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Book Review of Mary Kellogg Rice's Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project

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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.

OBITUARIES | OBITUARY

Amid Depression, Rice helped women find work through art

WPA project gave work, respect to thousands of Milwaukee's poor

By Amy Rabideau Silvers of the Journal Sentinel

Jan. 17, 2011

In those dark, desperate days of the Great Depression, thousands of women found employment and hope through a Works Progress Administration project.

Mary Kellogg Rice, then a senior studying art at the Milwaukee State Teachers College, was asked to serve as art director for a handicraft project. Hundreds of women showed up that first day in 1935, reporting to a vacant building at Jackson and Wells streets downtown.

They were the poorest of the poor. Many were middle-age. Many had never worked or were considered to have no skills. Some could not read or speak much English. All were on relief and ordered into the program because there was no "able-bodied man" in the household for other WPA work.

"They were undernourished and miserable, that's all I can say," Rice later told the Journal Sentinel. "They looked as if they'd been through an awful lot. They'd been assigned work, but they didn't know what it was. Some of them had walked all the way across Milwaukee to get there."

The project flourished, becoming a model for programs elsewhere. More than 1,300 women were sometimes involved at one time, with a total of 5,000-plus women by the time it closed in 1943.

More than half a century later, as more modern-day politicians debated welfare reform, Rice decided to write a book about the Depression-era project. Her handwritten manuscript - "Useful Work for Unskilled Women / A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project" - was later published in 2003.

"It was a gift to Milwaukee to say, look what these women did," said Lois Quinn, researcher with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Employment and Training Institute.

"It's totally a Milwaukee story," Quinn said.

Rice died of natural causes Jan. 6 in Tiburon, Calif. She turned 100 last month.

For her part, Rice always credited Elsa Ulbricht, one of her teachers at the teachers college, for the program's direction and success. A well-known art educator, Ulbricht was asked about what a program might do.

Ulbricht insisted that women should produce both useful and well-designed goods. And she tapped Rice to run it.

The young art student worked with art school grads - both women and men - to design production items and supervise the work. As art director, she approved every design.

The goal was to make high-quality items that could be used by public institutions.

"They went to the county orphanage to see what was needed, and they were shocked by the conditions there," Quinn said. "So they made educational toys, curtains, rugs and quilted coverlets for the beds."

They created dolls and fabrics, wall hangings and furniture. They rebound books for schools and libraries, and designed costumes for high school productions. Other clients included hospitals, nursery schools and the University of Wisconsin.

"Very shortly, after they had their first paycheck, you could see it," Rice said. "What was interesting to me was that they couldn't buy much, but they could get a white collar and wear it. And then they could have a permanent wave. The change was really just dramatic. They knew they were doing useful work, and they knew they could do it."

The women began to find work with other WPA projects.

"They sent women from the handicraft project to the World's Fair, where they demonstrated how to make the items," Quinn said. "Other states began to copy the program."

"Eleanor Roosevelt visited and wrote about it in her 'My Day' column," she said. "One of their wall hangings was in her house when she died."

The project was groundbreaking in yet another way.

Although only 2% of Milwaukee's population was then black, the number in the handicraft project was 25%.

"The county sent the African-American women they hadn't allowed to work on other projects," Quinn said. "And they already had a separate facility where they wanted them to work."

That, declared young Rice, wasn't going to happen.

"We were furious and vowed not to have a segregated workplace," she wrote in her book. "The idea that race should determine where and when one worked offended our sense of fairness."

Such integration was just the beginning.

"There were supervisors who were African-American," Quinn said. "They had skills that many of the white women didn't have, and they made them supervisors."

Mary Kellogg married Edward E. Rice late in 1942. He was from Milwaukee and a diplomat with the U.S. Foreign Service. They spent their first married years apart, while he served in China during the war.

They spent much of their married life overseas. Odd things sometimes happened when she tried to pursue her own art. In the Philippines, someone saw her weaving and she was soon working under the auspices of the United Nations and the Philippine government, organizing work projects for local women.

The couple later retired to the San Francisco area. Rice finally began to find time for art, first weaving until back problems developed, then experimenting with a fabric-dyeing technique called *shibori*.

"That led to collaboration on a book, 'Shibori: The Art of Japanese Resist Dyeing,' published in Japan in 1983," said Margaret Serrano, a lawyer who became a close friend. "It is considered a classic on the subject and is still in print."

But Rice's roots went back to Milwaukee and unfinished business with the old WPA project. She thought that someone should write about what it meant to the women and families, the young teachers and a Depression-weary community.

"She remained intensely interested in public policy, particularly policy affecting women and children," Quinn said. "Her vision was what could be done and what had happened in the past. She was a remarkable woman, remarkable throughout her life."

A private service is planned.

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