

Book Review by Lois Quinn:

Mary Kellogg Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2003).

Imagine, if you could, a light manufacturing business established to employ unskilled and semi-skilled women from the welfare rolls, creating products (toys, dolls, books, quilts, fabrics, weavings, and furniture) of such quality that art museums and eBay collectors would bid hundreds of dollars for them after they were discarded by schools, hospitals and day care centers. Such a project was created in Milwaukee County in the 1930s -- created, I might add, by a group of young college graduates and art students. One "designer-foreman" for the project's toy unit, George Burns, wryly recalls, "*We were so naive and inexperienced we didn't realize we were being asked to do the impossible, so we did it.*"

Mary Kellogg Rice, art director for the WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project from its inception in 1935 to 1942, has written a fascinating account of the project titled, **Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project**. Rice was a senior at Milwaukee State Teachers College during the Great Depression when her teacher Elsa Ulbricht asked her to help develop a Works Progress Administration project for women lacking skills for the other WPA projects operating in Milwaukee County. Within a few weeks Rice and her team of designer-foremen -- mostly young, unemployed art education graduates -- were training women to make products for use by children in WPA nursery schools, the county orphanage, county hospital and local schools. Eventually, their production lines were employing over a thousand women and furnishing area rugs, draperies, wall hangings and even furniture for local school offices, the Milwaukee Public Library and the University of Wisconsin student union.



Mary Kellogg Rice, today



Mary June Kellogg in the 1930s

Rice tells the story of the remarkable development of this project in careful, measured tones, emphasizing the importance of good design and useful work to the project's success. She understates the role she played in ensuring that every product made was of the highest possible quality. She once explained her philosophy, "*It was decided that no matter how simple the article to be made or how inexpensive the materials to be used in the construction, the article would be well designed or it would not be made.*"



The photographs in her book show the value of the approach -- women of all ages and different races working intently on production of children's books (now in library special collections), costumes (still used in high school productions), dolls (now selling on eBay for \$800-\$1,000), coverlets and textile fabrics (purchased and hung in art museums). Rice also provides color photographs of products and information on the location of public collections of historic photographs and WPA products, often worn through use.



WPA nursery school coverlet



Appliquéd curtains for the county orphanage

In her book Rice described her visit to the county home for dependent children:

“I took two designer-foremen from the woodworking section with me on my first visit. We were taken to see the pre-school children ‘playing.’ In a room the size of a classroom were about thirty three and four-year-olds running aimlessly about. We were able to observe them through windows along the corridor. The children, boys and girls alike, were dressed in long-sleeved gray flannel rompers that covered them from neck to mid-calf and buttoned down the back with ten large buttons. I counted them. There were no toys, no playthings of any kind and no attendant in the room.... Toys were needed and much more. When I reported to Harriet Clinton [Supervisor of the Women's and Professional Division of the WPA for Milwaukee County] what we had observed she went into action.... Orders for appropriate clothes were given to the WPA Sewing Project, a WPA nursery school was established. The director told me she could only work with half the usual number of children because they were not toilet trained and they had not learned to go up and down stairs for fear they would fall. They were transported between floors by elevator, making them truly dependent children.”

“The project quickly supplied educational toys and dolls, and on subsequent visits the beds lined up in dormitories (six hundred in all) were measured for coverlets. We supplied attractive curtains for the older children's activity rooms. Braided rugs for the playrooms and books and scrapbooks containing suitable material for the different age groups would in time complete the transformation, a transformation which was greatly appreciated by the matron and staff. Transforming this institution demonstrated that formerly unskilled women who had been dependent on the county for subsistence could make a significant contribution to the well-being of others -- in this case the children.”

Rice's book on **Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique WPA Project** is published by the Milwaukee County Historical Society. The soft cover book includes 130 historic black and white photographs and sketches and 34 color photos of products. It is available from the University of Wisconsin Press and through Amazon.com. See the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute website (www.eti.uwm.edu) for a summary of our 109 page history on **Jobs for Workers on Relief in Milwaukee County, 1930-1994**.



Workers made block printed fabric for school and hospital curtains and educational portfolios.



Large area rugs were custom made for University of Wisconsin facilities



Schools and nurseries from throughout the U.S. ordered toys from the project.

Sample of Products



These WPA-sewn costumes are still in use at Bay View High School in Milwaukee.



WPA dolls are now a hot collectors' item.



A nurse suggested that the project workers call their light, stuffed dolls and animals "counterpane toys."



The project's educational toys were copied by commercial companies.



Sailboats were a popular design for curtains, coverlets and toys.



Project weavers made draperies and upholstery material.