

**Replacing Welfare With Work in the WPA:
The Handicraft Project That Made Milwaukee Famous**

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Sixty-two years ago a small group of talented, hard-working young people with assistance from a faculty member at the Milwaukee State Teachers College set up a light manufacturing operation under the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA staff designed all products, and the work force consisted almost entirely of women who had no prior labor market experience except some cleaning and char work.¹ Once trained, women were encouraged to move into better paying jobs on other WPA projects or in the private sector, and women who failed at other WPA projects were transferred to the project. The product line became so extensive that it filled a ninety-page catalog, and the demand for the products kept eleven production units going at full force with as many as 1,350 workers employed at a time. Textiles manufactured on the project are now displayed in art galleries, the WPA dolls are sold on the Internet for hundreds of dollars, and the furniture is still used in schools, libraries and public institutions in Milwaukee and around the country.²

The Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project represents the largest public work program for unskilled women on welfare in Milwaukee County.³ Its success in providing meaningful employment to women with few obvious labor market skills was noted in the 1930's and attracts interest today as Wisconsin and other states initiate "welfare to work" programs. This lecture draws upon interviews with Mary Kellogg Rice (art director of the project from 1935 to 1942) and other project supervisors, published and unpublished project records, and studies of federal New Deal programs. Fortunately, a number of project staff were available to discuss their work in detail, others associated with the project have left records and reflections on their activities, and many of the Milwaukee Handicraft products have been saved by public and private collectors.⁴

The Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project was developed as part of Milwaukee's response to the Great Depression which hit the nation in 1929. Socialist mayor Daniel W. Hoan was committed to "spreading the pain" of the Depression among the citizenry and protecting as many city workers as possible from work lay-offs. In the winter of 1930-31 the city invested an incredible \$600,000 of local property tax money in work relief programs for men selected on the

urgency of their needs and their family responsibilities. Men were offered one ten-day shift of work (and a possible second ten-day shift if they had large families) in street sanitation, ash collection, grading for new playgrounds, work extending the underground conduit system for fire and police alarm cables, park projects, and painting of election booths and public museum space.⁵ In 1931 the city received about 15,000 applicants for work and hired 11,000 men for short-shift projects. In 1932 the City Service Commission received 28,470 applicants for work, and about 20,500 workers were employed sometime during the year.⁶ To avoid laying off city workers, Milwaukee initiated a ten percent monthly pay cut for city employees with a corresponding ten percent reduction in working time, and used rotating schedules for other workers to reduce the number of complete layoffs.⁷ By 1933, however, the city found it necessary to use the ten percent pay fund for general city operating costs, and reduced additional city employees to rotating work schedules or part-time work. Some city departments used shortened work days, while others placed workers (particularly road workers, laborers and civil engineers) on month-long furloughs without pay.⁸

Nationally, as the Depression wore on, it became evident that municipal and county governments could not handle the immense expenses of relief and unemployment in their communities, and that even with reductions in public services, a growing number of localities were facing bankruptcy. At the time the federal government aggressively entered the business of relief payments and job creation in 1933, over 14 million American workers, or 29 percent of the total labor force, were estimated to be unemployed.⁹ By 1935 the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration had assumed federal responsibility for large-scale employment programs for workers on relief while providing limited support to local governments for populations deemed “unemployable.” For the large population of “employable” workers on relief, the Works Progress Administration, created in May 1935, was expected to operate a program of “small useful projects” and to coordinate federal works programs. Nationally, over an eight-year period the Works Progress Administration, later renamed the Work Projects Administration, provided employment for a total of 8.5 million individuals. It is estimated that nearly one-quarter of all families in the United States were dependent on WPA wages at some time for their support.¹⁰

Because of its focus on providing work for families and individuals supported by municipal and county relief agencies, WPA regulations required that ninety percent of project

workers, and later ninety-five percent, be on public relief or certified for public relief. Local project sponsors submitted proposals to the federal agency detailing the scope and plans for the work, locations, and budget estimates of labor, material and equipment. The federal administration reviewed project designs and budgets, selected and scheduled local works projects, and established employment quotas within each state.¹¹ In Milwaukee County the Department of Outdoor Relief certified employable relief workers for referral to WPA employment. One employable member, usually the male parent, was identified for each family case. County relief “visitors” determined each family’s “budgetary deficiency” and provided county relief funds to families of WPA workers whose pay did not meet the minimum required.¹²

The issues that were debated at the time that Milwaukee began establishing WPA projects are the same issues faced today. A bulletin issued by the Wisconsin Industrial Commission in 1932 remains helpful in defining the competing theories underlying work relief programs. The first theory posits that individuals should be made to work before they receive direct aid. Here work is used as a test “which requires that the unemployed demonstrate their willingness to take any work that is offered to them.”¹³ Under this approach, work becomes primarily a screening device for deciding who deserves relief and who does not.¹⁴ The second theory holds that “...if money is given out for relief, the community deserves some service in return.”¹⁵ Instead of just offering welfare, the government finances work to insure that the community receives some tangible benefit for its payment. The third theory suggests that work should be provided in order to preserve the morale and self-respect of those given work. This approach goes farther than just saying “give us something back,” but insists that the work should be of sufficient value that both the worker and the community benefit in a significant way. The concern raised by the commission in 1932 (and which is still an issue today) is that usually the better the work, the more experienced the worker needed to execute it. Consequently, a portion of the money for work relief programs is used to hire people who do not need public assistance. The challenge is to hire people who lack experience and who are struggling financially. Also, the commission warns that much of the relief money for more worthwhile projects may go for costs of materials, administration and equipment. As the state commission observed in 1932, the challenge is to identify public work which requires as much hand labor as possible and the lowest amount of overhead.

During the 1930's Milwaukee County embraced the third approach to work relief. Certainly, the county did not embrace that first one. At no time was work mandatory during the Depression in Milwaukee County. Relief was always available with work optional.¹⁶ City and county departments identified public works projects which could have long term benefits for the community. Foremost in utilization of work relief programs was the Milwaukee County Park Commission which had toured parks around the country and developed plans for an elaborate park system with parkways, lagoons and various public facilities. Prior to the Depression, in 1927 the commission had secured state legislation to facilitate acquisition of lands which fell into public ownership through tax delinquency. During the 1930's the commission acquired land as farms went bankrupt and the commission initiated a number of labor-intensive projects in order to build one of the finest park systems in the country.¹⁷ Eschewing "make-work" leaf-raking or clean-up projects, the commission used WPA workers to construct swimming pools, pavilions, bathhouses, administration and service buildings, new roads, sewers, drainage lines, lagoons, lighting systems and recreation areas.¹⁸ Recognizing the primary objective of WPA to employ labor, the commission did not buy bulldozers (which would have been far more efficient). Much of the work performed was "pick and shovel," although the technology was available for far more advanced work, because the county's goal was to have as many people as possible employed at jobs which would benefit the community long-term.

Some of the other local WPA projects were quite innovative. The Public Museum sponsored the work of men and women who built exhibits and classified specimens and collections. The health department employed workers to assist in citywide immunization of children for diphtheria, smallpox and scarlet fever, and to sew needed medical materials. The school board used workers to offer recreational and adult education activities, and the park board used workers to design and sew costumes for summer operas. The city created jobs for 663 "white collar" workers, modernizing city property assessment, tax, legal, engineering and school board records, surveying all privately owned properties for tax assessment purposes, conducting a fire prevention survey of all buildings in the city, and cleaning and indexing library materials.¹⁹ One project established twenty toy loan libraries throughout the county. Milwaukeeans contributed thousands of discarded and broken toys to the project which hired unemployed men and women to repair toys and staff twenty toy lending libraries. The toy library in Cudahy, for

example, was loaning 2,500 toys a month.²⁰ (It is interesting to examine this project which recycled toys while providing work for the unemployed, particularly today when the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and most Milwaukee businesses are discarding computers at the same time educators are emphasizing the importance of computer literacy for all Wisconsin children.)

Most of the early WPA work involved manual labor or “white collar” work for men.²¹ The challenge remaining was to find work for women. Under WPA regulations only one person in a family could have a WPA job, and the Milwaukee County Department of Outdoor Relief classified 2,600 women as their family’s breadwinner.²² Harriet Clinton, a feisty former newspaper woman, was placed in charge of WPA projects to employ women. (Clinton’s administrative reports are replete with headlines, e.g. “They Are New Women,” “Checks for Thanksgiving,” “Costume Pageant Given before 60,000 People,” “Enrollments in College Art Courses Rise Following WPA Handicraft Exhibits in Schools.”)²³ As Supervisor of the Women’s and Professional Division of the Works Progress Administration for Milwaukee County, Clinton’s job was to find work for eligible women on welfare. She approved a WPA sewing project for women with sewing and industrial skills, but needed employment activities for other women who had never worked outside the home and lacked job skills.

In 1935 Clinton approached Elsa Ulbricht, a faculty member of Milwaukee State Teachers College, to sponsor a women’s project through the college. Initially, Clinton was interested in any kind of activity, even make-work, which would provide income for families. As Ulbricht recalled in an oral interview:

One of [Clinton’s] suggestions to me...and I can remember this so well...was that we could cut out some pictures from wallpaper and make scrapbooks. And then knowing her very well, I said, “Well, I don’t think that would be interesting enough for me, and if that’s what we’re going to do, I don’t want this job. [W]e can do scrap books—or something of that kind.”²⁴

It was that “something,” as Mary Kellogg Rice observed in her history of the project, that would break new ground for women’s work programs.²⁵

Ulbricht had helped found the Wisconsin Designer-Craftsmen organization, introduced most of the craft courses at Milwaukee State Teachers College and served on the Public Works

of Art Project committee in Milwaukee.²⁶ She envisioned the WPA as an opportunity for women to make craft items that would be useful to the schools, hospitals and county institutions. At the same time the workers could be exposed to the uplifting experience of good design.²⁷ Part of Ulbricht's genius was to employ as supervisors young artists who were just graduating from Milwaukee State Teachers College with majors in art education, at a time when schools were not hiring art education teachers. She saw an opportunity for these young people to develop designs which then could be mass produced by workers. Ulbricht selected Mary June Kellogg, one of her college seniors, to be art director of the project in charge of design and production, and Anne Feldman, a colleague from the Shorewood Opportunity School, to handle personnel and WPA business procedures.²⁸ Under Kellogg's direction, the young MSTC graduates developed the production units. Since the young graduates, who were called designer-foremen, were involved with both the product design and training of workers, they were expected to develop quality designs while recognizing the limitations of the materials available and the skills of their assigned workers.²⁹

The project actually started with scrapbooks—however, not filled with wallpaper. The WPA staff consulted with an occupational therapist to determine the kinds of articles that would be of interest to hospital and institution patients since the county had discontinued its magazine subscriptions during the Depression. Topics included “what to make in the basement workshop,” “interesting interiors,” and for the youth “stories without a trace of the gangland about them.”³⁰ Workers clipped articles, crossword puzzles and serial stories out of old magazines, removed the advertisements, and pasted them into hundreds of scrapbooks. To make the scrapbooks more attractive, the designer-foremen designed blockprinted covers. These covers were appealing, and teachers began requesting portfolios, scrapbooks and wallhangings with blockprint designs. Workers also bound magazines like *National Geographic*, repaired books, bound public documents and provided special bindings for Braille books translated under another WPA project.³¹ Early in the project six thousand books were mended and rebound for the Milwaukee City Schools.³²

Other product lines were developed based on staff initiatives. A graduate of Milwaukee State Teachers College who headed the WPA nursery schools asked for educational toys, dolls that could be used to teach the children to dress themselves, and braided rugs to serve as floor

mats for the children.³³ Once in full production the wooden toy unit made animal pull toys, a series of wooden transportation toys, pegboards, puzzles and games.³⁴ The braided rug work evolved into a rug-making unit which produced hooked rugs for college dormitories and public buildings. Staff had originally planned to rotate workers twice a day into different production units, but this proved unfeasible given the large numbers of employees, their limited skills and the supervisory time required. Efforts were made to situate workers in a production unit which suited their skills and interests, and very simple tasks (e.g. braiding carpet strings for pull toys) were identified for workers with learning deficiencies.

Staff found a variety of community needs which spawned other production units. For example, when Kellogg was visiting the WPA nurseries she observed that the cots were covered with dull gray blankets issued by the federal government. She suggested that the Milwaukee Handicraft Project could design a line of coverlets (quilts without backing) which could brighten up the nurseries.³⁵ The state WPA nursery school director ordered sets of these lovely quilts for all the Wisconsin WPA nurseries. Soon orders followed from Michigan, Illinois, Missouri, Iowa and Kansas.³⁶

The Handicraft Project staff visited the county hospital to see what other products the hospital could use. It was determined that the coverlets would be impractical because of the need to constantly sterilize bedding. Yet, the county nurses could see how the quilts' colors would brighten up the children's ward, so the designer-foremen developed a line of appliqué curtains to use as dividing screens between hospital beds and as window curtains.³⁷ The county hospital staff reported that they could use small, lightweight toys for children who were in bed for long periods of time. This led to production of little rag dolls (called "counterpane toys") for hospitalized children.³⁸ Concerned that boys might not want to play with dolls, the WPA staff designed counterpane geometric toys and animal toys.³⁹ Staff also designed a very attractive washable head for their 22" doll and developed a line of costume dolls and ethnic dolls—which teachers and schools ordered.

Other workers were employed making costumes. Initially, the sewing unit was asked to make robes for a Milwaukee State Teachers College choral group. Shortly after, Roosevelt Junior High asked project workers to sew costumes for an operetta.⁴⁰ Once requests for costume

work snowballed, a separate department was created. This work offered a chance for local schools to provide costumes for young people who could not afford them otherwise and also furnished the costumes for the University of Wisconsin theater department.⁴¹

Eventually, the project manufactured drapery fabrics using blockprinted fabric, screenprint designs, appliqués and weavings. By 1939 the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project had developed over 150 different designs available for draperies and curtains, and institutions could order material in the colors and yardage they wanted, lined or unlined.⁴² Project designers improved their product lines through constant experimentation. Harriet Clinton related one source of product improvements.

The great strides which the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft project has made in adapting dyes and inks is due partly to the recommendations of a bookkeeper. This bookkeeper hovered around the experimental department, made such canny suggestions, that he was asked how he happened to know so much. He confessed that he was a member of a family once prominent, which had owned a large dye plant. When the depression hit the business, it hit so hard that he was forced out. The WPA job made it possible for him to continue to earn a living. When his talents and experience were discovered, he was transferred immediately to the experimental department.⁴³

Wherever possible, workers used scraps and recycled materials—old magazines, yarn from rug manufacturers, cotton strips from dress factories, salvages from overcoat factories, used burlap sacks and cloth scraps from the WPA sewing project.⁴⁴ The beautiful hooked rugs which were used to furnish major rooms at the Milwaukee Public Library and University of Wisconsin were made of pieces of heavy suiting material secured from factory wastes. Many of the weavings were made from yarn obtained from surplus government burlap bags. The work of unraveling burlap bags was made less tedious by the proposal by one of the designers to dye the burlap *before* the bags were unraveled. As a result, the workroom became a colorful place with many different color burlap bags.⁴⁵ Consequently, workers who were among the lowest skilled and assigned to unravel bags could see that they were a key part of the production of the colorful finished table runners, napkins, upholstery fabric and drapery material. Such innovations helped workers throughout the project relate to the final products made.

In many cases formerly unskilled welfare workers began teaching community visitors and high school and college teachers how to make craft products. Two designer-foremen,

Clarence Hackett and Aaron Shansky, initiated an educational series to show teachers different types of bookbinding.⁴⁶ The bookbinding kit was the first of a series of educational materials (including blockprinting portfolios, weaving kits, costume designs, and furniture designs) which were developed to improve the quality of art education in the schools and colleges. College art education faculty arranged to have their convention in Milwaukee in order to visit the Handicraft Project. In preparation for the convention, WPA workers prepared promotional material with maps, and information about the products which the teachers could order. When the state teachers' convention was held in Milwaukee the Handicraft Project workers made 15,000 individual memorandum booklets with blockprinted designs on them to distribute to the teachers.⁴⁷ Each booklet included the address of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project to encourage school orders. Often teachers would pay out of their own pockets for WPA books, toys and wallhangings.

The Milwaukee Handicraft Project was always driven by federal regulations. At first, when local governments had to pay for non-labor expenses, the project used as many recyclable and inexpensive materials as possible. Institutions using handicraft products were asked to pay for the costs of materials. When the WPA rules changed and it became necessary for the local sponsor to provide twenty-five percent of the cost of production, it was no longer cost-effective to use only inexpensive and recycled materials since user reimbursements for these materials were low.⁴⁸ Furniture became a more reasonable product since the more expensive investment in furniture increased the local match. At the same time, the WPA furniture unit could offer schools and institutions an opportunity to secure high quality furniture for only the costs of materials. Atwater School in Shorewood asked the Milwaukee Handicraft Project to design and furnish its music room, nurse's office and psychologist's office. The Milwaukee Public Library created a browsing room fully designed and furnished by the project. What could have been a tremendous expense (even luxury) during the Depression was affordable since the governmental unit requesting products was charged only the cost of materials while the federal WPA program paid for labor costs. Much of this furniture is still in use today.⁴⁹

High quality workmanship and public recognition of the project work were seen as key elements for soliciting customers for project work and maintaining high morale among workers. According to project supervisors, throughout the years of the WPA project it was necessary to

fight some of what mothers would hear at home from neighborhood children: “You’re not doing real work—it’s just WPA.”⁵⁰ The project supervisors worked very hard to have the high achievement of the project work recognized. Even in the early days this project was recognized as a high quality work project. In 1936 workers set up a demonstration at the state fair where, according to the local paper, 2,000 people an hour waited in line to see the exhibit.⁵¹ In 1937 the federal government organized its first women’s WPA art tour.⁵² Yet it selected Milwaukee Handicraft Project products rather than art for its first exhibit. These products were designed by artists—very young artists—but mass-produced by so-called unskilled women.⁵³ (The average age of women in the project was thirty-seven years and almost half of the women were over forty years old.⁵⁴) When the New York World’s Fair began in 1939 the Milwaukee Handicraft Project was selected as one of the WPA projects to be showcased there. Two women were sent to conduct demonstrations for six months in New York at the fair.⁵⁵

To spur local support for their work, the project offered a week of demonstrations at Schuster’s Department Store at North Twelfth and West Vliet Streets.⁵⁶ Another major department store had agreed to do an exhibit but when the store learned that some of the demonstrators would be African-Americans, it refused to allow the exhibit unless the African-American workers were excluded.⁵⁷ Unwilling to accept discrimination in any form on the project, workers cancelled the exhibit. Mary Kellogg Rice has written about the early days of the project and the racial assignment of workers.

Those of us directing the Project had been so busy coping with the immediate problems we failed to notice that there were no black women among those already assigned to the Project. Shortly after the Project got under way we were informed that 300 “Negro” women were being assigned to a school building where space had been made available. It was assumed they would remain a segregated unit. It was obvious that the county kept the records of persons on relief racially segregated and were assigning the black women as a group—and last. We were furious and vowed not to have a segregated work place. The idea that race should determine where and when one worked offended our sense of fairness. When this group of women was assigned, a systematic mixing of the workers began. . . . Very quickly it became apparent that a number of the black women were very capable and better qualified than many of the white women.⁵⁸

Since the African-American women had been passed over for the sewing project and other WPA “white collar” projects, they were some of the more talented women on the staff.

Because the Depression hit the African-American community so early and so deep, at one point twenty-five percent of the women on this project were African-American. This was at a time when Milwaukee County's population was less than two percent African-American.⁵⁹

While Kellogg remained with the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project from 1935 to 1942, her supervisory staff changed constantly as the young college graduates found non-WPA employment. The project also experienced frequent turnover of WPA employees as women gained skills and found work in private industry or on other WPA projects. In April 1936 when the WPA sewing project converted from handwork to high-powered sewing machines, it recruited one hundred women trained on the handicraft project. A number of women who became skilled in bookbinding were transferred to small community library projects where they worked with little supervision.⁶⁰ As Ulbricht recounted,

The most discouraging phase of the entire work-situation at all times was the constant turnover in working personnel, which was natural and right in a work-relief program of this kind. But it meant a continuous training of new assignees in the work-methods of the project, in work habits and in new skills...For as soon as these workers acquired real skills, they were either absorbed in industry or transferred to projects where it was necessary to employ more skillful people. It meant that in the course of the eight years of the project's existence more than 5000 individuals of many varying capacities and degrees of talent had had the opportunity in different degrees, to bring system and order into their lives which a training and accomplishment in any craft necessitates, not only to become more or less skilled but also to become exposed to, perhaps saturated with, the idea that a thing worth doing is a thing worth doing well—beautifully.⁶¹

In spite of constant turnover, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project remained a highly successful manufacturing operation, employing as many as 1,350 workers at a time.⁶² The production units were moved a number of times due to the need for additional space, and at one time seven sites housed different production units. At its peak, the project was housed in three floors of a factory building one square block wide. Eventually, eleven production units were established, as described by Ulbricht.

bookbinding unit—rebinding old books, binding books in Braille, producing hand bound books, portfolios, cases and boxes.

blockprinting unit—making decorative wall-hangings and draperies for use by nurseries, schools, institutional buildings and hospitals; decorating covers for bound books.

screenprinting unit—printing textiles for wall-hangings and draperies.

weaving unit—making fabrics for drapery and upholstery.

rug unit—producing button hole rugs and small and large hooked rugs for schools and institutions, using cotton and wool strip waste products.

appliqué unit—producing bedspreads, draperies, decorative wallhangings, and quilts for educational and penal institutions.

doll unit—making cloth dolls and wardrobes for nurseries, schools, and institutions, and dolls in historical costumes for the state historical museum.

cloth toy unit—making washable cloth animals, alphabet books and blocks of various sizes and shapes for sick children in hospitals.

costume unit—sewing creative and period costumes for local pageants, school and community plays.

wood unit—cutting, sanding, painting and assembling wooden toys, including some designed for physically handicapped and mentally retarded children.

furniture unit—producing custom made furniture including chairs, davenport, cases, desks and tables (and using project woven materials).⁶³

Near the end of the WPA in 1941, with private employment increasing, the average age of women and men employed in the production units was fifty, with the oldest worker around sixty-eight years of age. After federal support for the project ended in 1942, Milwaukee County continued the work as part of a rehabilitation program for disabled and older workers. A 1944 *Milwaukee Journal* review of the project's accomplishments called it the "Project That Made Milwaukee Famous."⁶⁴

Today's revived interest in the "welfare to work" projects of the 1930's stems in part from the focus of many state legislatures on eliminating income maintenance payments for low-income mothers. As of November 1, 1997, Wisconsin ended its Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. November was the first month of "W-2," Wisconsin's new welfare program which requires most mothers with children over twelve weeks old to be employed or working in a community service job as a condition for any income support. Some women are already employed. However, a recent research project conducted by the Milwaukee Area Technical College and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training

Institute found that many women lack the employment skills needed in the workplace. The project assessed the education, employment history and assets of 1,551 mothers with very young children who were receiving AFDC in 1997. Over half (54 percent) of these mothers did not have a high school diploma, 72 percent did not have a driver's license (which means that their labor market is very small—where the bus line runs), and 20 percent had no employment history.⁶⁵ At the same time the University's semi-annual survey of Milwaukee area employers found that 74 percent of full-time job openings were requiring technical training or occupation-specific work experience beyond high school.⁶⁶ Thus a large number of low-income mothers in Milwaukee County are expected to find employment under "W-2" rules but lack the skills which are in demand in our labor force. Many of these women could benefit from a well-developed community work program.⁶⁷

Current community work programs are quite a mix. Unfortunately, the work program that is *now* making Milwaukee famous is the one described in a magazine in April 1997: "A Milwaukee mother...was assigned to a skills-training program that consisted of stacking game pieces into neat piles, which were then emptied into a bin to be stacked all over again..."⁶⁸ The *Time* reporter interviewed the mother who was in a homeless shelter because she had refused to do this work which she saw as "a waste of my time."⁶⁹ This may be one of the worst programs in Milwaukee. Other low-skill programs engage workers in picking up litter.

By contrast, the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project demonstrated that work programs which are highly visible and offer significant contributions to the community also show substantial *pride* and *skill* improvements in the workers. The Milwaukee Handicraft Project staff identified products which would improve life for children and families in the Milwaukee community, prepared product designs of high artistic value, trained workers to make quality reproductions of their designs, and encouraged constant public inspection and examination of the WPA worksites. Even though the materials used in production were often very inexpensive, each article manufactured was expected to show quality workmanship. Formerly unskilled women attained sufficient skills that they could teach visitors, including even college faculty, their manufacturing techniques. They made educational materials which were used in high school and college classrooms in Milwaukee and around the country. Given its success, the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project established a standard against which current "W-2" and

other work programs can be measured—first, in terms of the value of work performed; secondly, in terms of improved skills for workers; and finally, in terms of lasting impact for the community. It is a high standard and one that offers long-term benefits to the community and to the workers served.

Postscript

Concurrent with the 28th Annual Morris Fromkin Lecture, on October 30, 1997, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Chancellor John Schroeder presented the UWM Alumni Association's "Special Recognition Award" to WPA workers "in recognition of their dedication to, and the historical achievement of, the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project in providing meaningful work for thousands of Milwaukee County women." Milwaukee County Executive F. Thomas Ament presented a special recognition "for outstanding and exemplary community service to the people of Milwaukee County," stating,

The Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project improved the quality of life for children and adults in Milwaukee County and the nation by producing educational materials, books, book bindings, dolls, toys, costumes, quilts, wall hangings, draperies, weavings, rugs and furniture of exceptional design, outstanding quality and lasting educational value.

The workers honored included:

Kendrick Bell, a designer-foreman, wrote and illustrated *At the Zoo*, one of the children's books published by project workers.

Marion Bode supervised the blockprinting unit and later served as a full-time designer producing blockprint designs for textiles.

George Burns helped set up the wooden toy unit and designed a number of toys including the tugboat and barges, goat puzzle, and freight train.

Melveda Streeter (Burns) started the hooked rug unit and developed a line of designs for standard sized rugs.

Ludwig Cinatl wrote a series of children's books published by the project, including *An Adventure of Franz the Puppet*, *Franz Visits a Farm* and *Come and Sing*, songs written by second and third graders at the Milwaukee State Teachers College training school.

Elisabeth Danielson supervised the hooked rug unit, including production of rugs for University of Wisconsin buildings and the Milwaukee Public Library. (Awards accepted posthumously by her children.)

Lois Drescher (Dean) supervised project workers binding Braille materials, including a thirty-nine-volume dictionary for the Wisconsin School for the Blind.

Jane Daggert Dillenberger served as an assistant to the art director for the project.

Dorothy Phillips (Haagensen) helped establish the sewing unit and created quilt and curtain designs. (Awards accepted posthumously by her children.)

Elisabeth McCain (Harris) supervised workers in the bookbinding unit, making scrapbooks and books for school children.

Judy Loomis (Knudson) started the sewing unit, produced quilt designs and helped establish a handicraft project in Iowa. (Awards accepted posthumously by her husband and children.)

Elizabeth Pasler Kottler designed a series of cloth dolls with screenprinted faces.

Ruth Schoewe (Laux) started the costume department, trained workers and designed costumes for Wisconsin schools, universities and community groups.

Meta Seeberg Matthes served as a designer and supervisor in the costume unit.

Harold Milbrath designed educational toys for the wooden toy unit and designed the wooden mannequins used to display sets of ethnic costumes requested by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Mary Kellogg (Rice) served as art director for the project from 1935 to 1942, approved all product designs, and provided guidance to the project designer-foremen.

Victor Schmitt directed the weaving unit and introduced the idea of improving the work environment by dyeing surplus government burlap bags *before* they were unravelled by workers.

Harold Scott supervised the blockprinting unit and offered community classes for workers interested in developing their own blockprint designs. (Awards accepted posthumously by his niece.)

Aaron Shansky supervised the production of scrapbooks and book binding, collaborated on an educational series demonstrating bookbinding techniques, and helped establish a handicraft project in Iowa. (Awards accepted posthumously by his brother.)

Camilla Travanti (Wichman) designed screenprinting, blockprinted, appliqué and stitchery patterns.

Edmund Wichman helped set up the wooden toy unit and designed toys, woven fabrics, blockprints and hooked rugs. (Awards accepted posthumously by his wife and children.)

Dick Wiken supervised workers in the toy unit and sculpted the head for the twenty-two inch doll. (Awards accepted posthumously by his children.)

Notes and References

¹ Harriet P. Clinton to Sol Ozer, "Memorandum on Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Handicraft Project" (Milwaukee, n.d.), copy on file with author.

² A 1997 exhibit including Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project objects toured art galleries throughout the country." Catalogue of the Exhibition," in Janet Kardon (ed.), *Craft in the Machine Age: The History of Twentieth-Century American Craft 1920-1945* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 135- 225.

³ See Lois M. Quinn, John Pawasarat and Laura Serebin, "Jobs for Workers on Relief in Milwaukee County, 1930-1994" (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, 1995). Employment and Training Institute reports are available on the Institute's website at www.eti.uwm.edu.

⁴ In preparation for the Fromkin lecture the author spent five days interviewing Mary Kellogg Rice in May 1997 and benefited from numerous phone conversations with Rice from February-October 1997. Rice provided access to her extensive files of Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project materials, shared a copy of her manuscript *Useful Work for Unskilled Women* and collaborated with the author on an exhibit at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee displaying Milwaukee Handicraft products and historic photographs. See Mary Kellogg Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2003). (Available from University of Wisconsin Press.) Betty O'Sullivan, whose mother was a supervisor for the project's rug making unit, also shared her resource files on the project and provided access to her extensive collection of dolls made by project workers. Workers interviewed or sharing archival materials included Kendrick Bell, George Burns, Lois Drescher Dean, Elisabeth McCain Harris, Meta Seeberg Matthes and Camilla Travanti Wichman. Public institutions which loaned Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project products for the UWM exhibit included Bay View High School, the Detroit Children's Museum, Hartford (Wis.) Public Library, Milwaukee Public Library, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee Public Schools, Shorewood (Wis.) High School and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Information on the project and WPA collections was also provided by the Milwaukee County Historical Society, the Helen Allen Textile Collection of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the Harriet Goldstein Gallery of the University of Minnesota, the Art History Museum of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library/National Records and Archives Administration.

⁵ H.W. Perrigo, *General Relief in Wisconsin: 1848-1935* (Madison, Wis.: Public Welfare Department, State of Wisconsin, 1939), p. 36.

⁶ City of Milwaukee, "Municipal Activities of Milwaukee for 1932. Annual Consolidated Report of the Common Council as Compiled and Edited by the Municipal Reference Library" (1933), pp. 34-35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

⁸ City of Milwaukee, "Municipal Activities of Milwaukee for 1933. Annual Consolidated Report of the Common Council as Compiled and Edited by the Municipal Reference Library" (1934).

⁹ U.S. National Resources Planning Board, *Security, Work, and Relief Policies*. Report of the Committee on Long-Range Work and Relief Policies. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), p. 19.

¹⁰ United States Government Work Projects Administration, *Final Report on the WPA Program* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946); Arthur E. Burns and Edward A. Williams, *Federal Work, Security, and Relief Programs*. Research Monograph XXIV (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941).

¹¹ *Final Report on the WPA Program*.

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- ¹² Milwaukee County Department of Outdoor Relief, "Annual Report of the Department of Outdoor Relief: 1935" (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County, 1936).
- ¹³ Wisconsin Industrial Commission, "Standards of Work Relief and Direct Relief in Wisconsin," (Madison, Wis.: Bureau of Unemployment Research Series, Number 3, February 1932), 5.
- ¹⁴ The distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor was codified under the Elizabethan Poor Law, but has a more complicated application when applied to single mothers. See Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*. Fifth Edition. (New York: Free Press, 1994); Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).
- ¹⁵ Wisconsin Industrial Commission, "Standards," 5.
- ¹⁶ Mayor Hoan reported, "Since there were at no time jobs enough to go around, it would have been absurd to have made work compulsory. After a man went to work, should he at any time desire to quit, he was free to do so and could automatically return to the ranks of those receiving direct relief. There was, of course, an inducement to work, for these families were paid in cash." Daniel W. Hoan, *City Government: The Record of the Milwaukee Experiment* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), p. 323.
- ¹⁷ Eugene A. Howard, "Personal Recollections of Milwaukee County Park System, 1924-1960," *Milwaukee History* 5 (Spring-Summer, 1982), 2-43; Milwaukee County Park Commission and Milwaukee County Regional Planning Board, *Activities* (Milwaukee, 1951).
- ¹⁸ Milwaukee County Park Commission and Milwaukee County Regional Planning Board, "Quadredecennial Report: 1937-1950 Inclusive," (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County, [1951]), pp. 68-69.
- ¹⁹ City of Milwaukee, "Report of Work Accomplished and Money Expended: C.W.A., W.E.R.A., W.P.A. to September 1935" (Milwaukee: Department of Public Works, City of Milwaukee, 1936).
- ²⁰ The loan libraries had no income requirement for users, and the media was constantly encouraging children to borrow toys. See "United States. - Works Progress Administration. Milwaukee Toy Loan Centers, Scrapbook concerning the center, 1939-1940." Milwaukee Manuscript Collection AX, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
- ²¹ By April 1940, WPA workers in Milwaukee County had constructed 84 public buildings, 884 miles of streets and highways, 31 bridges and viaducts, 206 miles of sidewalks, 187 miles of curbs, and lighting for 215 miles of streets, and reconstructed 478 buildings. "Reviews Work of WPA here," *Milwaukee Journal*, 9 April 1940.
- ²² Clinton to Ozer; Burns and Williams, *Federal Work, Security, and Relief Programs*, 63.
- ²³ Harriet Pettibone Clinton, "The First Year of Women's and Professional Projects, W.P.A. Milwaukee County" [Milwaukee: s.n., 1936]. Fromkin Memorial Collection, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
- ²⁴ Elsa Ulbricht, transcription of interview with Heyward Ehrlich, Saugatuck, Michigan, 11 June 1964, p. 3. Elsa Emile Ulbricht, 1885-1980. Papers, 1905-1978. UWM Manuscript Collection 59, University Manuscript Collections, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
- ²⁵ Mary Kellogg Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2003), 8.
- ²⁶ Ulbricht interview; Peter C. Merrill, "Elsa Ulbricht: A Career in Art," *Milwaukee History* 16 (Spring 1993): 22-28; Gertrude M. Copp, "Elsa Ulbricht: She Conceived and Guided the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," *Design* 45 (February 1944): 4.

²⁷ Clinton later wrote, with the benefit of hindsight, “Here was the one chance in our lifetime to imprint the principles and examples of good design and color upon approximately 1,000 women of the community. The allure of conducting such an experiment in good taste could not but attract an educator with a feeling for social values. Secondly, here was a chance to set up in the community a production unit for fine handmade things which could be dispensed to tax supported institutions so badly in need of furnishings and of the art idea—to infiltrate good design into permanent agencies of the community.” Clinton to Ozer, 4. For a discussion of the importance of the Arts and Crafts movement to the WPA, see Hildreth J. York, “New Deal Craft Programs and their Social Implications,” in *Revivals! Diverse Traditions: The History of 20th Century American Craft 1920-1945*. ed. Janet Kardon (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 55-61; Janet Kardon, “Craft in the Machine Age,” in *Craft in the Machine Age*, 22-35; Kathryn E. Maier, “A New Deal for Local Crafts: Textiles from the Milwaukee Handicrafts Project” (Master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1994).

²⁸ Kellogg postponed her college graduation until 1941 to devote herself full-time to the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project. Ulbricht credited her with much of the success of the project, later writing, “No article was constructed which did not receive her approval. Her analysis of a problem and her criticisms were constructive and all of the designers and work-foremen whom she directed, benefitted and grew in aesthetic judgment and in ability to organize their assignments. She possessed patience, perseverance and the concentration necessary to surmount obstacles.” Elsa Ulbricht, “Mary Kellogg Rice and Those Who Aided in the Milwaukee Handicraft Project,” *Design* 45 (February 1944): 5.

²⁹ When the demand for products dramatically increased the supervisory load, a separate department was created with full-time designers. Mary Kellogg Rice, “The Policy of Good Design,” *Design* 45 (February 1944): 15.

³⁰ Clinton to Ozer, 10.

³¹ Ulbricht had learned bookbinding at Hull House and introduced it at Milwaukee State Teachers College. Ulbricht interview, p. 2.

³² [Harriet P. Clinton] “Organization of W.P.A. Handicraft Project No. 1170” [Milwaukee, 1938], p. 7. #832183B in Milwaukee Public Museum.

³³ Rice, *Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project*.

³⁴ Ten of the wooden toy designs were copied by Thorndyke Toys which is now Playskool. George Burns interview with author, Glendale, Wisconsin, 15 May 1997.

³⁵ Rice, *Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project*.

³⁶ Ibid. When the Milwaukee County Home for Dependent Children ordered 600 quilts, Harriet Clinton observed, “[This] will go far, we believe, in persuading that institution and similar, that color and beauty is the heritage even of institutionalized children.” Clinton to Ozer, p. 11. For a discussion of the quilt designs, see Merikay Waldvogel, “Quilts in the WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project, 1935- 1943,” *Uncoverings 1984*, ed. Sally Garoutte (San Francisco: American Quilt Study Group, 1985), 153-167.

³⁷ Rice, *Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project*.

³⁸ The name “counterpane toys” was coined by a Miss Brink, Supervisor of Nurses at the Milwaukee County Hospital. Typed notes of Elsa Ulbricht in Box 2, Folder 17 of the Ulbricht Papers, UWM Manuscript Collection 59, University Manuscript Collections, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

³⁹ Mary Kellogg Rice interviews with author, Fall 1997.

⁴⁰ “Organization of Handicraft Project No. 1170,” 12.

⁴¹ The theater departments at Bay View High School and Shorewood High School loaned costumes from their collections for the exhibit accompanying the Fromkin Lecture. The Milwaukee Public Library has a three volume collection of watercolor designs of costumes made by the project and a portfolio of 38 photographs of costume designs.

⁴² Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project, *Catalogue Number 10* (Milwaukee, Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project, n.d.), Collection of Betty O'Sullivan, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

⁴³ [Harriet P. Clinton], "Wisconsin Work Projects Administration Professional and Service Division 1939" [Milwaukee: WPA, 1939]. Fromkin Memorial Collection, Milwaukee Urban Archives, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

⁴⁴ "Organization of Project No. 1170," 5.

⁴⁵ Rice, *Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ The books, covered with blockprinted cloth and hand-sewn, invited teachers to visit the Handicraft exhibits, work rooms and new display room at the Jackson Street Building. "Plan Show at Wis. Teachers' Convention," *The Handicrafter*, 5 October 1939, p. 2.

⁴⁸ The Emergency Relief Administration Act of 1939 required that all non-defense projects within a state must aggregate 25 percent of the cost of projects approved after January 1, 1940. Donald S. Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943), 148. The Milwaukee State Teachers College was the first legal sponsor of the Handicraft Project. In 1937, when the federal government required local sponsors to contribute to WPA costs, the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors assumed financial sponsorship. In 1942 when the federal government ended financial support for WPA projects, Milwaukee County continued the work as a locally funded work program for residents who could not find employment in the private sector. Elsa Ulbricht, "Problems of Organization," *Design* 45 (February 1944): 10-11.

⁴⁹ The Milwaukee Public Library has discontinued its browsing room which was designed and furnished by the WPA project but uses many of the WPA-built sofas and armchairs in its employees lounge. A cane chair loaned for the exhibit accompanying this lecture is still in use in the principal's office at Atwater School in Shorewood. Introduction of a furniture unit made it possible to hire unemployed cabinet makers and "rough" carpenters from the Milwaukee County relief rolls. "Furniture and Interior Design," *Design* 45 (February 1944): 16-17.

⁵⁰ Rice interviews with author, Fall 1997.

⁵¹ Rice, *Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project*.

⁵² "Milwaukee's WPA Handicraft to Be Shown Throughout U.S.," *Milwaukee Journal*, 10 October 1937. In 1997 a National Archives exhibit of work produced by New Deal arts projects included a wallhanging made by Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project workers. Bruce I. Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1997).

⁵³ According to Ulbricht, "The word 'artistically,' was not used—nor was this program designated as an Art Program. It was merely a program in the production of practical, useful things; in work that was possible to do under the circumstances, and necessary to be surrounded with for fuller, richer living." Elsa Ulbricht, "Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," *Design* 45 (February 1944): 7.

⁵⁴ The project designer-foremen were aged nineteen to twenty-six. Mary Kellogg observed, "It took a youthful vision to see the possibilities in a handicraft project employing unskilled labor; a youthful enthusiasm to interest the workers in work foreign to them; a youthful energy to carry through in spite of discouraging circumstances; a

youthful sympathy with people to bring about a fine relationship between foreman and worker.” Clinton to Ozer, 9-10.

⁵⁵ “Return from N.Y. Fair Handicraft Booth,” *The Handicrafter*, 5 November 1939, p. 1.

⁵⁶ “Praises Schuster's Courtesy, Service,” *The Handicrafter*, 5 November 1939, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Rice interviews with author, Fall 1997.

⁵⁸ Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women*, 23-24.

⁵⁹ Clinton to Ozer; in 1930 African-Americans comprised 7,723 of Milwaukee County's 725,263 population; in 1940 African-Americans made up 9,069 of the 766,885 population. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943). See also, Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of An Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁶⁰ Clinton to Ozer.

⁶¹ Elsa Ulbricht, “Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project,” *Design* 45 (February 1944): 7.

⁶² Elsa Ulbricht, “Outline for Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment” [Milwaukee, 1937], Ulbricht Papers, UWM Milwaukee Manuscript Collection 59, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Kirk Bates, “A Project That Made Milwaukee Famous: Success of the WPA Handicraft Undertaking That Supplied Public Institutions With Beautiful Draperies, Furniture and Rugs Has Led County to Continue It as Basis for Future Rehabilitation Program,” *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 May 1944.

⁶⁵ Francine Triplett and Lois M. Quinn, “Project Get Started: Phase II Report” (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Area Technical College, September 1997).

⁶⁶ John Pawasarat and Lois M. Quinn, “Survey of Job Openings in the Milwaukee Metropolitan Area: Week of May 19, 1997” (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, 1997).

⁶⁷ For various perspectives on the merits of work relief programs, see Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Lawrence M. Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *The Breaking of the American Social Contract* (New York: New Press, 1997); William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

⁶⁸ Adam Cohen, “The Great American Welfare Lab,” *Time*, 149 (21 April 1997): 76.

⁶⁹ Wisconsin's new “W-2” welfare system provides annual lump-sum payments to five “W-2” service vendors regardless of whether AFDC/W-2 families find family-supporting employment. Consequently, meaningless work assignments while having a negative effect on workers may result in higher net profits for the agency provider.

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