designed to highlight "the material, social and cultural progress which has been achieved in the Great Lakes Region in the past 100 years" and to "indicate the paths of progress for the future."³ With these goals in mind, the GLE sought to affirm and recast the region's identity and, in doing so, it outlined the region's separation from its traditional Midwest label.

Cleveland and the surrounding areas of the Great Lakes were hit hard by the economic collapse that began in 1929. By 1933 the unemployment rate in cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, Toledo, Detroit, and many others that lined the five Great Lakes hovered between thirty and seventy percent. This was America's industrial heartland, where ore, iron, steel, automobiles and many of the other major industrial items that fueled the country's growth and prosperity were processed or manufactured. This was also an area of profound diversity, populated by white and black migrants from the south as well as peoples from eastern and southern Europe, all of whom mingled—sometimes uncomfortably—with native-born Americans. When the Depression occurred it not only challenged the legitimacy of capital and its partnership with democracy, but also encouraged many people to question their role and identity within the United States.

Like the expos that came before it, the initial rationale for organizing the GLE was to stimulate Cleveland-area businesses and provide a degree of temporary employment. However, the GLE sought to add a component specifically to highlight the city's centrality and connection to the "commerce and industry, arts and science, and culture of the Great Lakes States and the bordering provinces of Canada." The process began in early 1936 with the hopes of a gala opening in June of that same year. Once seed money from Republic Steel, Sherwin Williams, US Steel, Standard Oil of Ohio (SOHIO), and other businesses and industries was committed, an eighteen-member

³ *Great Lakes Exposition Official Souvenir Guide, Cleveland 1936*, 1, 12-14, Pamphlets C873 and C874, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio. Hereafter, WRHS.

planning committee, chaired by businessman Dudley Blossom, with Mayor Harold Burton as honorary co-chair, was created. According to the prospectus created by the initial leadership team of Frank Ryan, Lincoln Dickey, and William Ganson Rose, one of the central purposes of the GLE was to demonstrate the city's ability to hold national events and secure recognition of Cleveland's importance from other regions of the country. The committee wanted to showcase Cleveland as the center of the Great Lakes region. Committee membership represented the leading political and financial figures in northeast Ohio, as well as the local labor unions and educational leaders who commanded "the continued support of every element of the community." The official reason for GLE was the city's centennial as an incorporated city and the theme chosen was "The Romance of Iron and Steel" to emphasize the regional significance of Cleveland, via the Great Lakes, to the entire country. The president of the executive committee, Eben Crawford, later proclaimed the GLE a success when it neared its fall closing in 1936 because it had accomplished the goal of spreading "the fame of Cleveland throughout the nation" through hundreds of radio broadcasts, thousands of newspaper, magazine, and journal stories, and word of mouth from the nearly four million visitors to the event.⁴

Work began immediately, with Mayor Burton and members of the executive committee officially breaking ground on March 7, 1936. Builders had only 113 days to turn a dumping ground known locally as Tin Can Plaza, which was also home to a large Hooverville, into a spectacular venue promoting the best of Cleveland, the Great Lakes, and the United States. Over 2,700 workers ranging from electricians to laborers to plumbers, augmented by several hundred WPA workers, transformed the lakefront. The GLE opened on June 27 to great fanfare as organizers touted its potential to be one of the largest attractions in the country because nearly 24 million people lived within a three-hundred-mile radius. Over the next several months nearly 4 million visited—almost 7.5 million over a two-year span—and pumped more than \$60 million into the local economy. While Roosevelt symbolically opened the GLE from Washington, the official federal representative, Secretary of Commerce Daniel Roper, outlined the event's regional significance: "I compliment the people of the Great Lakes region on this striking significant exposition symbolizing the material and cultural progress of this beautiful and productive section of America. . . .what you

⁴ William Ganson Rose, *Cleveland: The Making of a City* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990, [orig. 1950]), 876, 878; John Vacha, *Meet Me On Lake Erie Dearie: Cleveland's Great Lakes Exposition, 1936-1937* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2011), 2-8. Quotes from 3, 8.

think and do here affects the rest of the nation.”⁵ When President Roosevelt visited the GLE on August 14, 1936, he congratulated the organizers for creating an event that “further strengthen[ed] that purpose of national understanding and national solidarity” regarding the problems facing society and presenting available technological and cultural solutions.⁶

The timing of the GLE coincided with an ongoing national discussion concerning the validity and demarcations of regions within the Republic. By the time of the Great Depression the identity of the Midwest was unclear to many along the Great Lakes. The idea of the Midwest as a region grew out of the long nineteenth century, from 1787 until the start of World War I, and changed as the geographical area of the country expanded. Historians have portrayed the Midwest, as Kathleen Neils Conzen reminds us, as a region made up of “diverse migration streams, republican ideology, and market opportunity” which intersected throughout the nineteenth century to create a “quintessentially bourgeois regional culture” that inevitably left it “bereft of a uniquely identifying soul.”⁷

Once predominantly defined by its connection to rural pastoralism, as technology and industry began to transform the landscape, so did changes concerning the definitional qualities of the Midwest. Kathleen Morrissey suggests in her 1997 *Mental Territories* that regions are “always in the process of formation” and the tension over definition comes from inhabitants, their various cultures, and their understanding of their identity within the larger construct of the nation.⁸ Within this regional construct comes another characteristic Conzen labels “regionality,” where individuals

⁵ Vacha, *Meet Me. . .*, 1; Roelif Loveland, “Steel Drama to Flare for Expo Throngs,” *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), 1936, Burton papers, Container 3, folder 8, newspaper articles, WRHS; “Cleveland Opens Lakes Exposition,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1936, 30; See also John Vacha, “Biggest Bash: Cleveland’s Great Lakes Exposition,” *Timeline* 13 (1996), 2–23.

⁶ *New York Times*, June 21, 1936, 12; Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Informal Extemporaneous Remarks of the President,” Cleveland Great Lakes Exposition, Cleveland, Ohio, August 14, 1936. ARC identifier 197583, item from Collection FDR-PPF: Papers as President, President’s Personal File, 1933–1945, WRHS; “Cleveland Cheers Roosevelt at Show,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1936, 4.

⁷ See for example, Dixon Ryan Fox, ed., *Sources of Culture in the Middle West* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964 [orig. 1934]), with essays by Benjamin F. Wright, Avery Craven, and John D. Hicks. Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Pi-ing the Type: Jane Grey Swisshelm and the Contest of Midwestern Regionality,” in Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, eds., *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 91–110; Edward Watts, “The Midwest as a Colony,” in Wendy Katz and Timothy Mahoney, eds., *Regionalism and the Humanities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 166–180.

⁸ Kathleen Morrissey, *Mental Territories: Mapping the Inland Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 6–15. Even though her book deals with the area in and around Spokane, Washington, her analysis of the idea of regions and boundaries is especially cogent for this study. Although they ignore the Midwest, Edward Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf’s *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) explores some of the current issues regarding regionalism and sectionalism as they relate to the West and South.

within a region tie their stories and experiences to the larger regional discussion because of their sense of exclusion and exceptionalism at the same time. In other words, as the country was growing in the long nineteenth century, many residents of what became the Midwest felt as though their voices were not welcome in the national discourse, which allowed them to see their ideas as more idealized than those being discussed in the nation's eastern centers simply because they saw themselves as less corrupted by the excesses of capital. This odd blending of alienation and superiority validated the Midwesterners' claim that they were better than the East and, by their entrance to the twentieth century, they saw themselves as the backbone of the country.⁹

However, given the varieties of settings that make up the traditional twelve state region—from Ohio to Kansas—no single “unified regional image” developed, according to historian James Shortridge. Instead, a “mélange” of rural with urban, plains with Great Lakes, industrial with pastoral, congealed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Situated between the “brash and youthful” west and the “stodgy and old” east, the Midwest defined itself as being vigorous enough to tackle modern issues, but with enough maturity to proceed cautiously. The region's identity was defined by its prosperity, maturity, and values that made it the “most American part of America.” The “middle west” was Shortridge writes, “a suitable phrase with appropriate cultural associations that happened to be current at the time when a general descriptor was needed.”¹⁰

Around the same time as this regional construction, the unity of Midwestern identity was showing significant cracks and challenges. Historian of the Midwest Jon Lauck suggests in *The Lost Region* that the idea of the Midwest, which had been so influential in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fell on hard times in the last century. This came from two directions, separate from one another yet both serving to undermine the confidence of those in the region. The first was cultural, as novelists like Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson lampooned the self-righteous provincialism of the region's residents and ridiculed the faux pastoralism that hid the hypocrisy of Midwestern insecurity. The second was more ideological, as the nation increasingly came to view the power of modernity and its connection to progress as seminal to American identity, thus making the regionality position less potent and associated more with provincial ideas. While the West, South, and East maintained and empowered their regional legitimacy, the

⁹ Conzen, “Pi-ing the Type,” 91-110; Kenneth H. Wheeler also explores the rise of Midwestern cultural idea during this time period in *Cultivating Regionalism: Higher Education and the Making of the American Midwest* (DeKalb: University of Northern Illinois Press, 2011).

¹⁰ James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989), 1-26. Quotes from pages 3, 7, 8, 33, 26.

Midwest's reliance and promotion of small-town and farm life seemed out of step with the emerging dominant ideas of technological and social advancement. What had once been seen as the heartland was now labelled as backward or, more specifically for those industrialized areas near the Great Lakes, the Rust Belt.

Lauck's analysis focuses on the traditional twelve state Middle West designation, although for *The Lost Region* he separates out the "prairie Midwest" from those "areas . . . more connected with the forests and heavy industries around the Great Lakes."¹¹ It is this differentiation that developers of the GLE were trying to accentuate in order to modify the national understanding of the Middle West and in so doing legitimize the identity of the Great Lakes region, for the region had lost, as Andrew Cayton and Susan Gray write, "its ideological moorings," making midwesterners unsure as to how to "explain the region's past and thereby to foretell its future."¹² The Great Lakes region, made up of industrial, technologically-minded, and multi-ethnic cities along the Great Lakes stretching from Cleveland through Toledo, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, and all the way to Duluth, felt out of touch with the Midwest moniker rooted in conservative and traditional rural values. The modernist drive of the 1920s, combined with the economic collapse of the 1930s, forced a reevaluation and redefinition of the Midwest that challenged both its geographic and ideological identity.¹³

This struggle for identity was not reserved for the Midwest, as the Depression during the 1930s encouraged the growth of a movement already begun during the 1920s, labelled New Regionalism, which drew much of its energy from the study of regions begun under the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner. Among the most vocal in the years leading up to the Depression era were those from the South who had long sought to define and defend their region from what they determined was a type of colonial appropriation by the dominant Northeast. Twelve artists, poets, and writers from Vanderbilt, writing as Southern Agrarians, published a manifesto in 1930 entitled *I'll Take My Stand* that outlined and defended the traditional notion of the American South. While they did not use the word region in their work, it helped set the stage for more comprehensive analysis

¹¹ Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Towards a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 8; See also the recent Jon K. Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920-1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017).

¹² Andrew R. L. Cayton & Susan E. Gray, "The Story of the Midwest: An Introduction," in Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, eds., *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 18. See also Edward Watts, *An American Colony: Regionalism and the Roots of Midwestern Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).

¹³ Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 39-60.

of the nation's regions by artists and politicians alike. Later in the decade Donald Davidson would examine the rise and influence of the regionalist movement in the south in *The Attack on Leviathan*, where he left little doubt as to regionalism's intent:

We are a federation of states; but we are a nation of sections. The unwritten constitution of that nation is a sectional constitution as apparent in folkways and political predilections as it is *not* apparent in the written document. In all the 160 years of our history as a Republic this contradiction has existed without our even drawing up a single practical device for dealing with the problems which it created.¹⁴

During the Depression era, there were many who called for a reevaluation of America's regions. Edward Barrows suggested in a 1933 *New Outlook* article that given the complexity of modern society, "the reorganization" of the country was "inevitable" as a result of "natural, orderly social growth."¹⁵ When Franklin Roosevelt became president in the spring of 1933, his administration was overwhelmed with the complexity of the problems the country faced. To further complicate matters it was also clear that there were significant social, economic, physical, and governmental divisions within the country. Burdette Lewis, writing at the time of Roosevelt's inauguration, compared the inefficiency of the current forty-eight state system to a colonial house originally built with thirteen rooms that had become a "lop-sided, hard to heat and keep clean" forty-eight room house.¹⁶

There needed to be another way to manage the new, modern America. When the National Industrial Recovery Act was established as part of Roosevelt's first Hundred Days legislation, the question as to how to govern and dispense funding became paramount. Initially advised by the Committee on National Land Problems and the Federal Emergency Administration of Public

¹⁴ Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006 [orig. 1930]); Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Donald Davidson, *The Attack On Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 6. See also Helen M. String, "Regionalism: Its Cultural Significance," *Economic Geography* 12 (October 1936), 392-410.

¹⁵ Edward M. Barrows, "United Regions of America: A New American Nation," *New Outlook* 161 (May 1933), 17-21. Quotes from 17.

¹⁶ Burdette G. Lewis, "Regionalism: A Plan for Uniting the States More Effectively," *The Forum* 89 (March, 1933), 136-141. Quote from 136.

Works, in 1934 Roosevelt abolished these groups and created the National Resources Board (NRB) through Executive Order #6777 in order to streamline and better coordinate the study and preparation of specific proposals for “public policies for the development and use of land, water, and other national resources.”¹⁷ In 1935, under Executive Order #7065, the name was changed to the National Resources Committee (NRC) to work closely with the recently passed Emergency Relief Appropriation Act that directed funding to work relief projects through the Works Progress Administration.¹⁸

Chaired by civilians Frederic Delano, Charles Merriman, and Wesley Mitchell, who worked actively with the Secretaries of Interior, War, Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administrator Harry Hopkins, the NRC was designed to advise the President on national planning. The NRC submitted its first comprehensive report to the President in December 1935 entitled *Regional Factors in National Planning and Development*. Here they laid out the most up-to-date, social scientific definitions for the various American regions, whereby an “area exhibiting homogeneity in one or more of its aspects . . . represents a real or spatial generalization.” The report featured a variety of maps that laid out possible regional divisions and advocated using the study to more efficiently identify “possible planning regions [and] criterion for use in selecting regional planning centers as well,” so as to “outline what needs to be done” in a more rational and meaningful way that would benefit the region and the larger United States.¹⁹

Much of the initial data the NRC utilized came from Howard W. Odum’s 1934 *Social Forces* article “The Case for Regional-National Planning.” A founding member of the Southern Regional Council earlier in the decade, Odum worked with the NRC and expanded this article for the report. A comprehensive examination of the positive attributes of regional delineation and planning, the initial article helped to identify regionalism as a seminal issue during the Depression era. Odum also published in 1935, through the University of North Carolina’s Institute for Research in Social Science, a small policy booklet entitled *The Regional Approach to National Social Planning*

¹⁷ Executive Order 6777 Establishing the National Resources Board. June 30, 1934, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14715>, accessed November 2, 2016.

¹⁸ Executive Order 7065 Establishing the National Resources Committee, June 7, 1935, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15075>, accessed November 2, 2016.

¹⁹ Byrd L. Jones, “A Plan for Planning the New Deal,” *Social Science Quarterly* 50 (1969), 525-534; *Regional Factors in National Planning and Development* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935), quotes from 145, but continues as a discussion concerning regionalism through page 154. For a complex analysis of the NRC’s connection to Keynesian economics, see Frederic S. Lee, “From Multi-Industry Planning to Keynesian Planning: Gardiner Means, the American Keynesians, and National Economic Planning at the National Resources Committee,” *Journal of Policy History* 2 (1990), 186-212.

where he suggested that because of the crises permeating the US and the world, combined with the rise and acceptance of modern, organized social and economic planning, “the regional approach and analysis are fundamental to any successful permanent social planning program or procedure in the United States.” To not adopt regional planning could lead to increased “chaos,” the “dominance of corporate business,” and perhaps even “dictatorship.” The similarities and differences between regions of the country, he suggested, needed to be regulated so as to ensure the greatest good for the greatest number, and to make certain that natural resources and trade were balanced for the benefit of the region and the country.²⁰

Given the complexity of the problems facing the nation and the growing role and influence of the federal government to administer these issues, many observers called for greater recognition of regional identification and planning. Delbert Clark wrote in the *New York Times* in 1935 that while no one had yet called for the abolition of states in favor of regions, there would be certain advantages in creating such a system. He discussed how such a system might look, retaining for “sentimental reasons” state boundaries, but creating a new system for the election of Senators as well as developing a uniform system for everything from marriage to traffic to education. In his view, the Great Lakes would “undoubtedly like to get away from ‘Middle West’” to be its own region with its own concerns.²¹ William F. Ogburn, writing in *Social Forces* the following year, concurred, suggesting that the turn toward regional identification rested upon the necessity to better dole out and manage the aid and development ideas emanating from Washington. He developed a model to test the comparative unity of urban to rural areas within a region to urban areas in general and found that within each general region, urban areas served as a central point of identity and unity, as most migrants coming to these cities tended to come from the surrounding rural areas.²²

These discussions continued as New Deal projects grew more influential. Harry Moore, participating in a study out of the University of North Carolina concerning the meaning and application of regionalism, explored the prevailing attitudes regarding the legacy of regionalism and its application for the future. Agreeing with many that a region is an area with distinctive and similar social, geographic, or economic attributes, he also saw the value of large urban areas as magnets

²⁰ Howard W. Odum, *The Regional Approach to National Social Planning* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), quotes from 6, 7, 29.

²¹ Delbert Clark, “Nine Groups Instead of the 48 States,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1935, 5, 23.

²² William F. Ogburn, “Regions,” *Social Forces* 15 (October 1936), 6-11.

for regional planning and change. “The big city is the hothouse of cultural change” where “new ideas and new customs” develop and from which those ideas radiate throughout the region. This was not a one-sided relationship, as urban areas relied upon the input, both commercially and from migrants, creating a constant dialogue over regional identity. He made certain to differentiate regionalism from sectionalism, pointing out that “*sectionalism sees the nation from the point of view of the differing areas; regionalism sees the differing areas from the point of view of the nation.*” In the final analysis, he believed that regionalism offered the most efficient and reasonable way to coordinate and supervise the complex issues facing the country in the Depression era and into the future.²³ James Fesler, who had advised the NRC, suggested that the multiplicity of regional identifications emanating from Washington’s various agencies needed reevaluation. Seventy-two “federal agencies of bureau status or higher have territorially defined jurisdiction,” he pointed out, resulting in the construction of over eighty-five “regional schemes.” The problem, Fesler believed, was that there were too many models which reduced the efficiency of federal appropriations and suggested a twelve-region system which would group states together, with key cities serving as headquarters within each of these groupings. Cleveland, in Fesler’s eyes, along with Detroit, would serve as the Great Lakes’ regional center.²⁴

In 1938, Odum and Moore joined together to publish *American Regionalism*, an expanded discussion of their earlier studies on a “general picture of contemporary regionalism.” They believed that better regional planning would lead to a national agenda which would provide the greatest benefits to the nation and its people.²⁵ Their study involved examining the idea of regionalism from six social scientific areas—geography, anthropology, ecology, economics, political science, and sociology—in order to develop a systematic understanding of the issue and determine a measured and scientifically accurate response for each defined area. These two aspects comprise the second and third parts of the 366-page book, but in order to observe and test their ideas, they first had to struggle with the definitional characteristics and dilemmas of terminology in the first chap-

²³ Harry E. Moore, *What is Regionalism?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), quotes from 2, 9. Italics in the original.

²⁴ James W. Fesler, “Federal Administrative Regions,” *The American Political Science Review* 30 (April 1936), 257-268.

²⁵ Howard W. Odum & Harry E. Moore, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966 [orig. 1938 by Holt, Rinehart & Winston]), v. The work is exhaustive, covering a wide range of topics in nearly 700 pages.

ter, titled “The Implications and Meaning of Regionalism.” Here they laid out the various theoretical foundations behind regionalism and created differential identities based upon social scientific methodology. They were careful to locate their study within the framework of science, so as to avoid being labeled sectionalists, a term that “always assumes isolated, segregated areal divisions with potential completeness in themselves and looked upon as separate entities,” often “analogous to nationalism.”²⁶ Comparatively, regionalism “magnifies the meaning of a local group in relation to the whole,” while on a more complex level it “emerges as an equally definitive economy of balance and equilibrium between conflicting forces.”²⁷

Well before Cleveland’s business and political leadership decided to pull out all the stops and pursue the GLE, the federal government and experts in regional study had already identified the Great Lakes as a significant region within the United States. The NRC, for example, identified the Ohio-Great Lakes as Region 5 (in 1937 changed to 4) and included Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, as well as Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia. In 1937 Tennessee was transferred to the Southeast region largely to connect it with the activities of the Tennessee Valley Authority.²⁸ But the GLE organizers wanted to go further than just US state borders, and in their proposal advocated for making the exhibition’s focus on the Great Lakes international by including Canada. This was not unique, as both Chicago and San Diego had advertised and encouraged a more international identification. GLE organizers recognized that the industrialization of the United States created a cooperative understanding between the two countries bordering the vast Great Lakes transportation system. The interrelationship developed in the era leading up through the Great Depression, crafting a regional identification that transcended national borders. Led by the iron and steel industries and its accompanying relationship with ore shipping, the Great Lakes region spread throughout the five lakes area but had its hub, where the greatest volume of trade was located, in Cleveland.²⁹

The city saw itself, William G. Rose suggests in his exhaustive history, as the “center of a vast industrial empire [and] . . . the headquarters for several important organizations directly related to

²⁶ Odum and Moore, *American Regionalism*, 18, 27.

²⁷ Odum and Moore, *American Regionalism*, 3.

²⁸ Odum and Moore, *American Regionalism*, 29-34, 462-463.

²⁹ Jerome K. Laurent, “‘And Cut Throat Competition Prevented:’ Concentration and Control in Great Lakes Transportation, 1915-1949,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 14 (December 2002), 43-84; John C. Hudson, *Across This Land: A Regional Geography of the United States and Canada* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), especially chapter 14.

the commerce of the Great Lakes.” In 1934, even as the country was still mired in underproduction, the city’s ports unloaded more than a half-billion dollars’ worth of ore from 856 American and Canadian freighters, representing Cleveland-based companies that held eighty-five percent of all iron ore deposits around the Great Lakes. Furthermore, the region contained one-third of the nation’s population and produced “70 percent of the metal-working tools, half the nation’s cement, more than 60 percent of the nation’s rubber, more than 60 percent of the printing, nearly 60 percent of the construction, and about 50 percent of the electricity.” The Great Lakes industries’ production surpassed all European nations in every industrial category. And, while one third of the nation’s population lived in the states bordering the Great Lakes, only sixteen of ninety-six Senators represented the region. Clearly, the Great Lakes region was central to both the nation’s growth and the recovery that would lead to a brighter future. Yet many also felt that underrepresentation stifled long-term growth and development.³⁰ It was in this milieu that the planners of the Cleveland Great Lakes Exposition began to reevaluate their place within the Midwest. As Cleveland Mayor Harold Burton wrote in his letter appointing E.G. Crawford to the chairmanship of the GLE organizational sub-committee, the purpose of the event was to use GLE as a “lever for the long-range support” of the city’s place in the region.³¹

Historian Ginette Alley suggests that by examining the people and underlying history of a region, one can “identify crucial turning points, or ‘defining moments,’ that appear to construct a distinctive regional identity.”³² This was certainly the case for the GLE in 1936, as both the effect of the Depression and the underlying historical context of Great Lakes regional development encouraged many to reconsider their Midwestern identity and promote a more cogent one, focusing on the industrial and urban distinctiveness of Cleveland, and by association, the Great Lakes. With so much discussion of regional identity and its positive role in the future of the American system, Cleveland saw in the Great Lakes Exposition an attempt to place the city at the center of an emerging Great Lakes region. While the Depression hit the Cleveland area hard—unemployment ran to thirty percent and a great number of locals were on FERA relief and other New Deal programs—there were many signs that pointed to regional and even national leadership. The Termi-

³⁰ Rose, *Cleveland*, 875-877.

³¹ Harold H. Burton to EG Crawford, President, Cleveland Illuminating Company, January 30, 1936, in Harold H. Burton papers, 1933-1941, Container #2, folder 21, WRHS.

³² Ginette Aley, “Dwelling within the Place Worth Seeking: The Midwest, Regional Identity, and Internal Histories,” in Katz and Mahoney, eds., *Regionalism and the Humanities*, 95-109. Quote from 96.

nals building complex, completed in 1926 and made up of a rail station, office buildings, a department store, hotel, and restaurants and shops, was recognized as the second most important set of commercial buildings in the country and was highlighted by the Terminal Tower, the second tallest building west of New York City at the time. Civic leaders continued to augment the Wade Oval arts and culture area, adding the spacious Severance Hall (for the orchestra) in 1931 to join the Cleveland Museum of Art and Wade Park. The Municipal Stadium for the local professional baseball and football teams, also completed in 1931, rose from the lakefront within sight of downtown.³³

GLE would serve as a capstone event, according to Mayor Burton, that would place Cleveland at the center of the national limelight as a regional leader and aid in “the realization of some of our deepest needs as a city.” Leading up to and through 1936, the city would be host to meetings of the Republican National Convention, American Legion Convention, American Road Builders Association, National Auto Parts Association, Great Lakes Protection Association, National Petroleum Association, Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, National Opticians, American Society of X-Ray Technicians, National High School Band competition, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, National Lumber Salesmen, Knights of St. John, National Association of Meat Dealers, National Air Races, and many more. In a press release crafted in early spring 1936 by the GLE Speaker’s Bureau committee, the events of that year would typify the centrality of Cleveland not only within the Great Lakes but also “the industrial empire of America.” With nearly sixty percent of the population of both the United States and Canada a mere one-day drive away, the event was, the release continued, “in the interest of the entire Great Lakes area.” The expo would make Cleveland the “Mecca,” according to one local newspaper, of the “greatest industrial trade empire, the eight states bordering on the Great Lakes.”³⁴

The exhibits were designed to showcase the commercial, cultural, and, most importantly, the industrial significance of the Great Lakes region. Architect Joseph H. Deacon previewed the GLE’s design in May 1936, informing his readers that the overall plan successfully introduced “the emotions of a big show built around the commerce, industry, and culture of the Great Lakes dis-

³³ Rose, *Cleveland*, 874.

³⁴ Letter, Mayor Harold Burton to Herman R. Neff, January 14, 1936; “Speech For The Come to Cleveland Committee Speakers Bureau,” January, 1936, both in Burton papers, Container 2, folder 21, WRHS; “Great Lakes Exposition Headlines Festive Summer Fare at Cleveland,” *Cleveland Gazette*, Burton papers, Container 3, folder 8, WRHS.

trict.” He provided a guided tour of the GLE’s structures, pointing out their modern design features and how they adroitly led the visitor throughout the grounds in a rational and orderly way. He reminded his readers that the Lake and what it represented to the region was the real star: “The lakes themselves, furnishing a main Exposition theme of shipping in which the lakes lead the country, ripple at the Exposition’s door.”³⁵

The central feature of the GLE was the Lakeside Exhibition Hall, which featured the “Romance of Iron and Steel” exhibit. Corporations that utilized the Great Lakes region in the production of the iron and steel so essential to the vitality of the country, led by US Steel, Republic Steel, Interlake Iron Company, Youngstown Sheet & Tube, American Shipbuilding, Lake Superior Ore Institute, American Rolling Mill Company and many more, collaborated to create the Hall. Visitors were guided through all the stages of iron and steel manufacture—from ore drawn from the Mesabi range in Minnesota, through shipping across the Great Lakes, to offloading along the shores of Lake Erie, and then via railroads to mills throughout what some called the “Ruhr of America.” The largest and most spectacular section within the exhibit was a full-sized blast furnace with a replica of a the “125-ton ladle used for pouring molten steel into ingot molds.” Also included were models of hot strip rolls (which pressed/rolled steel into sheets of various thickness), a stamping press, and a butt weld tube mill (which makes pipes). Case University Professor of Metallurgy Dr. A.A. Bates and Myron Curtis, of Youngstown Sheet & Tube, designed the whole area.³⁶ The regional theme was not lost on visitors, as the local African American newspaper, the *Cleveland Gazette*, pointed out that the “original purpose of the Exposition—the demonstration of the industries which have made the prosperity of the Great Lakes basin—has been carried out,” especially as it documented the region’s contribution to the “country’s wealth.”³⁷

Just beyond Lakeside Hall were other exhibits dedicated to the Great Lakes region and its industries. The Court of the Great Lakes occupied the upper level of the grounds and was home to wonderful landscaping as well as model home features. The Hall of the Great Lakes featured “historical, educational, and cultural exhibits . . . that tell the story of the Great Lakes states and cities.” Nearby was the Court of Presidents that featured over 100 exhibits and concession booths, with a main feature of sixteen “enormous gilt eagles” that identified those Presidents who hailed from

³⁵ Joseph H. Deacon, “The Great Lakes Exposition,” *Progressive Architecture* 17 (May 1936), 247-252. Quotes from 247, 249.

³⁶ *Great Lakes Exposition Official Souvenir Guide, Cleveland 1936*, 1, 12-14, Pamphlets C873 and C874, WRHS.

³⁷ “Exposition Proving Mecca to Travelling America,” *Cleveland Gazette*, June 25, 1936, 4.

Great Lakes states, including incumbent Franklin Roosevelt. The “giant industries of the Great Lakes State, which supply the world with automobiles” and whose factories lined the lake’s shores were housed in the massive automotive building and featured the most recent developments by leaders in the industry. Next to the auto building was the Firestone Tire exhibit that blended scientific advances in tire manufacture just 45 miles south in Akron, with the bucolic image of Harvey Firestone’s farm set in the rural countryside of Ohio. The Hall of Progress displayed the variety of appliances and utilities that defined modern American life, from kitchens to insect traps. Like most expositions there were exhibits and booths for virtually everything, as well as a well-designed amusement area within 125 acres along the lakefront.³⁸

The federal government played a prominent role in the GLE, both in making certain the grounds were developed properly and, once opened, with a variety of exhibits documenting the positive role Washington played in the Great Lakes region. The 74th session of Congress approved a joint Public Resolution in favor of the GLE and authorized “the President to invite the Dominion of Canada to participate,” filling out the larger regional identity of the Expo. The resolution clearly understood the regional meaning of the GLE, linking it with “the eight states bordering upon the Great Lakes,” from New York to Minnesota. Furthermore, Congress allocated \$275,000 to the GLE Commission, which would represent how and what federal exhibits would be created, in order to document the positive role of the government in the affairs of the region. Once building of the grounds began, several hundred Works Progress Administration (WPA) enrollees assisted with landscaping, basic labor projects, road building, and, with the help of WPA Art project, creating a scale model of Cleveland set in the center of the Great Lakes. They even held a special recognition day in mid-September for the numerous WPA workers in the region; Cleveland area rolls in these years ranged between thirty and eighty thousand workers. The event drew over eighty thousand visitors.³⁹

The exhibits at the GLE representing the federal government ranged from the Department of State through the Department of the Interior. Virtually every cabinet-level post had an exhibit. The Department of War sent 144 men of Company C of the Eleventh Infantry to perform daily demonstrations and welcome visitors to their encampment. They also escorted VIPs through the GLE. The Department of Justice presented a film entitled *Protecting the Public*, showing how the

³⁸ *Great Lakes Exposition Official Souvenir Guide, Cleveland 1936*, 9-42; *Great Lakes Exposition Official Souvenir Guide, Cleveland 1937*. Both in Pamphlets C873 & C874, WRHS.

³⁹ Vacha, *Meet Me . . .*, 17-18, 37, 90-91, 198.

“Federal prison system protected the public” and helped to reform and rehabilitate those under its charge. The Department of Agriculture used its exhibit space to document its role as it related to “the needs of the people residing within an agricultural and industrial area such as the Great Lakes region,” which featured information about conservation, marketing of agricultural items, and the inspection system. The Department of Labor featured a “mechanical man” who spoke at regular intervals about the positive attributes of technology in the workplace to counter the prevailing attitude that machines were responsible for unemployment. Other departments’ exhibits and displays reinforced these tendencies, namely that the federal government was actively involved in the Great Lakes region, understood the problems the region and its people faced, and was dedicated to creating more stability for the region.⁴⁰

Central to the federal government’s involvement was connecting the GLE and its regional identification with the rest of the nation. When President Roosevelt visited the GLE in August, he specifically connected the GLE with the nation. It was the third exposition he visited that year, as he had already gone to San Diego for the California Pacific International Exposition and to Dallas for the Texas Centennial Exposition, and was impressed with how each had represented the ingenuity and desire of the American people. For the GLE, he recognized that people from all over the region were visiting Cleveland, not just for the educational exhibits, but for a holiday, which was just as important in those trying times. Most significantly, he touted the GLE’s influence not “merely to all those states that border the Great Lakes, but also to the whole of the country.” Sounding like advice taken directly from the NRC, FDR praised the GLE for documenting its region’s identity manifest in its people, industry, agriculture, and needs, but also understood that they were interdependent on other regions which strengthened the whole country. FDR concluded his informal remarks on that day by congratulating the city of Cleveland and the GLE for doing a “fine job for the Nation.”⁴¹

During its two-year run, nowhere was there mention of this being a gala for the Midwest, but time again the organizers pointed to their Great Lakes connection and the role it played and would continue to play in Cleveland’s development. It was as though Chicago’s Century of Progress expo of 1933-34 was the event for the Midwest, and even though Chicago was located on one of the

⁴⁰ *Great Lakes Exposition: Letter of the Members of the United States Great Lakes Exposition Commission*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938). This document outlines Federal participation in the GLE in 1936-1937. See pages Vii-24.

⁴¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Extemporaneous Remarks at Cleveland Great Lakes Exposition,” August 14, 1936, Collection FDR-PPF: Papers as President, President’s Personal File, 1933-1945, <http://arcweb.archives.gov>.

Great Lakes, its expo appeared secondary due to its distance from the eastern areas and its directional emphasis to its south and west. Cleveland, situated in the middle of the Great Lakes region and identified by the NRC as a regional center, was making a case for itself as the leader in the region. Its connections to the East were well established, its central role in the rise and continued development of American heavy industries well defined, and its principal place among Great Lakes shippers made it the epicenter of the region. By hosting the GLE, Cleveland sought to outline its identity not as part of the Midwest, but of the Great Lakes. The iconic graphic for the GLE, reproduced on postcards and other trinkets for sale, outlined the reach of this regional identity and delineated its move away from casting its lot with the Midwest.⁴²

There is nothing to suggest that civic leaders held any ill will towards the idea of being part of the Midwest. However, given the sweeping changes that were taking place with the expansion of federal power, combined with the significant discussions about regional identity and their role in planning, creating a positive image of Cleveland as the logical center of this emerging regional division of power made good economic and political sense. Cleveland wanted to be the epicenter of the collection and distribution of federal grants, as well as of the varieties of new government agencies and the numerous jobs that would come with them. Given the speed at which the GLE went from idea to organization to planning and finally to opening, and considering that before late 1935 little interest or movement toward such a gala was even being discussed, it appears likely that the motivation for the GLE was more complicated than what first appeared. Given Ohio Governor Martin Davey's battle with New Deal administrator Harry Hopkins over FERA irregularities and the new WPA policy whereby the federal government would simply bypass the state with direct relief, Cleveland saw in the GLE an opportunity to court federal patronage. The organizers made certain that the federal government was prominently displayed. Cleveland's activity was not lost on the state legislature in Columbus, as both Houses held up funding for the Ohio exhibit at the GLE until Governor Davey stepped in to push it through. This meant that when the GLE opened in June the Ohio building was not yet complete and would not be open until late July and was by all accounts underwhelming.⁴³

⁴² The GLE, like other fairs during the 1930s, ran for a second year to try and recoup financial losses and to utilize the tremendous effort put forth to create the events in the first place. The GLE drew over seven and a half million visitors in its two-year run and was regarded as a success as it had a positive effect on local business and labor, with out of town visitors pumping between twenty-five and forty-two million dollars into the local economy. But for all practical purposes, the second year was an afterthought.

⁴³ Vacha, *Meet me. . .*, 44.

Cleveland's prominent role with FERA allocations, new WPA projects, and its identification as a regional federal distribution center, seemed to challenge the power of the state capital in Columbus. The possibility of a new regional division, via federal recognition, would likely weaken the influence of the state capital and its leaders. And while Chicago had to be the center of power for the Midwest, given the size and diversity of the region, it was necessary to create the Great Lakes region. On this playing field, the only real competitor to Cleveland was Detroit. In the GLE and the enthusiasm which its creation and success over the two years detailed, the Cleveland area seemed to be fulfilling what the NRC and others were interested in working toward, namely regional divisions crossing state lines, not held by traditional boundaries, linked together through common economic, social, and even political identities. The GLE signified Cleveland's centrality to this regional identity and also advocated for the revival of business and industry that would provide employment opportunities for the region's citizenry and help the country as a whole work its way out of the Depression.

"The Exposition will be a national marketplace for the [industries] in the trade empire of the Great Lakes area," announced the creators of the GLE. They believed their event was essential to the identity of "every citizen in states touching the Great Lakes" as it documented how the region was "the industrial empire of America."⁴⁴ Wendy Katz and Timothy Mahoney, editors of a volume dedicated to understanding the connections between the idea of regionalism and the humanities, define regionalism in a way that focuses on the how local identity reaffirms regional identity. These "practices and agendas in cultural, political, economic, or other realms" serve as the foundation for regionalism that helps to locate its place within the larger construct of the national identity.⁴⁵ Certainly Cleveland and the GLE played a fundamental role in constructing a Great Lakes regional identity in an era where the idea of greater regional planning and cooperation was under serious national consideration. The many-faceted nature of the New Deal necessitated a greater emphasis on coordinated planning and organization, and with the advice provided by outside sources and the NRC, FDR's administration worked to streamline and make more efficient investigations into the country's needs and the resources necessary to advance the country to greater heights. Events like the GLE represented this desire for regional planning and organization, as it sought to bring

⁴⁴ "Speech for the Come to Cleveland Committee Speakers Bureau on the Cleveland Centennial Celebration," npn, January, 1936, Burton papers, Container 2, folder 21, WRHS.

⁴⁵ Wendy J. Katz & Timothy R. Mahoney, "Regionalism and the Humanities: Decline or Revival?" in Katz and Mahoney, eds., *Regionalism and the Humanities*, ix-xxv. Quotes from xi, xviii.

together those states and countries most effected by the economic, social, cultural, and political events of the era and the future. While the regional divisions discussed in the 1930s and early 1940s did not come to fruition—there would be no United Regions of America—in the aftermath of World War II, the effect of officially identifying a Great Lakes region separate from the Midwest remained part of the mindset of many in the region throughout the remainder of the century and to the present day. A 2008 Brookings Institute report indicated that if the Great Lakes region—which included the states from New York to Minnesota—were an independent country, its economy would be second only to the United States.⁴⁶ While some enjoy poking fun at the mistake by the lake, or document the decline of the Rust Belt, the GLE in 1936-1937 pointed to this brighter future and laid the foundation for a new regional identity outside the Midwest.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ “True Regionalism,” *The Detroit* (September 2008), 24.

⁴⁷ Steven High, “The Making of the ‘Rust Belt’ in the Minds of North Americans, 1969-1984,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 27 (1997), 43-75.