



Deborah Meader Papers

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THE POWER OF PUPPETRY: THE CAREER OF DEBORAH SIMMONS MEADER, 1927-1942

By Elizabeth M. Colburn

When my family left North Dakota to move to Minnesota, they moved with us, their beautiful faces and delicate hands protected by hand-sewn muslin bags. They were labeled and organized: *The Three Little Pigs*, *Ivanhoe*, *Hiawatha*. I didn't know it, but by then they had traveled all around the State of Minnesota during the 1930s and had stoically endured a trip to Pittsburgh in the 1940s. During the 1950s they went to Cincinnati and then were packed in a moving van for a move to North Dakota. They were part of the family even if they were puppets.

My mother had a love-hate relationship with those puppets. She dutifully unpacked and aired them out once a year. Those same puppets had kept her mother from her during the late 1920s and the Great Depression. "I used to hang on the bumper of her car when I was eleven when she'd leave," she remembers. "I missed her so much."¹

But those puppets, many of them made during my grandmother's job with the Minnesota Works Progress Administration (WPA) from 1935-41, had also kept food on the table and shelter over the family's heads in a time when the unemployment rate had reached a staggering twenty-five percent.

¹ Betsy Downing, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Rapids, Minn., 3 July 1998.

Her skills with all forms of puppets took her to remarkable settings: state hospitals for the mentally disabled, a women's' prison, and settlement homes as well as to private homes, churches, libraries and schools. Her knowledge of puppet history and educational uses was vast. She was frequently invited to speak before conferences, conventions and women's groups. She began her own puppet company in Saint Paul during a time when many women did not have the skills even to work outside the home. She worked for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and the WPA, teaching puppetry to those on relief all over the state so that they could conduct workshops and give performances.

Throughout her career, her message was unwavering: puppets were an excellent educational and therapeutic tool for children and adults. She felt that, "puppetry has proved to be a successful method of teaching literature, the social studies, religion, health and safety, and has been used successfully in library work, the field of occupational therapy, recreation and adult education. There is a form of puppetry adaptable to all ages... It is an active rather than a passive means of visual education. It should be part of the working equipment of those entering the above fields."²

She believed strongly that puppetry was a democratic art form, able to use the talents and abilities of many different people working together as a team. One of her greatest achievements was to invent and patent several theaters that could be folded and latched

² Correspondence between Deborah S. Meader and W.E. Peik, acting dean, University of Minnesota, n.d. family collection.

into neat and transportable cases. But the truly special thing about the theaters was the "semi-transparent back drop."³ One of the things that had bothered her from the start of her research into puppets and puppet theaters was that the performer had to manipulate a hand puppet above his or her head in a puppet theater opening so as not to be seen by the audience. Not only is this a very uncomfortable position to sustain for the length of a puppet play, but it does not enable the performer to use the small, controlled gestures necessary for a lifelike performance. Meader's see-through backdrop made it possible for the performer to be directly behind the puppet theater opening, holding the puppet directly in front of his or her face and still not be seen by the audience.

She became a crusader with and for her puppets. The time period in which she worked was one of the most unstable and demanding. It was how my grandmother met those challenges that was all the more remarkable in light of the fact that her background did not seem to prepare her for her future.

Deborah Marion Simmons, was born into wealth and privilege in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1895. She was educated at Coe College in that city, receiving respectable marks in her classes for a young lady who never expected to work once she had married. Shortly after receiving her BS from Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1917, she returned to Iowa to teach school briefly before marrying my grandfather, Amos Kingsley Meader, a World War I veteran. They were married in 1919 and in 1927 they moved to Saint Paul with their five-year-old child, Mary Elizabeth (Betsy).

³ Washington, D.C.: U.S. Patent Office, patent no. 1,874,819, 1932.

In that year, the family's life changed forever when Amos lost a leg to an illness and did not have the strength for sustained work. Betsy was quarantined with scarlatina and in attempt to amuse her bedridden child, Meader went to the Saint Paul Public Library to look for books about making puppets. "I decided to make a few puppets. Imagine my surprise when I could find nothing published on the construction of hand puppets but a book in Italian which I had translated,"⁴ she said some years later.

Like most women of her time, she was skilled with a needle and worked hard to keep her hand puppets lifelike, with heads rounded rather than flat with realistic features. With her husband not able to work very much, she began to perform puppet plays at birthday parties in fashionable homes along Summit Avenue in Saint Paul.

In late 1929, around the time the stock market crashed, Meader began the Deborah Meader Puppet Shop. In 1930 Meader ran an ad in *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes*, the headline reading, "Give Puppet Shows to Earn Money or as an Educational Project."⁵ The large wood and canvas puppet theater (six feet high with a stage width of twenty-seven inches) that was soon to be patented was advertised and so was a child's version made of particleboard. Dressed hand puppets and painted or unpainted heads were also available.

⁴ Anderson, Marie Hinderer, "Deborah Meader, Maker of Puppets," *The Trident of Delta Delta Delta*, n.d., family collection.

⁵ Advertisement, *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes*, 1930, 91.

Meador's father, Thomas H. Simmons, a retired lawyer, had recently moved in with the family. He and his son-in-law built the puppet theaters. In 1929 they sold several theaters to the National Dairy Council following a speech and demonstration Meador gave before their national convention. It is not known how this came about and nothing of the speech she gave before the convention remains. The play she used for her demonstration called *Why the Cow Jumped Over the Moon* does survive. It tells of the trouble in Mother Goose Land that erupts when there is no milk because the cow has jumped over the moon. The most unfortunate character in the play is the Crooked Man who developed crooked bones and teeth because he was unable to find milk to drink. Meador commented on the experience briefly in an article, "The National Dairy Council was one of the first to recognize [puppets'] adaptability to propaganda."⁶

Another foray into the health care area was her work with the Bureau of Dental Hygiene in Iowa City, Iowa. The Bureau was established in the 1920s as an arm of the State University of Iowa's (now called the University of Iowa) Extension Division. One of its primary functions was to promote the Iowa Plan for Dental Health Education, particularly in the rural areas where preventative care for teeth was a new and radical idea – and not always popular. Some people were convinced that dentists were overseeing the Plan for the purpose of "drumming up business."⁷ Although sketchy information survives, it is known that Meador supplied puppets and a play involving a character named Mr. Tooth to this enterprise to help children learn how to take better care of their teeth.

⁶ Deborah Meador, "Puppetry," *The Interpreter*, Vol. XI, No. 7, March, 1937, 2, 6.

Many of her educational principles and methods were developed during her twelve years at Unity (Unitarian) Church. She conducted puppetry classes as part of the religious education curriculum at that progressive institution. In February 1930, the church bulletin announced, "The girls planned and decorated the theater, painted and dressed the puppets, wrote and produced the play – all under the leadership of Mrs. A.K. Meader. It looks as though puppetry would become a permanent method of instruction in the School, and those who saw this first performance will agree that it is a very promising type of experiment."⁸

She worked with Sunday school groups ranging from third grade to high school. The plays that the children wrote in a collaborative setting are full of action and interest: "Joseph and His Brethren," "The Finding of Moses," "Jonah and the Whale," "Queen Esther." In an article, Meader outlined the key to success when children put on a hand puppet play: "When the puppets are made in approximate proportion to the size of the puppeteer's hand, so that its head is not out of proportion to its arms, subtle motions of the head and arms give a true illusion of life."⁹ Another "trademark" of the Meader hand puppet was the inclusion of two lightly-stuffed bags that hung down from the neck inside the puppet. The second and third fingers would grasp the front bag. She also insisted that the puppeteer hold his or her arm firmly, extending the index finger into the puppet's head with the elbow directly below it. She was always looking for ways in which a

⁷ Thomas A. Gardner, "The School Dental Inspection: Who Should Inspect the School Children?," *Iowa Dental Bulletin*, Vol. 15, No. 6, December, 1929, 11.

⁸ *Unity Church Bulletin*, February 1930, 1.

⁹ Deborah Meader, "Puppets Solve Patty's Problem," 5, family collection.

puppet could move realistically and these methods worked well to gain control of the puppet.

In the same article, which was submitted to *The Woman's Home Companion*, she wrote, "The children come voluntarily on Saturday mornings to go on with work they have started, becoming so interested that both boys and girls are willing to forego their usual Saturday morning activities at home to come to the puppet room during this period. The main part of the work, however, is done in the class period on Sunday morning. No difference has been discovered in the interest shown between boys' and girls' classes or in the age level of the groups. They are all universally interested. If the most enthusiastic group was selected, so far, it would be that of sixteen Junior High School Boys."¹⁰

The young men portrayed the shipwreck of Paul. The drama group of the Church School had been given "the episode of Paul's reception on the island of Malta and it had been brought out that while they could not easily portray the shipwreck on the stage, it was entirely possible to do so with puppets."¹¹ The process of producing the puppet play gave them a well-rounded educational experience. Because they were going to write a play about them, they needed to read the Bible chapters involved extremely carefully, deciding what characters and how many scenes would be needed. Two members of the class began to write the play and eight began to paint the plaster heads that Meader provided them. Two other boys used research materials "for a suggestion for painting the back drop for

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹¹ Deborah Meader, "The Field of Puppetry is Broad," n.d., 1, family collection.

the interior of Agrippa's palace for the scene in which Paul appears before Agrippa. They looked at the pictures from an entirely different angle than ever before... These two boys became very absorbed in painting this interior scene on tan cambric with poster paint. It was done with infinite care and detail. They came every Saturday so that they would have sufficient time to give it."¹² The two boys assigned to produce the properties that would be used, such as the ship, also did careful research, even though, "When it was first tried in the stage, it was found to be too short, for the passenger to get easily on board, so it had to be made over. Great ingenuity was shown in the way in which the boys arranged cords run through screw eyes over the heads of the puppeteers, so that the ship could be rocked in the storm without interfering with them. There are always problems to solve and always someone in the group with ingenuity to solve them."¹³

Other boys in the class were assigned the duty of dressing the puppets. Again, research was used for authenticity. "They especially enjoyed making the armor for Julius as we made it from the tin foil that comes wrapped around Hershey bars. We had more tin foil furnished than we could use."¹⁴ With the help of some of the mothers, the sewing and dressing of the puppets progressed and at the end of eight weeks, a production was given to all of those in the Church School at an assembly.

The children had "adventured in organization, literature, art, handicraft, and teamwork. When they were privileged to exhibit the result of two months' work, they were happy in

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

the general approval.”¹⁵ This method of producing a puppet play from the ground up was repeated with great success for each class she taught at Unity Church until 1942.

Meador had come to find that another one of the great benefits that could come from producing a puppet play came from her semi-transparent backdrop. “By protecting the children from the sight of the audience, it frees them from self consciousness. Their attention and that of the audience is on the puppet. This lack of self-consciousness heightens their enjoyment and allows them to give their best effort to the production. It also puts the child seeking the spotlight in the shadow.”¹⁶

Also, personal appearance was not an issue, as the subject of the *Woman's Home Companion* article illustrates. It was called “Puppets Solve Patty's Problem” and Patty was a child that was slightly overweight and was shy in group situations. She had become increasingly withdrawn and as the article opens, she is about to go Sunday School where a whole world will open up to her through a puppetry program. She will be playing the part of Pharaoh's daughter. “For once, she need not be tall, dark and stately. All that is necessary is that she project the spirit of Pharaoh's Daughter into the little figure on her hand and make it live. This gives an unusual opportunity to children who are excessively shy or handicapped.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Deborah Meador, “Puppets Solve Patty's Problem,” 7, family collection.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8.

Meader was as fascinated by the history of puppetry as she was by its therapeutic and educational potentials. It was a subject that she was to come back to many times when she was asked to speak before groups. When she used puppetry in the Unity Church setting, she felt as though she was going back to the roots of puppetry.

Puppets were used originally for religious teaching. They were found in the ancient temples of Egypt, India, China and Japan. Many of the huge gold plated statues of the gods of Greece and Rome were in reality huge puppets. Their chests contained mechanisms that were operated secretly by the priests so that they could nod, shake their heads or raise their arms as the occasion demanded. For centuries grotesque shadow puppets have been used in the religious ceremonies of the people of Java.

When the early Christians were forced to find shelter in the catacombs near Rome, they preserved the incidents of the life of Christ with puppets. Later in medieval Europe, the little figures of the Christmas Crib became animated, telling the Christmas Story at first in pantomime and then with words. A certain type of puppet, those operated with strings, took the name from the beloved central figure, Mary, and are still called "marionettes" or little Marys. Later other Bible stories were given in this way. It is easy to understand how much more real the Bible stories became to the people when they were acted out by puppet actors.¹⁸

Hand puppets were used almost exclusively in the Unity Church productions and also in some public school workshops that she had begun to do. At Linwood School in Saint Paul, she worked with groups as young as Kindergarten age. One teacher expressed her enthusiasm, "Through the use of puppets the imagination of the child is developed. He learns the necessity of co-operation. His appreciation for drama and literature is awakened. He realizes the necessity for clear enunciation and his skill in painting and

¹⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

dressing the little actors develops his sense of the artistic and trains him in the use of his hands.”¹⁹

In 1934 Meader saw her first shadow puppet performance and was so enthralled that she began to experiment with methods for children to reproduce the effect. Shadow puppets, while fairly easy to manipulate, are difficult to make. Shadow puppets may have been used as long ago as 125 B.C. They were made of donkey hide treated by a secret process to make them translucent and were jointed and operated by rods or wires. When back-lit and held against a screen and “skillfully manipulated they give a real illusion of life and their graceful dignified motions and beautiful colors make them more appealing to some than any other kind of puppet.”²⁰

Lacking donkey hide and the secret process, Meader set about reproducing the effect with modern materials. Unity Church was the testing ground for two of her methods. One was using construction paper rubbed with boiled linseed oil. The other was using a fairly new product that was a heavy cellophane material from DuPont that came in a variety of beautiful colors. It was highly flammable, so great care had to be taken with the lighting. She purchased it from an automotive supply house in twenty-by-fifty-inch sheets of several colors but the cost was prohibitive so the oiled construction paper was used more frequently for educational projects.

¹⁹ Taylor, Adeline, “Puppets Become Teachers in Hands of a Former Cedar Rapids Woman,” *The Cedar Rapids Sunday Gazette and Republican*, 5 April 1931, 7.

When church school let out for the summer, Meader took her show on the road. She easily convinced the heads of several girls' camps in northern Minnesota that a puppetry program would be worthwhile. An added benefit was that her daughter could attend one of the expensive camps without charge. Not far away was the family lake home where she continued her work. One family member recalls the "wonderful smell of the papier mâché puppet heads drying."²¹ She also remembers Meader giving puppet performances on the porch using a small Victrola to play music for dramatic effect.

The year 1931 was a terrible one from a personal standpoint for Meader. Her husband became very ill and spent most of the year in the Veterans Hospital in Minneapolis. The family relied on her income even more and Meader combined a business trip with an Easter visit to relatives back in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Nine-year-old Betsy went with her and while playing with cousins, she was blinded in one eye and spent the next six months convalescing never to recover sight in that eye again.

From another standpoint, Meader's trip home to Cedar Rapids proved to be a career boost. She had been invited to speak at the Midwest Conference of Municipal Recreation Superintendents attended by recreation executives from twelve states. She also gave puppet performances, one of which was for all the school children in the city. She was featured in a large article in the city's Sunday newspaper, outlining all the work she had been doing to tie education and puppetry together. The writer noted, "The preparation

²⁰ Deborah Meader, "High Brow, Low Brow...", speech, n.d., family collection.

²¹ Barbara Leflang, interview by author, notes, Grand Rapids, Minn., 6 June 1998.

and production of a puppet play found a direct correlation in the literature, art, drama, history, geography and music classrooms. It not only taught the fundamentals of these studies but it developed self expression in the child.”²²

In 1932 the puppet theater and semi-transparent backdrop were patented. The family had moved to a house with a large workshop in the basement where the puppet theaters could be built. Meader also hired a full-time seamstress to make the puppet hands and dress the puppets. My mother remembers her vividly, “I can see her sitting at the sewing machine with a long piece of fabric which was all full of little sewn hands...it was my job to cut things out and clip them.”²³

The Deborah Meader Puppet Shop was doing quite well. Three theaters were offered for sale. A large one “for semi-professional use”²⁴ was sold for sixty-five dollars and it included overhead and foot lights. It was cleverly constructed of wood and canvas “with two foldable sections equal in size to facilitate transportation by hand or in an automobile” and could be put up in five minutes.²⁵ Another large theater made of painted plywood could also be folded into sections for easy transport and also had head- and footlights. It sold for thirty-five dollars and was advertised as being “ideal for schools,

²² Taylor, Adeline, “Puppets Become Teachers in Hands of a Former Cedar Rapids Woman,” *The Cedar Rapids Sunday Gazette and Republican*, 5 April 1931, 7.

²³ Betsy Downing, interview by author, tape recording, Grand Rapids, Minn., 3 July 1998.

²⁴ Brochure, Deborah Meader Puppet Shop, [1935?] ,family collection.

²⁵ Ibid.

churches, libraries, camps and other groups.”²⁶ This was the same theater that she had sold to the National Dairy Council and Bureau of Dental Hygiene.

The small theater was made of particleboard and also had a row of footlights and sold for \$7.50. This particular theater was able to be clamped onto a cardtable using notched extensions, but could be folded flat for storage.

The small theater was a popular Christmas gift item. A flier printed especially for promoting holiday gift giving encourages customers to order quickly because, “Our supply is limited. It was exhausted last season.”²⁷ It gives an excellent description of the “patented semi-transparent back-drops...and the patented foldable character of the Theater.” As a clincher, the flier gave parent testimony, “the puppet theater is one gift which excels all others in holding the interest of [our] children.”²⁸

All the theaters had at least one of the special backdrops to facilitate performances for beginners and professionals alike. Each theater was also designed with a slot along the front of the stage opening to hold one-dimensional properties, such as tables or trees. Meader, her husband and father had carefully worked out the designs for all three theaters. Their precise construction is evident by examining the theaters in our family collection, including the large theater that was used countless times and could be used confidently today.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Flier, Deborah Meader Puppet Shop, [1936?], family collection.

In addition to the theaters, puppets and puppet plays could be purchased for an additional \$5.25. Puppet heads, painted or unpainted, wood composition or plaster, were also sold; dressed hand puppets were five dollars or less each; and the hands that were sewn on the long sheets in the upstairs bedroom cost one dollar a dozen. Performance services were also advertised: Meader charged ten dollars to twenty-five dollars to do a forty-five-minute performance.

All the work with health organizations, the church and her puppet company prepared Meader to tackle the work she did with relief organizations during the rest of the 1930s. While many have criticized the government relief programs that were put into place following Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration, there is no denying that the programs helped to foster creativity like no other time in history.

When Roosevelt was inaugurated in March 1933, there were about thirteen to fifteen million unemployed in the country. The unusual thing about this crisis was that the numbers were not limited to one segment of society – white and blue collar were hit equally hard. Some had found that they could no longer be hired for the skills they possessed. Others had some personality quirk that caused them to be among the first to be fired or laid off when hard times hit. Many like Meader had gone through life's savings paying for family members' medical expenses.²⁹ And for the first time in the nation's

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Mabel S. Ulrich, "Salvaging Culture for the WPA," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1939, 654.

history women were numbered among the unemployed in large numbers. In Minnesota, during the decade that preceded the stock market crash, there was a sixteen percent increase in the general population but a twenty-six percent increase in the number of female workers.³⁰

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) was the first relief program under President Roosevelt. It was created in May 1933 and Harry L. Hopkins was appointed as its administrator. FERA was allotted five-hundred million dollars and grants to states were made from this money with no guidance as to how it should be spent. It set up a partnership between the Federal Government and the states that was to help smooth the way for other relief agencies.³¹

Under the FERA, Meader traveled around the state in order to hold three-day leadership training sessions. She taught people on relief how to make cloth-headed hand puppets, probably for use in occupational therapy at State institutions. She wrote, "It became apparent that puppetry had real value in this field. Its correlation of various handicraft activities and the linking of these with dramatic expression had a...stimulating effect on the patients in the State Hospitals."³² She found patients receptive to giving performances

³⁰ Citizen's Committee on WPA Crisis, E.P. Totten, Chairman, "Report on Minneapolis WPA Crisis of July, 1939," Records of State Supervisor, January 1940, 1730.

³¹ U.S. Federal Works Agency, "Final Report on the WPA Program 1935-43," U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1947.

³² Correspondence between Deborah S. Meader and W.E. Peik, acting dean, University of Minnesota, n.d., family collection.

and her puppet theater could be moved into wards where patients were confined. Patients were not the only ones who were fascinated by puppetry. At a school for the mentally disabled, forty attendants and teachers signed up for her workshop. Female prisoners benefited too. She reported, "One of the two 'lifers' in the State Women's Prison wept when she missed a puppet class through error." Meader estimated that one thousand people a week were working with puppets in the state, including recreational projects in the parks for children.³³

In the fall 1933, the short-lived Civil Works Administration (CWA) was created. Again, the program was federally financed, but this time the federal government administered it as well. The top wage that could be earned was \$1.20 an hour. Meader was employed by the CWA and Florence Kerr, who eventually went on to work for the WPA in Washington, supervised her work.

Meader told about her experience with the CWA in an interview, "The word went out to put people on the program more or less helter-skelter. There was no time to sort them out or get projects set up. What they wanted to do was to get a paycheck in the hands of the head of the household to prime the pump – to get things started in the other direction. People had to go to relief associations and get certified for relief. There was a cursory interview. All those who couldn't name a special skill were put in the two catch-all projects. The women, whom I worked with, were in sewing. There was a great bunch of women in the sewing project and a great bunch of men in the road working crews. There

³³ Ibid.

were not enough shovels to go around, but if they got a paycheck and put in time, that was enough."³⁴

The "cursory interview" that she refers took place in the old Saint Paul Auditorium. My mother remembers that she reported that in one day alone, two thousand women showed up to find work. The CWA employed under half of those in need nation-wide and direct relief had to be given to many. Under CWA Meader supervised the seamstresses who were making clothing and some toys for the needy. She also continued the work she had done with state institutions in the FERA and she also set up workshops in settlement homes to entertain both resident adults and children.

A year later, in 1935, she joined the Works Progress Administration (renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939). The federally administered, many-layered, WPA became a bureaucratic nightmare, using four levels of administration. For example, the segment that Meader worked for, the Minnesota Division of Women's and Professional Services, had district, state, regional and the central administration in Washington, D.C.

Ninety percent of those who worked for the WPA were required to be on relief. Relief status was determined on a state level by an extremely cumbersome method involving family size and location measured against total income and resources. Meader was one of the ten percent in supervisory positions that were not on relief. There were so many

³⁴ Deborah Meader, interview by author, notes from an unpublished college research paper, Saint Paul, Minn., November 1975.

workers on WPA projects that had had no experience in the job they were to perform that skilled professionals not on relief were needed to train them.

A little background on the structure of the WPA may be helpful. Many have heard of Federal Project No. 1 that was established in 1935. It was the first program established under WPA and also the first to purposely support the work of white-collar professionals and artists. It included the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Arts Project and the Federal Writers' Project. The Federal Theater Project was famous because of its perceived leftist leanings³⁵ and had only a four-year lifespan. Despite constant funding shortfalls, the artistic contributions of the remaining projects cannot be underestimated. It was the first time in U.S. history that the arts had been federally supported to such a degree. The Historical Records Survey was also under Federal Project No. 1. This project had workers preserving archival materials such as birth and church records, newspapers, books and even taking rubbings of gravestones for information.

In addition to Federal Project No. 1, the Minnesota WPA was divided into five divisions. The Operations Division employed people in construction areas and was responsible for the many buildings, playgrounds, bridges and roads that are still in existence today. They were also responsible for materials requisition for all of the other projects. The Administrative Division was the public relations arm. The Finance-Statistics Division

³⁵ Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., "The WPA Federal Art Projects in Minnesota, 1935-1943," *Minnesota History*, 53/5, Spring 1993, 172.

was in charge of payroll and gathering and reporting copious statistical information on WPA that would be sent to Central Administration in Washington, D.C. The Employment Division was responsible for acting as a liaison between workers and other relief agencies and was involved in labor relations.³⁶

The fifth was the Division of Women's and Professional Projects. Meader worked for a project under this division called the Recreation Department. The major projects of the Recreation Department were: drama, athletics, art, music and puppetry. Meader was a state supervisor of recreation in charge of puppetry – a project that grew to a substantial size under her guidance.

Another large area under the Women's and Professional Projects Division was the Handicraft Project, employing a large group of woodcarvers, designers, needleworkers and painters. Work on the various projects overlapped frequently. For example, people working on the Handicraft Project were called upon to work on puppetry, and several woodcarvers in particular carved beautiful marionettes.

Irene (Smith) Odegaard, who later worked with Meader, began working with the Handicraft Project (then called the Toy Department) in 1935. The project occupied the corner of a one-floor drafty warehouse space in Minneapolis. Odegaard, trained in design, remembers that they sat at tables in groups and were assigned various projects to complete. Now in her mid-eighties, she marvels at the volume of things that were created,

³⁶ Victor Christgau, to All State and District WPA Officials, 15 July 1936, MHS microfilm collection.

some going out for display and then “they just disappeared. I just wonder what happened to all of those things.”³⁷

Odegaard also designed plates to be painted by others on the project. She worked on needlepoint, glasswork and woodcarving designs. It was because of the woodcarving and sewing abilities of the workers on the Handicraft Project that Meader came to them in the fall of 1936. She brought a clown marionette with her. Odegaard recalls the visit: “She said, ‘Can you make one?’ So we made one and it was made in the wood department and I went around and I costumed it. And then we made another one with checkered pants and a black coat and a white shirt with a red bow tie and a tall silk hat and he could really dance!”³⁸

Apparently Meader was satisfied with the work of the Handicraft Project because she soon returned to ask them to make whole sets of puppets, properties and scenery for puppet plays for the demonstrations. Four or five people from the Handicraft Project dedicated their time to making the sets – each doing the specific task they were good at such as carving, painting the puppets and scenery or dressing the puppets. “This project became so big at the Handicraft that they were devoting an awful lot of time to it. It really got so big.”³⁹

³⁷ Irene Odegaard, interview by author, tape recording, Saint Paul, Minn., 8 July 1998.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Some very special puppets were made by the Handicraft Project under Meader's direction for a production done at the Minnesota State Fair in 1937. The production was "Creation of the World," a play that had been written by Meader from notes that a researcher on the Federal Writers' Project had taken from a member of the Chippewa tribe. The main character is Way-Nah-Bo-Zho (Hiawatha). The cover sheet to this play says that it is "one of several Chippewa Legends that the WPA is endeavoring to preserve through the presentation of Puppet Plays."⁴⁰ Some of the marionettes were hand-carved, their facial features unbelievably delicate and expressive – almost like tiny sculptures. Other marionette heads were made of plasticine and painted beautifully. Their clothing was made of leather, hand-beaded by several Native Americans who were employed by the WPA. Odegaard and several of her co-workers performed the production, but the voices were done by the Drama Project of the Recreation Department. According to Odegaard, this was a common practice. The State Fair production was preceded by a dance performance by a group of Native Americans in hand-beaded dress. Many of the marionettes were used in performances at parks and schools as Native American stories were quite popular.

The field of recreation was becoming an important part of American life. Leisure time was beginning to be looked at in a new way, but the coming war was to put the brakes on. In "The Final Report of the WPA" a wistful comment tells much, "If world events had permitted a normal development of community interest, it appears probable that many of

⁴⁰ Deborah Meader, *The Creation of the World*, [1936?].

the service activities of the WPA would have become regular community services. That was the end toward which they were administered.”⁴¹

The work that Meader had begun in state institutions under the CWA was continued, but her primary responsibility was training others in puppetry so that workshops and performances could be conducted and displays put up around the state. As a state supervisor, Meader realized the importance of knowledge transfer between the districts of the state. The supervisors taught their recreational projects to their groups of teachers. These teachers would then teach leaders who went out to teach adults and children what they had learned. Meader supervised and trained twenty-six teachers who trained about 900 leaders.⁴²

In an interview in 1975, Meader explained how recreational projects were initiated, “All tax-exempted institutions had to set up projects. For instance, public schools could write education projects...the recreation departments of Minneapolis and Saint Paul wrote projects to employ our people on the playgrounds. We wrote courses of study for which people were paid. They were required to take the training. When anyone wanted a training project somewhere, we went. Sometimes, I went alone.”⁴³ In order for a project to pass muster, it had to use the largest number of relief workers possible. In 1939, the

⁴¹ U.S. Federal Works Agency, “Final Report on the WPA Program 1935-43,” U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1947, 71.

⁴² Deborah Meader, interview by author, notes from an unpublished college research paper, Saint Paul, Minn., November 1975.

⁴³ Ibid.

Recreation Department had a quota of 700 employees statewide to maintain, the bulk of which (375) were in District III (the Twin Cities).⁴⁴ The first thing that was considered was the number of capable relief workers in the area and what recreational experience they had. Consideration was also made of whether the project would be beneficial to the community in which it was located. This careful screening was done partly to protect against the detractors of WPA, of which there were many.

For some WPA stood for "We Plod Along" and Meader and her teachers were sensitive to this, "The idea was to set up puppetry projects in libraries all over the state. We were one of the departments to be picked on for 'boondoggling' as they called it. They'd say, 'Puppets! Of all the things to teach adults.' Adult education and recreation was a completely new idea and besides, the Republicans and anti-New Deal people were usually always critical. I think we accomplished a great deal and there was a tremendous growth through adult education. The people we had in the Recreation Department had excellent training. There was money for doing something and that something they learned better and better."⁴⁵

Pay for WPA workers was based on complicated scales. Victor Christgau, State Administrator of the WPA and his successor, S.L. Stolte, wrote frequent memos on this subject. Workers other than supervisors were paid from forty-five to ninety dollars a

⁴⁴ Memo from S.L. Stolte to All State and District WPA officials, 20 November 1939, MHS microfilm collection.

⁴⁵ Deborah Meader, interview by author, notes from an unpublished college research paper, Saint Paul, Minn., November 1975.

month, often less than they had made in a week when they were privately employed. Supervisors such as Meader received from \$125.00 to \$175.000 a month and were required to work an eight-hour day Monday through Thursday and a seven-hour day on Friday.⁴⁶ There was also a great deal of travel involved.

The Recreation Project was becoming very interested in the psychological aspects of training. Some titles from her training manuals and workshop agendas illustrate the trend: "The Supervisory Process," "Techniques in Dealing with Children When Leading a Puppet Activity," and "What Is a Mature Person?" The supervisors were serious about their mission and insisted on grading the recreation teachers and leaders to keep projects on track. She said, "We built those courses from the ground up. Some of the people we trained got so good that they became supervisors."⁴⁷

Meader described the process, "[Those teaching academic courses] would teach a child psychology course to help people to teach the recreation course programs to children. [Those teaching practical courses] taught such courses as handicrafts, puppetry, games, folkdancing, drama, music and athletics, which included things like ping-pong and other indoor games. These were taught to the children on playgrounds. The playground jobs were almost like babysitting, but this was very important because very often both the parents were working to keep the family going. I had to visit the playgrounds in Saint

⁴⁶ Memo from S.L. Stolte to All State and District WPA officials, 8 August 1939, MHS microfilm collection.

⁴⁷ Deborah Meader, interview by author, notes from an unpublished college research paper, Saint Paul, Minn., November 1975.

Paul, Saint Cloud and Minneapolis once a month. I just kept going. After one of these trips, I ended up in bed for six weeks with a back problem, but I put in my time from bed working on *Ivanhoe*. I guess I just wanted to do it all.”⁴⁸

The training materials focussed on leadership and seemed bent on turning supervisors and teachers into leaders. Meader commented, “A great deal of emphasis was put on leadership. It was a hounding on leadership. There was a study conducted on why these millions of people had been left unemployed to have to seek work relief. The most prevalent answer was that they couldn’t get along with other people. That was our burden of training – to teach others to relate to one another. I ended up as the only woman in the group. That came from having learned not to run head on into things.”⁴⁹

Irene Odegaard remembers one of those frequent training sessions. It was conducted like a retreat at St. Croix Scout camp and all of those involved in the Recreation Department from the Twin Cities area were required to attend. The purpose was to teach each other what they had been working on and for those on the Puppetry Project that meant a workshop on marionettes. Each project had a cabin in which to conduct workshops. Since there was no electricity at the camp, puppet shows in the early evening were given by candlelight.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

WPA supervisors were occasionally asked to write informational bulletins that could be used by WPA workers all across the United States. Examples from the Minnesota Recreation Department include, *Craft Suggestions for Recreation*, *Organized Athletics*, and *Early American and Folk Dances*. In about 1936, Meader was asked to write Bulletin #6, *Recreational Puppetry* and it proved to be so popular that it was updated and reprinted at least once. It included an entire play (*The Frog Prince*) and instructions for building properties, hand puppets and a puppet theatre that could be made cheaply from a corrugated box. In the introduction she noted that, "A Puppet Project is valuable because it may employ a number of different groups simultaneously."⁵⁰

In 1933, Meader began an association with the University of Minnesota, concurrently with her positions with the WPA and Unity Church. Under the auspices of the WPA, she had been presenting puppet plays at the Saint Paul Public Library. Della McGregor was the head of the Children's Library and taught two classes in the Library School at the University of Minnesota. Sold on the idea of using puppetry for educational purposes, she asked Meader to give some talks and demonstrations to her students. By 1935 her demonstrations had blossomed into a non-credit course through the University of Minnesota-Extension which Meader taught two evenings a week – one at the Saint Paul campus and the other at the Minneapolis campus.

⁵⁰ Deborah Meader, *Recreational Puppetry*, Bulletin No. 6, Works Progress Administration of Minnesota, [1936?], 1.

The course cost ten dollars and there was no prerequisite. Meader was not surprised to find students from many different fields – elementary and church school teachers, public relations, recreation, welfare, drama, art and libraries. The bulletin copy read, “History and adaptation of puppetry to education (correlating the teaching of literature, social studies, art, handicraft and spoken language), to religion, visual story telling in libraries, camp craft, occupational therapy, and recreation.”⁵¹ In an enthusiastic article in *The Interpreter*, a newsletter published by the University’s General Extension Division, the writer commented, “this is one of the unusual courses offered by the General Extension Division... The enthusiasm of Mrs. Meader, instructor of the class, for the subject she teaches is boundless. Puppetry, she firmly believes, is a splendid means of education which in the past has been sadly neglected. Therefore, she insists that the manipulation of puppets and putting on of shows should never be left in the hands of those inexperienced and uninstructed in this art.”⁵²

In 1937 Meader was asked to write an article for the same publication. In it she discussed the history of puppetry and warmed to her favorite subject, “Puppetry is now recognized as a form of visual education that has peculiar advantages. It is creative, not mechanical. There is a need for stimulating creative effort in mechanized America. The appeal of puppetry to the imagination as well as its unique linking of the arts and handicraft with the drama is of great value.”⁵³

⁵¹ University of Minnesota, *Announcement and Program of Extension Classes*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 39, 8 August 1935, 27.

⁵² Ardis Kaplan, “Puppetry,” *The Interpreter*, Vol. X, No. 10, June 1936, 3-4.

⁵³ Deborah Meader, “Puppetry,” *The Interpreter*, Vol. XI, No. 7, March 1937, 2,6.

The students went through a whirlwind of puppetry projects in their seventeen weeks in the Extension course. While they could decide on which type of puppet they would concentrate on for their particular line of work, all forms and methods of puppetry were discussed in the class. The third week, for instance, was devoted to making different types of puppet heads (cloth, papier mâché, wood pulp and clay modeling that would be cast in plaster). They also made scenery, properties and theaters for hand and shadow puppets as well as marionettes. They were required to rehearse and give a play during the final weeks of the class. She taught this Extension class until June 1938.

Meador had been advocating that her puppetry course be taught for credit in the College of Education. In 1937, she had written W.E. Peik, Acting Dean of the College of Education, giving him a resume of her work as well as strong arguments for why the course should be moved to the College and given for credit. He was, "very much impressed with what she is doing,"⁵⁴ and he gave the go-ahead to establish the course. But funding was tight and the course was only taught for the academic year, 1938-39 in the College of Education. It moved to Art Education for the academic year 1940-41. But Meador's request to Peik shook loose another teaching opportunity in various teachers colleges around the state where she gave talks and demonstrations. The president of the State Teachers College in Moorhead, Minn. thought "her philosophy was decidedly sound and wholesome,"⁵⁵ that he advocated she be hired on a permanent basis to teach at

⁵⁴ Letter from Acting Dean Peik to Commissioner of Education John G. Rockwell, 17 January 1938.

⁵⁵ Letter from President MacLean to Commissioner John G. Rockwell, 15 March 1938.

teachers colleges. She had been conducting short courses in teachers colleges since 1933 in a different department almost each time. It is testimony to the diversity that puppets can bring to an educational setting to know that she was invited to teach in the departments of "fine arts, applied arts, drama and English...depending on the imagination and interest of the department heads."⁵⁶

The full-time appointment never came to fruition. It is obvious from the correspondence that her work with the WPA was becoming a hardship, probably because of the bureaucracy involved. In response to the president of Moorhead, the Commissioner of Education wrote, "I think Mrs. Meader is distinctly interested in getting into some college position where she would be able to work more effectively than she has been able to do under the WPA. ...I happen to know something about Mrs. Meader and her needs. Her husband is a disabled war veteran so that the support of the family falls very much upon her. Of course the WPA program is not a permanent one and would not appeal to one as a career."⁵⁷

Never one to let grass grow under her feet, Meader took several courses as an Adult Special at the University of Minnesota during the academic year 1939-40. Among the courses that she took was one called Radio in Education. During her work with the WPA, she had been invited several times to give talks on local radio and was interested in honing her skills. No information exists about the content of these radio talks and it is

⁵⁶ Deborah Meader, "High Brow, Low Brow....," speech, n.d., family collection.

⁵⁷ Letter from Commissioner of Education John G. Rockwell to President MacLean, 17 March 1938.

interesting to imagine the skill level involved in promoting puppets – a distinctly visual art – on radio.

For her work with the University of Minnesota, Meader was paid from \$200 to \$384 a semester. In addition to the approximately \$165 a month from the WPA, she had to rely heavily on sales from the Deborah Meader Puppet Shop. She seemed to be instinctively clever at marketing herself, perhaps because she knew her product so well. Since December 1933 she had been advertising in the national children's' magazine, *Child Life*. The full package she offered for the Christmas season included the small particle board theater, two puppet plays and the hand puppets to go with them. The ad proclaimed, "The theater and puppets provide an outlet for the child's dramatic instinct, a stimulus to his imagination and are a source of amusement to the whole family throughout the year."

In 1936 *Child Life* chose her company as the supplier for their subscription premium. For the price of a three-year subscription (five dollars), a child would receive a small puppet theater made out of heavy cardboard, three hand puppets and a play. *Child Life* ran the premium until March 1937. Meader also wrote a series of articles for the magazine, including "How to Make a Puppet Clown" and "Making Chinese Shadow Puppets for Upper Grades." She also did a series for *The Instructor*, a national magazine for teachers, including "Stick Shadow Puppets as a Method of Teaching Safety" and "Making Hand Puppets."

She was a member of the Saint Paul Chapter of the Northwest Puppetry Guild and the Puppeteers of America. When these organizations had their annual conferences, Meader was often invited to give a talk, performance or workshop. Her husband was adept enough at the puppetry business by 1940 that he was able to conduct a workshop on papier mâché puppet heads at the Puppeteers of America Festival and Conference.

Meader herself gave a workshop on shadow puppets.

More than 140 puppet plays survive from her career and she was responsible for writing many of them. Many were collaborative works, notable among them are the plays written at Unity Church with children and those from the WPA. Some were adapted from books such as *Winnie the Pooh* and *Treasure Island*.

The family moved east in 1942 and she ended her teaching career at a private school for girls in Cincinnati. She continued a little puppetry work with her classes of third graders. Her emphasis was to help the children recite narratives with the use of simple shadow puppets and then progress on to the jointed colored shadows.

One of the last talks and demonstrations she gave on puppetry was called, "Puppetry – On and Off Stage." The talk was given in the late 1960s at the College Club in Saint Paul and in it she applauds the recent use of puppetry on television such as *Howdy Doody* or *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*. Half the talk is devoted to the history of puppetry – a subject that she made so fascinating, pulling information from a career-long search for knowledge.

But half the talk is reserved for her favorite subject: the ways in which puppets could be used for teaching and the ways in which they could be used for therapy. "Puppetry develops reasoning in lifelike situations. The production of a puppet show presents a succession of problems and it is a joy to see the excited determination and ingenuity in solving these problems. There is also real necessity for cooperation. This results in the beginnings of learning one important lesson of life in a democracy – that of working as a member of a group toward a common goal – each member contributing something quite different. A puppet performance is also a valuable means for expressing emotional experience, especially to the shy or physically handicapped child. The center of attention is on the puppet, not the performer. He is able to demonstrate dramatic abilities unknown to himself, his companions or his teachers. It is also beneficial for the child who seeks the spotlight to be put in a position where the emphasis is on performance."⁵⁸

Never one to put herself in the spotlight, my grandmother's career had been built on this philosophy. Her purpose through all the years had been to teach, to help, to motivate and through it all she learned from those she taught. Tenacious and creative, she saw hardship as a challenge – a beginning rather than an end. I am glad that I had the chance to see her, a puppet on her hand, moving it ever so slightly, so fluidly, to take a bow.

⁵⁸ Deborah Meader, "High Brow, Low Brow...", speech, n.d., family collection.