TAPE RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH ELSA ULBRICHT - June 1964

246 MARY STREET, SAUGATUCK, MICHIGAN

INTERVIEWED BY HAYWARD EHRLICH

HE: Dr. Ehrlich
EU: Miss Ulbricht

HE Can we go to the beginning and talk about your first interest in design and your training?

EU Well, first of all I went to the Wisconsin School of Art while I was teaching kindergarten. I was trained as a kindergarten teacher. I went to the Wisconsin School of Art where a man by the name of Alexander Miller was a very strict disciplinarian and very keen on design. He wouldn't let anybody steal anybody else's design because he said that was plagiarism. So we had a very good course in design and he started the crafts way back when nobody was thinking in terms of crafts.

HE How did you become interested in crafts at all?

EU I think it was perfectly natural. My grandfather was a good craftsman. He was a contractor, but he was very ingenious. He did things nobody else could do and would do, and he got lots of recognition for doing the unusual thing. He was a practical engineer; he did house-moving of all kinds and even tower-moving and putting the Statue of Liberty - - straightening her out on the courthouse in Milwaukee. So I think I come by that naturally, and my mother had ability, too, to do things with her hands. She did weaving until she died.

HE What kind of weaving did she do?

EU Well, loom weaving. I taught her. It was my field, especially my field in teaching. But when I got out of Pratt Institute I had the opportunity to start the Normal Art Department of Wisconsin State Teachers College. They had no Normal Arts training, no teacher training, and though I was

fairly young I had lots of opportunity to try to experiment with the different courses which I had to teach. And that was way back in 1911. I was put into that position and I had to really start the different things that I thought were good for art teachers to have from an educational standpoint.

HE What were some of those things?

EU Well, one of the first was weaving; bookbinding also, because I had taken a course in bookbinding more recently at Hull House. Then I did puppetry. I established that. Then I did some of the graphic arts. I did practically every kind of thing that people needed. Basketry was another one of my early crafts. And I had to work those out for myself because there wasn't very much written on the subject, especially on screen printing. I did textile screen printing then.

My kindergarten training lasted only three years. I had a teacher in the Normal School when I went there who pushed me on to thinking I should be doing something else. So I did go to evening school, where I got this marvelous start of independence in the arts which gave me a certain philosophy about how to arrive at your ends. Then in the years that I taught at the Normal School there were a series of changes in the head of the school, the President of the College, as well as the people heading the department. And in that two years I became head of the Art Department.

But while I was doing all those things I was also interested in all cultural affairs in Milwaukee, especially the little theatre. I had practically every office there. The most important office, or job, was being technical director of Stage. And that gave me much experience. I

had a crew working with me and we put on all the plays. But I also liked to act and I liked to attend the School of the Dance; everything that concerned the theatre was brought in there. But then I was asked in 1935 to take over the WPA Projects - the woman's work project, by Mrs. Clinton, who was district director. She went to Mr. Baker, the president of the school, and said she wanted me to do it. I had known her because she was a dramatic critic of one of the newspapers in Milwaukee and knew me through my Little Theatre work and knew what I had done there.

Well, when Mrs. Harriet Clinton came to me about it I was in Saugatuck here at the Summer School of Painting and I had been taking a full course in lithography. I wasn't just ready to come home, but I was called several times and finally I did go home and she told me what she wanted. She wanted a handicraft project for women to give work to women who were out of employment, who were indigent and needed it. And what she suggested to me - and I can remember this so clearly - is that, oh, well, we could cut out some pictures from wallpaper and paste them into books and make scrapbooks. And knowing her very well I said, "Well,Harriet, 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."

Then the one thing I insisted on was that the people that assisted in this whole enterprise should be art-trained personnel. It was a very good time of the century because it was a depression period and the art students weren't getting teaching jobs, so I had my own art students from art school, the University of Wisconsin now, to draw from. I put the standards for people who were to assist me very high. First of all, I wanted one person to be the supervisor of the arts and design consultant, and that

was one of my very wonderful students who was just a senior at the college that year, fourth-year student. I asked Mr. Baker whether he would graduate her in case the project would not be approved. Because we were two months setting it up with all the things that we needed for materials and equpment and all that kind of thing.

HE How did you set it up at the beginning?

EU Well, we didn't get any money right away, but the Federal government set it up for 250 people for a year and advanced the funds for their salaries. Then, of course, the equipment - I don't know exactly how all the equipment was gotten, but we had help in housing. First of all, in the Veteran's Administration Building they gave us two rooms out quite far. We had at one time seven different locations where people didn't use the buildings, like a public school building. Finally, some other buildings of industry that had been abandoned during this depression period.

It was always necessary to have space and more space, and we finally landed at the Weyenberg Shoe Company, which is two square blocks practically. We were in three floors of that building. And then we could put all the units of the project together under one roof, and that was ideal.

HE Did you ever visit all seven locations in one day?

EU Well, I didn't have to. I had selected so many good people that I could do lots of things by telephone, but also there wasn't that much supervision to do after we once got started. We got started in a small way with these two rooms and I could go out to that. But this is the rub, too. I did not stop teaching - I still continued to teach. I'd start my class and then I d tell them, "Well, I'm going to have to go, you'll have to be on your own." And they did better than if I'd been

there, I thought, because they were on their mettle, you see. They were wonderful people. I had mostly seniors and juniors anyhow, in my classes, so it wasn't too difficult a thing to leave them.

HE How did you pick people to work with your students?

EU I was very disillusioned. I went to the U.S.Employment Service records and I thought I could pick out some skilled workers, but I didn't realize until after the project started that this was the dregs of all WPA employment groups. They had been combed by other projects. First, the museum project had taken a lot of very good people; of course, the art project had taken all the artists; and the sewing project had taken the skilled workers. You should have seen those people when they came the first day, the 6th of November, 1935. They were a sad-looking lot, and they were sad, too, because they were afraid.

HE What were they afraid of?

EU They didn't know what was going to happen. And they were also afraid because their assignments were delayed and they were dated before and they were afraid that the job wouldn't be there any more. Well, when they came, of course, we had to do all kinds of reassuring that they would be able to work under good personnel. It was simply - it was one of the most beautiful things that could be seen how they immediately began to respond and how willing they were bacause they wanted the job. Now people oftentimes in WPA thought all these projects were boondoggling and weren't necessary, but I know they were because it made different human beings out of them. After a few months/they began to take pride in themselves and take heart. And it really was just wonderful.

Of course the personnel that I selected were people who had had four years of art training as well as teaching background and good psychology.

HE What made a good assistant for you?

EU I worked with adults all my life practically up to 1935. From 1911 I was working with college students and I knew too that they were very anxious for work and when I discussed the assignment with them they were more than anxious to come because it would mean a job as well as to work with people. And there was quite a bit of feeling for the whole thing. Now the first unit that we opened up was this one that went into the bookbinding unit.

HE Was there any reason why you began there?

EU Yes, because there were no other materials available. But there were materials like magazines from which pictures could be cut and we would have to mount them into something so we began to make books where pictures could be mounted in permanent form to give to hospitals, nursery schools, and kindergartens. So that was the most logical thing to begin with. Then as the project grew - we were set up for 250 people for the year, but it had to be changed because within the week about 800 to 900 people came on and we had all those to deal with. Then we had to have the project funds extended for a greater number.

HE How did the number increase?

EU Mrs. Clinton asked me whether I objected to Negroes. I said no. So when they came, they came about 200 at a time. They were sent because other projects refused them. I said I didn't refuse them and so we just built up this 800 to 900 within the week, within the end of the first week. And of course it was very difficult because we didn't have any equipment. I rummaged through my stuff at school and brought whatever

I could. I brought blocks that had been cut and left by students for prints to make block prints. Well, that was another thing we did almost immediately. We got ink imbraders and began to print on paper. Then we began to print on cloth with already-made blocks until we could design some more that really belonged to the project. And then all the scissors that I could gather, I brought down the sewing machine, I think I brought down almost everything that I had in my room at school that I felt I could spare.

HE Did anyone help you to gather supplies?

EU Oh, yes. Because I had Mary June Caller, who became the art director and also Ann Selman, whom I put in as a sort of administrative director. Now Mary June Caller was a perfect artist and had wonderful taste and she was a little bit older than the majority of the students that I had in my fourth-year class. And the two of them, Mrs. Sellman and Mary June Caller, worked through catalogues with me and for two months picking out what we thought we would need in equipment. But of course that wasn't available because we had to order it.

HE Did it take a long time to get the things you ordered?

EU Well, it took quite a long time. But the project was not okeyed until two months later. This was when I went back to school in September and so all the way through September and October we worked on the details of setting it up. Ann Sellman had had courses at the University of Wisconsin in industrial relations, so I thought she would be rather good, but she also worked with me in the evening school at Charwood, which was opportunity school where I taught crafts classes.

HE Can you say more about the reactions of the people who arrived?

EU Not a bit hostile, but frightened. Some of them were gaunt, sort of under-fed and undernourished. Their clothes were bad; their hair-dressing was very bad; everything was that of an indigent person who had no hope in the world. And they were afraid even to express themselves. But the personnel was good - they encouraged them. They didn't even know how to handle scissors when we began cutting out pictures and stuff like that.

HE Where did the people come from?

EU All over Milwaukee County.

HE And what had they done before?

EU Some of them had done nothing before. Some of them had lost their jobs but most of them were unskilled - definitely unskilled - so they probably couldn't have been put on any industry project.

HE What was the range?

EU From about 18 to 80 almost - not quite as old as that. They were all ages, all sizes, al nationalities, and all colors. It was wonderful to see. And I can say right there there was never any feeling on the project of segregation. They got together at the tables for work and worked very harmoniously. We never had any difficulty whatever. There was a unity there. They mingled and they worked well together. And one thing I think which made the project successful was that we never ~~dloxed~~ locked the doors to any visitors who wanted to come at any time. That gave the people pride in showing off what they were doing because any time a visitor came around the table to ask the worker what he was doing, he'd have to tell, and they'd say, "Oh, it's lovely, it's beautiful, did you make this?" And that kind of thing helped.

The esprit de corps was just wonderful and it built them up.

HE How long did people stay with you?

EU Until they learned a skill so well that they could be absorbed by industry. It was an ever-changing training program for skills because the new ones that would come would have to be taught all over again.

HE Can we talk a bit more about the different kinds of projects? How about the bookbinding?

EU We collected all the magazines - we got our friends to bring their old magazines - especially the colorful ones, and then the women cut them up. Then there was one young fellow who was a graduate, who was very clean, Harry Lish ter, who sorted the things according to values, according to age levels, and also to values. He was very alive, a very brilliant Jewish boy like they are and a very good friend of mine because he was one of a large family and when he was in my class in school he used to stay after school a lot and talk to me about things.

He started as one of my students. He really started with me at the Wisconsin Players because his high school art teacher told him to look me up and see if there wasn't something he could do at the Wisconsin Players. He came donw there and helped me on the stage with the technical direction, then the next year he came up to our school and stayed for four years.

HE How long approximately was he on the project?

EU I don't know dates, but I know that he was quite a radical in his thinking and he signed for the Spanish cause and then he left at that time. So I didn't see him again until he came back, and of course hewas accused of being Communist and he had radical thoughts and all that. He was young but very brilliant and a very talented craftsman, a very good craftsman.

HE Did the project hélp him further his career?

EU Yes, I think it did. And I think it did give him a job at the Madison Historical Museum because of the experience he had on the project. As it happened to any number of others. One young lady who did stock printing designing got a job at the University of Minnesota and taught there. That's the way even the project supervisors got their positions and we had to replace them. I had in all about 50 through the length of the years of the project because of replacements - 50 in the art designing department. And those designers also became supervisors, or project heads. They were practically all people from my school, although I tried not to take them only from my school, but my school had the best record usually. They had all the crafts. We were very profuse in crafts training, as well as painting and lithography and all the other arts. But they were always good, and then they had also this training in teaching and the psychology of people - how to handle people.

HE What would they have done if the project hadn't existed?

EU I don't know. They probably would have gone on relief because they were almost all of middle class families, many of them were, and they did need help.

HE Were there any political difficulties?

EU Well, the City of Milwaukee didn't entirely approve. I know even one of the professors at our school didn't think it was good, but when he came down to see it he said, "Well, this is one project which is doing a good job." He didn't like the WPA idea.

HE What were some of the other reactions of your colleagues or neighbors that you knew to the project?

EU Well, I don't know very many people that are liberal. I don't think I

had much to do with them except this one, the English teacher who didn't think he approved of it until he came down to see it, but he did make the remark, "Well, this is one that I think I can believe in."

HE What do you think changed his mind?

EU Because he saw them, the work being done. And he couldn't do else. The work was superior and it went to public institutions, tax supported institutions so the whole country benefitted by some of the products.

HE What was the purpose of keeping the products of the projects to public institutions?

EU So it wouldn't compete with industry.

HE With factory workers?

EU And of course there was that danger because we began to make things, but our excuse always was that these things are not available to public industry.

HE What were the kinds of things that you made?

EU Well, furniture after a while. After we got men on the project, the project deepened as the need came - there were men assigned to the project.

HE Where did they come from?

EU Well, a lot of them were cabinet makers. And some were upholsterers. You see, this was a construction project, not like - it wasn't an art project. I said it was to make art, produce art, but it - but I didn't want it to be affiliated with the art project because the art

project, the painting project, and even some of the craft projects that developed, like the one in Chicago, did one thing of a kind and gave it to institutions. But we did hundreds and hundreds of things of one kind, like 4,000 dolls one time that we made for the county institutions for Christmas. Well, that's a production project.

HE 4,000 dolls is a lot of dolls.

EU Yes. They're little ten-inch dolls. And at one time Washington wanted to consolidate the projects. We had started this doing the best that we could do with what we had and by taking the best directors that we could get and keeping the standards high and trying things out before we sent them out. For instance, that doll that we had, that 24-inch doll, had the most wonderful experience. I had a friend who is a kindergarten teacher and I had the first one made and took it to her kindergarten and we set it down on one of the kindergarten chairs while the children were out of the room. And one of the little boys came in and didn't seem to think it was anything different from a child. He said, "Who is she?"

HE How did the designs originate?

EU Each one of the foremen did the designing for his unit.

HE How did you find the foremen?

EU From the students that I knew at school, from their abilities and from their desire to become that. They had to learn some things too, especially how to do things in production.

HE About how many such students did you have working as foremen or supervisors?

EU Well, one for each unit, which would be about ten in the beginning. Then more as we went - - not ten in the very beginning because we only had

Harry Lishter in the bookbinding unit. Then there was my very good friend Clarence Hackett, who was on the project for youth - that Roosevelt - -? NYA! Well, Clarence Hackett was on NYA and was helping me while I was in school in establishing exhibitions and things of that kind for the school. Of course he was a logical person to put on; and then young George Burns was also there and he was put on to the bookbinding after it enlarged. Then there was a very wonderful designer - Marion - this girl was a good designer, Barbara Warren, and she did that wonderful sheet. She was just absolutely a good designer. She was one of the people that came from the Layton School because she was so very, very good in designing. And Marion Bowdy was a student who was rather shy, but also a very good designer, and Elizabeth Taffer was a nice little person, did the dolls - these dolls. This doll originated as a sort of group participation. I started the head one time, and then we got Dick Weiken to do a better one than I did because he was a sculptor. Out of that grew that all cloth doll. It wook quite a while to make a doll because we cast the head into plaster of paris molds out of knit goods, knit material, like underwear material.

HE Why did you hit upon that process?

EU Because I had a Russian doll that was sort of cast in that way and I thought it might be that way that we could do it. But through experimenting we found that three layers of this material pressed into the mold which was shellacked could bring out a mask. Then we had to do the back of the head separately. It could be stiffened and could be filled with sawdust at first, or plastic wood, so that it would be hard enough to withstand blows, and colored very faintly.

HE The materials for it were fairly easy for you to get?

EU Yes. All cloth. And we could get cuttings, scraps from different places, like the sewing project would give us what scraps they had so we could make - these things, almost all of these little stuffed cloth toys were made out of things - out of scrap material. And the 4,000 dolls were made out of the scraps that came out of the cuttings from dresses and materials from the bigger doll. So nothing was thrown away.

HE Extraordinary ingenuity in getting the most out of the material.

EU Isn't that the important thing about craftsmen? I think so. Well, I have always thought about this as being one of my most thrilling experiences, and of course, I didn't work for money, and I think that was one of the things too. I could be very independent of WPA regulations.

HE Were the regulations bothersome at times?

EU Yes, they were because they weren't meant for a project like ours.

HE Which ones bothered you?

EU Well, the regulation of getting things done on certain times - I've really forgotten most of them now, but each time one regulation or another came out we would talk it over. Mrs. Clinton was very sympathetic with me and of course she had entrée to Mrs. Kerr, who was the regional director, and Mrs. Kerr again with the Washington director. So we had a pretty good standing with all of them. And finally, they let us alone pretty much. Then besides that I established what I called my citizens committee and I had very interesting people on that: an eight-grade teacher; the wife of the president of the school; a sociology teacher at our school; and people of that kind. And so if there was any chance of there being a controversy I would say - I would put it on the basis that the citizens committee of the project was responsible for this thinking. It was a good idea because I didn't have to take the brunt of all decisions that were against WPA regulations.

HE How could the regulations have been changed to be better suited to the kind of project you had?

EU We just didn't observe them. Well, I think the "no visitors" was a regulation at the beginning. I think it was. But I didn't know about it and what you don't know about is all right. I started it that way and I said, "We've never - we'll not close the doors at all. We'll have visitors because we have to show what we are doing." And pretty soon nothing was said about it, you see. And that was a good way to do it.

HE Sometimes you had to either ignore or go against the rules to get the thing done?

EU Yes. And Mrs. Clinton was quite politic, too. She was very careful not to let it get into a bad state, so she was my very good helper in that regard. And of course she was so proud of the project, and it was a good thing for her. And Mrs. Kerr was - - she called the Regional Director and she went to Washington afterwards and the Washington people came over and when Mrs. Roosevelt was in town she came over to the project and talked to two units; only two units, I was sad about that, but she told the workers very simply that they should be congratulated on being on such a project which had such cultural significance and which would mean so much to them in the long run. And that's practically all she said. But at least she was there anyhow. We were very proud.

HE Was it ever a problem distributing material that you made?

EU Well, we never used the word "sell." It was given for the cost of materials. Milwaukee County took a great many things that we made - like the dolls for the Milwaukee County units.

HE What did they do with them?

EUT They gave them to families and children. Of course we furnished many schools, mostly teachers' rooms - with the furniture that was made for their specific needs.

HE Was that furniture that was not available in stores?

EU Yes. That's the only way we could have done it because it had to be designed. One was a vanity chair and a desk, a dresser. That was in the Crow Island School in Winnetka. And we did some drapes for the Crow Island School in Winnetka, too. We furnished drapes and furniture and toys mostly for the kindergarten. We went into block printing first and then into screen printing. When we went into screen printing of course then it was more of a quick production because screening is better for quick production.

Now one of the spots that we had was the University of Wisconsin at Madison and for the music part of the Union Building we did a great big hooked rug. It had to be made in two semi-circles.

HE Really! It was that big?

EU It was so large. And it had a symbol on it of music as the center of the design. It was very nice. And then the drapes. I don't think they're there now. Of course that was so long ago they probably have worn out.

Then we did the library of Milwaukee University. We did the lounging chairs as well as the reading tables - the little circular tables - that is up at Milwaukee. We did a lounging room, a reading room for the Milwaukee Public Library and everything was designed for that.

HE Was that the largest of the projects?

EU No, I think the University of Wisconsin was a pretty big one.

HE Well, how would you describe this piece?

EU Well, it's a settee and it's on a hooked rug, on one of the hooked rugs that has a design in the middle.

HE What is the rug made out of?

EU Wool. We got nothing but wool cuttings from the tailors and they used to come in strips about five inches wide and quite long. They seemed to be pieces that they cut off. And on the project they devised a cutting machine - one of the men, that they could cut the strips in about eight-inch pieces, then we did it through a rug hooker.

HE Well, that's a nice chair with a cane bottom.

EU Well, this young fellow who became head of the project was the middle boy in a family of three boys. The oldest one was an artist in New York; the baby was a teacher at art school, and Clarence was in the middle. He wasn't going in any direction, so one time Harold, my friend from art school, said, "What - has the Project any job for Clarence?" And I said,"I'm sure there would be one." I knew they were making furniture at home, the two boys were, so Clarence got started and he turned out to be very efficient. He's in California now and he's vice-president of some big company. He was one of these shy boys that was in the middle of things, you see.

HE How would you describe this one?

EU Well, it's a lounge chair. That one I have out at Ox Bow at the Summer School of Painting. And then these straight chairs are dining chairs. I think those went to the Household Training Center. You see, that was another WPA center where they trained maids for household work.

HE What were the influences in your interior decoration?

EU Tied to modern but not extreme. Personally, I don't think anything should be extreme if it's going to be really functional.

HE What kind of wood did you use?

EU Birch or oak.

HE Is this rug design an Indian motif?

EU Well, it has a primitive motif, yes.

HE Some of the other rug designs are abstract, you would say?

UE Yes, quite, quite. But they still remained on the floor, as it were, because I think a floor covering should stay down and not come up. Here is a block print - the Rubaiyat - that we sent to Eleanor Roosevelt at Hyde Park.

HE Oh, this must have been quite large. Is that on cloth?

EU It's on percale, usually.

HE About how big was this?

EU It's about six by four.

HE How many colors was it, do you recall?

EU There were about thirty blocks because there were so many spaces.

HE And this is just an illustration of quotations from The Rubaiyat?

EU Yes. And those were done by Barbara Warren mostly.

HE Were there many copies of this made?

EU Not too many. I have one at home now that was given to me and then the one I have here was given to me. The Eskimo one out there - that was Agner Justin's design. These were really good designers and one doesn't have to do much criticism.

HE Did you have to invent many techniques?

EU Well, one that I think is the most interesting cut these strips. It

was a wheel - later on it was electrified - not it wasn't electrified I don't think because it would have gone too fast, but I tried it myself and it wasn't too easy to do. But they cut - there was a gauge on it on a blade and when it turned around the cloth could be fed in there and fed through rather rapidly. It must have been electrified because I remember how quickly it went through.

HET This is the manner in which the blocks were printed?

EU We cut the blocks first of all in linoleum, battleship linoleum - rather thick; later on we found a rubber base that would hold up better than the linoleum.

HE Is linoleum too brittle?

EU Well, it would begin to wear down on the edges. This happens to be a linoleum print. And our units were very large in that. We even had an evening unit for men that was taught by one of the Negro supervisors.

HE What use did Miss Warren and Miss Kellogg make of their experience with you?

EU Well, Miss Warren, after she got through teaching at the University of Minnesota, she married again. She had been married, or was married, and was divorced. I think she went down to Georgia at that time after she was married again, but I've lost track of them pretty nearly. But I haven't lost track of Mary June Kellogg. She married Edward Rice and he was an American Consul - in China first; then after they were married they went to the Philippines and Mary June opened up a weaving project there and taught them how to widen the width. They used to weave only about eighteen inches or less and she made the looms larger and now she is in Hong Kong.

HE Well, her experience with you was very important.

EU Oh, it was. It was very important from another point of view because she was her mother's darling and her mother didn't want to let her out of her sight, and was quite provoked at me for putting her into the project until she saw what a wonderful field it had been for Mary June, and then she was all reconciled.

HE What are some of the things that she did with weaving in the Philippines and Hong Kong?

EU Well, she used the fibers and all kinds of things. I had a number of things that she wove - pineapple fiber and all the things that they use. You see she used the native things and made scarves and dress materials which were sold. And she also devised patterns which could be sold in the contemporary market - could be brought to the U.S. and sold, and they were very, very nicely designed. She used their motifs, though; she didn't separate it from the people, which was very good.

HE Did she get a sense, do you think, of that by working on the WPA project?

EU No, I think she had it. I would not say that we did everything for her, because she had it. I wouldn't have accepted her as head of the art department if she hadn't been as good as she was. As a little girl I used to remember her - she used to have a studio of her own.

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HE What would you say the project meant to her?

EU She got away from under the pressure of her mother. She was so considerate of her mother that it was very difficult for her, but now taking her out -

it was a complex, I think, her mother had. But she turned out to be wonderful after awhile when she realized the things that Mary was accomplishing. It was a complete change. I hear from her periodically and she sent me a few of these things when she left for Hong Kong just a couple of months ago.

HE What about some of the other people on the project?

EU Well, one of the boys who was on the project went to Detroit to do textile work and I met him there one time. Several - many of them went into teaching. George Burns has been teaching at Riverside High School all the time. Dick Weikens, who did the sculpture, became a sculptor of some note.

Now this one I think I d like to talk about because those are costume dolls that were fabricated in a kind of abstract manner. They made the dolls without faces -just form - and each one of the dolls represented a different nationality and that gave rise to some of the more intricate things that had to be done, like crocheting of edges on costumes and printing costumes, and those went to the Historical Museum in Madison.

And this one doll, the twenty-four inch doll, was also dressed in different nationalities. I can show you a lot of those pictures, I think I have a number of those. But another feature about this doll is the fact that all the clothes could come off and everything would unbutton so a child could undress the doll, and it had a whole wardrobe.

HE Was that unusual for dolls at that time?

EU Yes, because dolls never - I don't think dolls were ever that way, at least the buttons and buttonholes weren't large enough, but these were all buttoned, or with hooks.

And this is another feature about this unit that was so very good: the mothers got the patterns of these dresses for their own children to take home and make the clothes for their children.

We made costumes for the various dramatic organizations, the municipal dramatic play group under the Municipal Recreation Department of the city, as well as for the Wawatosi Public Schools. I think the woman that was in charge of drama there got most of them because she was putting on plays all the time which needed costumes. Then I gave her all the plates that were made of the drawings.

HE What happened to some of the other things that you had when the project ended? Were they all distributed?

EU Yes. I could have had all their old blocks from which the prints were made, but I didn't know what to do with them. I couldn't use them, I couldn't use them because we were doing our own things, and then I think they were destroyed, mostly, I'm afraid, there was no place to store them. But the handicraft project did continue and it took quite a lot of the things that were there. It was moved to the Milwaukee County Building and Mrs. Spear, who was the business administrator, continued on with it and she turned out to be very good, although she had never had art training.

HE So it became a county project?

EU Well, it became a country project soon after I had taken hold of it because when I was drafted for it they needed an educational institution to sponsor it, but it began to seem that they also needed money and

my school couldn't give money, so we had a co-sponsor and Milwaukee County industries, institutions, became co-sponsors and they would assume the cost of some of the things. And it wasn't at all a difficult thing for them. They made money on it because they had so many orders and they even really paid for having people on the project. Of course it wasn't under WPA then - it just went on.

HE Well, that was unusual, wasn't it, that a project like this would continue as a local project?

EU Yes, I think so too, and that's what I say in this issue of Design.

HE You also mention that it was one of the largest projects of its kind in the country.

EU Adn the only one of its kind for many years until we sent two people down to Des Moines, Iowa, to open one like it. They did very well. They were two of my best directors, Arne Hansky and Julia Newman. Julia Newman had done all this designing for the textiles. She did most of these. She was Julia Sootgen at that time. They went down there and did a very good job and I went down to visit one time and it was very interesting because they thought I belonged to the project - they treated me as though I belonged to their project. Of course they had built me up, the two youngsters here. Then they went on for a year or two, I think, but then the move came about to have all the projects of any art nature united with the WPA Art Project. I don't know whether Dornbusch was at the bottom of that or - -

HE What was the reason for that?

EU I really don't know, but I fought it and I said that it would never go, I said our project is quite a different one from any other art project because the painting project and the crafts project were different, Even in Chicago when I visited there they were doing single things and we were doing them by the hundreds.

But it was toward the end of the WPA regime anyhow, it was toward 1940, I think, around there and I think almost all projects eased out about '42 or '43.

HE What about this newsletter here?

EU I don't think there were more than four issues.

HE What was the reason for starting it?

EU Because the projects were so highly separated and they wanted to unify them. And so there'd be some little small talk about all the units, you see: "Shavings, Stains, and Loose Threads," - here's "Yummy Receipe, Eatin' Good" - and just so many things like that written by the workers, or by other people. And I have an article in here. But sometimes written by the staff: "New Department Added to Project"; "Form New Councils to Elect Officers."

HE You called it the WPA Handicraft News.

EU We didn't begin until '39, this is the first one. They tried to do it once a month, but I don't think it lasted longer than this. I'm not sure what happened. It's possible that the person who was a printer left, or something of that kind.

HE You printed it yourself?

EU We had a printing press on the project. I think that this article I wrote here is quite interesting to me in that I talk about the four years a little bit:

> I think it is appropriate at this time, the time of our fourth birthday anniversary, to restate the aims and objectives. As with all WPA projects, to give work to unemployed persons who needed it was the immediate aim. The specific aim of the Handicraft Project was and still is to design and construct only such articles of the handicrafts as would incorporate in a structure basic principles of good art, to distribute these in public institutions which needed them, and so bring to a number of people a better understand and an appreciation of the finer things in the handicrafts. . . . .
>
> All of you who have followed the work of the project have realized that the original aims and objectives of the project have quite well been fulfilled. We have not always reached our goal, but we have kept on reaching and reaching. We have served not only the immediate community, but also the entire country. We have provided countless articles for boys and girls and for men and women to enjoy and we have helped them to make their own handcraft better ~~and their own handcraft better~~ and their surroundings more beautiful. I want at this time to express my sincere appreciation.

Well, that's my message. I think it touches me even now. But there's such a warmth about this whole thing and it's so amusing because anything that anybody would write would be printed in it, whether it was a birthday party or somebody getting married, or whatever.

It was edited first of all by Robert Sweeney, later on by Henry Weinstein, I think, and both those people were not on relief roles because the numbers that we could have on that were not certified were dependent upon the need as well as the numbers we had that were certified. There was a certain proportion, I think it was ten percent. But everybody visited the project from all over the country in large groups, the different educational organizations, like the N.E.A. ~~A[illegible]~~ and Western Arts Association.

HE What was their reaction to the project?

EU Well, it was a member of the Western Arts Association who came early and told Mr. Pentz that this would be very good, and who also taught our own supervisor of art, or told him he'd better visit that project. But you see it's a case of a prophet in his own home, he's not considered. But it was later on and we couldn't fill the needs of the public schools after awhile.

HE What was the reaction of the community to the project?

EU It was very good.

HE What about the local press?

EU Oh, yes. I'll show you one. It's the Milwaukee Journal, May 22, 1944. One of them gave me the headline "The Project that Made Milwaukee Famous." I have that here. And that was written by a name editorial man, Kirk Biggs. Then there was another one by Leo Wilson on the Journal. And every bit of publicity I've gotten since mentions it. And Margaret Fish, who was on the Milwaukee Sentinel always gave us very good write-ups. It was very interesting to be compared to the beer that made Milwaukee famous.

HE What about other projects with which you had contact?

EU Well, we did work with many other WPA projects and also we worked some with the National Theatre Project with Hallie Flanagan, but not too much. She visited there and was a friend of my friend with whom I worked with the Wisconsin Players, the director of the Wisconsin Players. And of course the people who were responsible for my project were, first of all, the State, Esther Haas was the head of the ~~xxxxxx~~ professional project, Women's and Professional Project, and under her for the region, ~~xxxxxx~~ county, was Harriett Clinton, of whom I spoke. And then in

Chicago was Florence Kerr and in Washington was Ellen Woodward. Those are all people with whom I had contact and who came up to see the project at one time or another. Finally, Mrs. Kerr was transferred to Washington and she still remained a very wonderful friend of the handicraft project. And we served her with many different things that she needed and sent an exhibition down to Washington, which was very well received. We sent exhibitions wherever they wanted them. Of course I think that gave us the national recognition that we got. I think we showed in every single state in the union.

I remember in Berea College when one arrived, and Mary Eeler, head of the department there, knew I was coming so she didn't want to open the exhibitian until I came, and she was very enthusiastic. One of the important exhibitions, I think, that I ever had anything to do with was the one that was held at Toledo that was during the Western Art Convention which was an art teachers convention. We filled two galleries in the Toledo Museum. I also had to make a speech at that time in regard to what the project was. One of the very first persons that understood the project and what it meant was Betsy Jane Welling of Wayne University. She was the art instructor. She came over to Milwaukee one time and immediately went to the art supervisor and asked him if he had been to see the project. And he said no. And she said, "Well, you go right over." So he did. And he was one of our very good friends. But we had stacks of letters from people all over.

Another person that was one of our first patrons was Marion Miller of Denver, Colorado. She was supervisor of art there. She sent for several exhibitions all the time throughout the period of the project - kept on doing it. I wish I could have all those letters that were sent,

but they were all, I think, destroyed. I have a very interesting letter from Mr. Toffelson of the Division. He was one of the heads there. And under him was Esther Haas of the Women's and Professional Project, and there were others too. But our contacts were rather broad. One of the most interesting persons I ever encountered was Professor Mitchell from Alabama who had the interest of the sub-standard people at heart and who was trying to work out some kind of project whereby they would be going to school and at the same time building their homes and learning what was necessary to put in their homes. And when he came up to the project he said, "You ought to see that this project is taken over by industry because it should continue just as it is. But of course no industry would do it, and it's now running a little bit under the County.

HE But nothing came of this suggestion?

EU Nothing came of the suggestion because I wasn't able to do it alone without the support of all the other people. We did serve the Writers Project too. We bound their books, their manuscripts. Then we also worked some with the WPA Art Project, which Charlotte Partridge was head of, but not too much because they were quite self-sufficient. Although we took on our project all those men who were not eligible for the Art Project because they weren't creative artists, they were very good technicians and we found them very good, but we couldn't put them into a creative job. But they did much of the reproduction and all advertising and so on that was laid out for them.

HE Where did they come from? What had they been doing?

EU They were Milwaukee people; they were working in advertising establishments, were laid off, were on relief, and so we had to consider them--we had to at least try to put them on. Then when they weren't eligible for the Art Project, which was a creative project, we were glad to get them to do some of the work that meant precision and good draftsmanship, and so on. They were good people. We had, as the project went on, more and more specialists to do certain types of work because there were more and more people out of work who were specialists. For instance, the upholstery people.

HE Do you want to describe some of the units?

EU Well, as I said before, it started with a spot printing until because we didn't have any equipment to do anything else but - I mean the bookbinding unit - because we didn't have any equipment to do anything else, and we collected enough scissors and paste and necessary items so we would be able to carry on and it was a good thing to give the people confidence because we could disregard some of the stuff they didn't do well and so not use it, but had much material to make into books for hospitals and nursery schools, and so on. And then of course that led into the printing of fabric and from the small trial pieces that we did and made into portfolios of design we went to the bigger things like the Rubaiyat and hangings and curtains. Then one of nice things we did in this bookbinding department came when out of my crafts school was to do boxes showing the steps on how to bind a book. Each book that was included in a case showed only one process; then the next one was added on until you came to the finished book. That was very popular with the public schools.

Then we devised a special book to take in Braille. We had to make it thick and put dubs in between so the Braille wouldn't touch down; they were big books, about ten inches square, and it was very interesting

to see the braille books come through. And we supplied those to the institutions for the blind in Janesville, mostly.

Then another easy unit was established - the patchwork quilt unit. We had lots of scrap material, but the designs were made by the supervisors so they were very interesting. We used colored percale in a great many original arrangements. We made lots of nursery school coverlets, small ones, as well as hangings. When we started the toy unit we started out mostly with dolls because they were interesting. And I talked about those before. We had twenty-four inch dolls, ten-inch dolls, the other toss dolls, and then there was a Negro doll; those were supplied to kindergartens. When we got the power machines then we could make other kinds of toys - wooden toys of all kinds, and most of those were pull toys - - chickens drawn by braided carpet warp in different colors. And these braided carpet strings were made by the least intelligent people on the project. They could sit there by the hour and braid, and they were happy.

HE How did you discover what project or what activity was best for which person?

EU We tried them out. If they couldn't do a certain thing we just put them to something else. What my idea was in the beginning was to have workers work on one thing in the morning and in the afternoon work on something else. But it didn't work out quite well because it meant too much change, but I thought it was better for ease not to have to work at the same thing.

HE But they were more comfortable doing the same thing all day?

EU They seemed to be happy to continue. I think they were the kind of people that hadn't had to do much thinking, of course, or change, and it was easier to keep on doing the same thing than changing to another

kind of thing. Then it was also a matter of administration. You'd have to assign them to another project in the afternoon.

Well, after the dolls there were all kinds of cloth toys - what we call "counterpane" toys. They were made for bedsides for childrens' hospitals: soft toys to cuddle and play with, and some of them were done in balls, as spheres, and some of them were done as animals, and they were correct educationally, because they were made so that they wouldn't be hurt by them. Even the wooden toys were made correct educationally for the kindergarten. Some of the toys did not have any wheels, but some of them did, and when the wheels were put on they were big, solid wheels. Then they were bulky forms, like the engines of a train made streamlined and the cars were all solid with painted windows and things of that kind. These toys formed a large group, as Mrs. Welster said, "peg wagons, puzzle boards, streamlined trains without wheels, simplified steam- and tug-boats, airplanes, steam rollers, tractors, and trucks, animals, miniature building blocks of farm and city representation for community arrangement." They were all nicely designed and they were well painted with paint that would not poison anybody and strip off.

Then another unit was the block print unit which began to be a very large one after the small sample trial blocks to try out workers and see whether they could do it. This includes, first of all, the working on paper and then on cloth, and then decorative panels and draperies, and then the collection of those that were put into a folio. The rug unit was quite extensive because that, first of all, started with braided rugs made out of old materials and we made some very interesting rugs just like Grandma used to make in braiding and for sewing up. Then, also, of course, hooked rugs, which were done on, not burlap because

burlap wasn't very good any more, but on monk's cloth, which was much stronger and was satisfactory. We used the woolen fabrics which we cut up into eighth-inch strips. Then the weaving unit was developed very hard. As soon as we could get some four-harness looms, and I had a boy in my own class who had been in my classes, to work on that. He had found a man, a carpenter, an old German carpenter, who was a good mechanic. And then I sat down one night and designed a loom and together the three of us made all the looms, designed all of them that were on the project which we used. And those that I have out there are WPA looms.

HE You have them out in the back now? You designed them yourself and they were made for you by a carpenter?

EU We distributed those looms for ten dollars, the cost of the materials, even though they were made out of birch. But the weaving unit went over very big. We used scrap wool, what was called wool crumbs that came from a carpet manufacturer and they were all in short ends. This happens to be one of them. Then we made all the furniture covering, and those had to be made sturdily so they would stand up for the furniture that we made. The draperies, of course, were all kinds of weaving because some of them had to be sheer, and some of them for portieres, and so on. And as the project progressed we were able to find a man who was out of work who was an expert hanger of draperies. He installed some kind of a bracket whereby he could hang the curtains and let them hang for a long time before they were hemmed so they would hang correctly. And that was another thing. We tried to do everything in a professional way. Another thing we did in the weaving project was to get out a box of educational weaves to show progress of how the loom worked and what

the loom could do in about ~~fifteen~~ fifteen plates mounted in a case to present to schools.

HW What would you say were the educational benefits of your project?

EU Well, I think it started many things going.

HE And were these improvements that have been generally accepted since then?

EU Well, I don't know if we gave them to anybody.

HE Do you think that the things you learned were taken advantage of?

EU Oh, I know, I'm sure they were, I'm sure they were. Well, I'll tell you one case - - well, probably this isn't taking advantage of it in that way, but there's a woman came from Iowa, I think, and she also had some kind of a project and she came one day in high glee and said, "Oh, we're copying all of your toys; we've got up to the giraffes." I thought it was amusing and thought well, they ought to have been making their own designs for it, and the project personnel were furious to think that she came in and wanted to copy all of our things. They were schooled in the fact that you shouldn't ever copy anybody's work, they should do it creatively, and so they found fault with that angle, that side of it.

Well, the costume unit made costumes for public institutions for their theatre projects, for their theatre, for their stage, and they were all correct historically for the dramatic needs of the junior and senior high schools and recreational dramatic groups and municipal pageants. Hundreds of these costumes and costume accessories, shoes, boots, sandals, hats, caps and gloves show ingenuity in the use of diversified material. The costume manikins, small dolls with authentic historical costumes are made from time to time and will be used in loan exhibitions for visual aid to costume design classes and dramatic organizations. Then the Historical Museum in Madison took up the whole collection.

Another thing I had in mind - there was an old house in Milwaukee that was going to be torn down. Through the aid of the Historical Society and Mrs. Clinton we saved that house and it was moved to Esterbilt Park on the Upper East Side and was re-furnished and re-done by my project in authentic wallpaper, authentic furniture, which could be collected or made, and then a pageant was presented as though it were of that period by the Drama Group and pictures were taken.

Then we made books for children. This is one of them - block printed entirely.

HE The whole thing?

EU The whole thing. And it was done by the workers and then printed by hand.

HE I wanted to ask you some of your impressions in general of some of the benefits of the project, and some of the shortcomings of the project.

EU Well, I did start to think about the benefits. But the benefits were many in that the entire personnel changed in its outward appearance as well as in its inward feeling toward life. One of the things they did of course was to take the patterns of the twenty-four inch doll costume and make dresses for thier children.

HE For their own children?

EU This shows how families made hooked rugs; this is a writeup here about how the families all got together and cut up cloth and made rugs for the houses. They learned so many things that they could use that they had never had an opportunity to because they were just indigent people. And the first thing some of them did was to get permanent waves when they had their first pay, which/ showed something too, you see.

HE They were beginning to have some pride in their appearance, and their pride in their appearance was very, very great - because they were very hopeless in their early days.

HE With the benefit of hindsight, if things had to be done over again, what might be done differently?

EU Well, I don't think in the attitude anything should be done f differently because the attitude was simply wonderful, fo experiment. If the thing didn't work out it was just put aside and not used, not given to the public, as for instance, almost entirely these chairs if they didn't feel good to sit on they weren't continued, so that was put in the discard too. So there may have been some waste of material, but not appreciable. And the weaving also; of course when they're learning, some of the weavings weren't quite as good as they should be, but they could be cut up into samples and put into some of these educational things, the best part. The block printing, if a block print didn't work out, like that one, we just cut it up and put it into a sample. And these books were used - asked for - and they were distributed, some of the portfolios are this big and then there are some that were small. so - - -

HE What about yourself? What did the project mean to you at the time?

EU Everything!

HE Tell me about it.

EU I am quite sentimental about it. Well, how can I? I'm so - - It's one of the biggest things that's happened to me and I've had lots of big things happen to me. I've loved everything I've done. And I think this letter of Mr. Torkelson's - maybe I won't eb able to read it because I'm sentimental now about it, but he sayd, "The excellence of the work

done entitles you to great credit, but an even greater tribute is due to the fact that your services have been given without compensation. . ." You read the rest - I get kind of sentimental.

HE Well, how do you feel about it now?

EU I feel that I was not sorry I ever did it. I'm very happy that I had the experience and I'm very proud to have been asked to do it, because before that project opened I was on PWAP, that's the Public Works of Art Project, that was before WPA Art Project.

HE What did you do on the PWAP, by the way?

EU Well, we met every week and huried the work that was done previously. And we had to decide whether that person could stay on or not and that was very heart rending because there were only about thirty-five on it and it was very, very interesting because that developed into the WPA project for the national picture too. Then while I was on that, that was before this one broke, I was thinking, "Well, why can't we have some kind of project where design, where the craftsmen could benefit," because there were plenty of craftsmen not earning enough to eke out an existence and was about to write to the government to ask about whether it couldn't be done when Mrs. Clinton came and asked me to start this. So this took its place. It wasn't exactly what I had planned or thought of, but probably better in a sense because the art teachers got jobs, and five thousand workers got jobs in the long run, and got some culture.

HE What did the WPA projects mean to you in terms of your career afterwards? Was there a connection between what you did on the project and what happened afterwards?

EU Well, great acclaim. I think I had more acclaim than I had a right to get because everybody worked. I couldn't have done it alone. I had excellent support and they were people that were

sympathetic with my philosophy. Even now I hear from people who know something about it - or have had in their schools in the country some of my art products. And this is another thing I did,which I think made the project famous: I wanted to have each person's name on the design that he made, but that wasn't allowed, that was one of the things that WPA wouldn't allow, but then I said, "Well, anyhow, we should give the school credit." So on everything that went out we had "Milwaukee State Teachers College" printed on it. And that was very important. Everything we made had a tag on it and a number. The first of the puppet books is dedicated to me.

HE Do you find that WPA experience something that you talked about over the years with other people who participated in it?

EU Well, if the occasion came about we talked about it naturally, and, as I said, I got so much acclaim that I had to talk about it with some people, and I was always glad to because if there were some people who were opposed to WPA I certainly did talk and try to prove that it wasn't boondoggling, that it was necessary. And I think the Art Project showed people that are doing painting now. Many of them are products of the WPA Art Project because they had a chance.

END OF INTERVIEW