

12-10-2003

Grinwis, Millie Oral History Interview: General Holland History

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Trap, Paul, "Grinwis, Millie Oral History Interview: General Holland History" (2003). *General Holland History*. Paper 30.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_history/30

Published in: *General Holland History Oral History Project (H99-1355.1)*, December 10, 2003. Copyright © 2003 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Oral History Interview
Eames Choir Robes
Interviewee: Millie Grinwis
Interviewer: Paul Trap
December 10, 2003

PT: Let me start just by saying that we are the home of Millie Grinwis, on the 10th of December, and we're here to talk about the Eames robes that are being used by the Herman Miller chorus. We don't know very much about them, except we do know they were designed by Charles Eames.

MG: Yes.

PT: So let me ask you a couple questions about yourself first. Did you work for Herman Miller?

MG: No, I did not. They just, by mouth, I guess, said I could sew and my mom could sew. So they called us and told us what it would be, as it was a terrible job, but it was fun. So we took the job, and it had to be done at a certain time too—it just couldn't drag out. So we did get them done, but it was a great big job. Some of the times we would run out of the material, and we had to wait for it to be sent from California, but we still had to have them done by the deadline. Sometimes it got a little bit hairy because we couldn't get the material when we should've had it. I never regretted it, that we did it.

PT: You did it with your mother?

MG: Yes.

PT: Did you work as a seamstress then?

MG: No, just for myself. I was never schooled as a seamstress, but I did a lot of sewing for myself and helped my mom. It was this on here, this bias—oh, that was the biggest job of all.

PT: Put the bias on the neck?

MG: Yes, on the neck. Because it wasn't straight, you know. But we got it done. Now which one is this one?

PT: This is the sopranos.

MG: Oh, yes, yellow. This is one they're still using?

PT: Yes, this is one they're still using.

MG: Oh, I see.

PT: As we look at it, do you see anything different from the way you made them?

MG: No, I can't say I do.

PT: Of course, you made them quite a while ago.

MG: Oh, years ago.

PT: Do you remember the year you made them?

MG: I can look it up because I do have it. I'll get that little book in a minute. I do have it though because I was looking in that book for something else the other day, and I saw that. Here it is, it's years ago because my mom's been gone for quite a few years already. I was going to have this all done, when you were going to come; and then, now I don't.

PT: You said the material came from California?

MG: It came from California. Beautiful material. The blue was just beautiful, all of it was and you could tell it was the best. It was fun to work with that because it was such beautiful texture and everything. My mom, of the scraps, she made us all a blanket—white and blue. We had so much waste, because it was cut, some on the bias and some like the sleeves, that had to all be on the blue over white because they wore the blue like this see. I had never attempted anything like that before, and I said, "What did I do?" But it all

worked out fine. When they gave them to Hope College, there weren't enough for the choir. So then they called us again and asked if we would do it, and I said I would love to do it, but I'm not up to it. So I don't know who did it. I don't know who they got to make them. But mom, she always loved to sew anyway, and she loved to make blankets.

PT: Do you still have the blanket that she made from the scraps?

MG: I never had one. I think that some of my brothers and sisters have, but I don't have any. But that's an awful long time ago to have a blanket like that. But it was such good material that you knew it would last a long time.

PT: Now, does this appear to be the same material?

MG: Yes, it does. Beautiful, this blue is so pretty. Well, you found it, later than '78.

PT: Oh, much earlier. I'm guessing it would be about in the '50s.

MG: Yes, I think so too. We're in the '50s now, so maybe we'll find it. I know I got it, otherwise it's in there. We looked this all over the other day, my husband and I; we were looking for something else too. When you get our age your memory isn't so good, you know. It'll be the last one you look at I'm sure.

PT: Oh, that's the way it always goes. Do you have a list of all the sewing projects you did?

MG: No, I didn't do a whole lot. This was the only big project I ever did. Really, we didn't realize what we were getting into. We really didn't. It was really much too big for just the two of us and our houses looked terrible. The cloth, you know, laying on the...and our tables—I had to make this table a lot bigger because you had to cut that and it's got such a big blue sleeve on it. But it all worked out all right. Well, it's got to be in here somewhere; I know I've got it.

PT: When they contracted, or had you do it, did they give you just a drawing to work from or a pattern?

MG: We had a pattern.

PT: Did you give the pattern back to Herman Miller?

MG: Yes, we gave everything. I didn't want it around and my mother sure didn't. She was alone, so she didn't want it around. They told us that any of the scraps that we had left, if we wanted to keep them, we could. I had no intentions of doing anything with them, but my mom was just thrilled because then she could make some quilts. She just loved to do that. It was nice that she did that. Those that have them have a nice memory of her. But I often think, this was the worst job...to put the velvet on, because you had to have it straight, naturally, and so many on one robe you know, that's an awful, awful lot of work.

PT: About how long did it take you to do it?

MG: Oh boy, that's a good question. I really don't know. But we had to have it done when they said it. It was a month, I'm sure. Maybe more, I don't know.

PT: Somewhere between a month and two months?

MG: I would think so, because that was a really, really big job. When we said we would do it, they just thought that was it. I said to my mother, "Boy, oh boy, mom, I don't know, we bit off too big a piece, I don't know." But we got it done and it was fun.

PT: Do you remember how many you did at first?

MG: I should've kept track of that because it's just kind of fun to go over it again.

PT: It was pretty significant work that you did.

MG: Thank you. It was something that we didn't realize it was such a big thing.

PT: When you made them, did you make them different sizes or were they all the same size?

MG: They were all the same. Well, the men probably a little longer. But when you have something like this, when they just hang, you use a lot of sizes in that. So, that's the way it was.

PT: So you made all the sopranos the same length?

MG: Yes. They told us how many of each one we had to make of each color. We made them, and they were done. But they did want more, because Hope College was a bigger choir. And some of them, I understand, have worn out. I can't understand that because that material was so very strong, but you have them dry-cleaned so often that it's hard on the material. Well, mister, I can't find it; I don't know what I did with it.

PT: Well, you can call me if you find it. These were designed by Charles Eames. Did you ever get a chance to meet him?

MG: No, I didn't.

PT: You never met him?

MG: I never met him. Our son worked there at Herman Miller for thirty-eight years. He just retired. I just don't know who told them to ask us if we'd do it. I just don't remember that.

PT: Because it was quite likely before your son went to work there.

MG: Oh yes. Yes, he just retired, thirty-eight and a half years there. They gave him such a beautiful retirement thing, it was just unreal. They were just so nice to him. Herman Miller was a very good company to work for. [phone interruption] Excuse me a minute, will you please? [continuing] My mom bought herself a new sewing machine from what she earned. Now that's on here, so you would think I would have that. I'll have to wait

and call you on that one. We had material all over our house. You can imagine, when you have that many robes. I often think, “How did I ever dare to undertake that?”

PT: It helps to be young and foolish sometimes.

MG: Yes, it was. It was a big thing, I’ll tell you. If we had thought it through, I think we would’ve said no. But my mom would’ve wanted to do it more than I did, because she was always so into it, she loved it, and she enjoyed it. I enjoyed it, too, but I just... You can see the sewing machine, the thread. I don’t know how they did that. I don’t know if this is one of the original or not.

PT: Well, if it was the original, it’s one that you would’ve done.

MG: Yes. I guess we did a better job than what we thought we did. [laughs]

PT: About how old were you when you did it?

MG: Oh boy, I don’t know. It was just so many years ago. I don’t remember. My husband would probably remember more about it than I do.

PT: I would suspect he got kind of sick of them laying around the house.

MG: Well, our house was such a mess. My mom’s house was worse than mine because they brought everything to her. She had a big table so we could cut the material on that. But this was a big job, because first you had to cut them all the right length, and then you had to sew them on and measure in between. It was really a terrific job. The women that did it—when they asked for more—they said too they didn’t realize it was what it was.

PT: Do you know who did the others?

MG: No, I don’t know. I never found out. I don’t know whether Howard Johnson would know that or not, because he called me on in too because he wanted to write something on it. But I didn’t give all the answers; it happened years ago.

PT: Did you make the collars for these too?

MG: No, we didn't make that.

PT: So you only made the robes? The collars were not part of it?

MG: No, they weren't. I don't recall making this at all because we had such a time getting this on here—we call that's on the bias and that was terrible. They didn't have those when we made them.

PT: So it maybe something that they added later.

MG: I think so. Maybe some girls thought they'd rather have...Oh see now, they put that on there. I don't know how we did that. She had to have a big piece.

PT: We're looking at the blue and the white now.

MG: Yes. And that's where that would be, on your arm. It's wonderful. Then we had to have all of these little pieces too. It wasn't just those big ones, we had to put these on too.

PT: Yes, the grace notes.

MG: Yes.

PT: And there was a pattern telling you exactly where to put those?

MG: Yes.

PT: Now the pattern you had was not a full-size pattern?

MG: What do you mean full-size?

PT: The paper was not as big as a robe.

MG: Oh, yes.

PT: Oh, it was?

MG: Oh, sure, because otherwise I don't know how you'd do it if you didn't. You'd have to have it that long. That was clumsy to work with, but it was nice. Isn't that an awful big

thing? It's unreal. So you can imagine that took a lot of material. I never found out how much material they ever did buy. But if we ran out of material, then we'd call Herman Miller and they'd send a...what would you call it...to California because they said we've got to have it in a hurry because they have to be done at a certain time. It was nice.

PT: Did you ever have a chance to see the choir singing in the robes?

MG: Yes. Well, they were made first for Herman Miller, and I was in that choir.

PT: Oh, you were in the choir?

MG: Yes, and my husband was too.

PT: You were both in the choir. You were in the choir, but neither of you worked for Herman Miller.

MG: My husband did for just a little while, but not very long. As I said, our son did, and I had a brother that worked there thirty-eight years also. But he had nothing to do with it. Anyway, I don't even know who came here to bring the material. When you're as old as I am, your memory isn't so good.

PT: But it's better than it's going to be ten years from now.

MG: Oh, yes.

PT: So you did sing with the choir?

MG: Yes. Mr. Fast was our director, and he was a tremendous person. We had a lot of fun.

PT: I can count in the picture and see how many people were in the choir, but you sang with the choir for how long?

MG: As long as they had it at Herman Miller, because then they gave it to _____ because of the... I don't know if Mr. Fast cut it off, or if they just thought they wouldn't have it anymore. Then they gave these robes to Hope, which we were glad of, because

we knew Hope would use them. All that work in there and just leave them lay. Well, that isn't very nice. So we were happy about that. I have seen them sing with them on, and it is a very colorful...

PT: That must make you feel awfully good to see them.

MG: It does. It was a big project, but it also was something to look at and say, "I accomplished that, and that was a big thing."

PT: Yes. How long did you sing with choir?

MG: I don't know that. I don't even know how long they had it.

PT: You joined the choir...your husband was working there at the time?

MG: Yes, we both liked to sing. So then he joined it too. Anybody in his shop, could sing, and they had quite a big choir, too. It was so much fun, because he was such an upbeat man.

PT: Mr. Fast?

MG: Yes, Mr. Fast. We really enjoyed him very much, and we even learned to sing a Dutch song, and that was fun.

PT: Do you remember his first name?

MG: That's something that Howard Johnson would know.

PT: We can find that out. What kind of music did you sing with the choir?

MG: Oh, we sang religious and we sang classical. We sang songs that we all knew, but they were different versions probably. But they were all nice songs; there wasn't any junk.

PT: Didn't do any rock and roll.

MG: No, of course that wasn't very prevalent yet. [laughs]

PT: What kind of occasions would you perform?

MG: Good question too.

PT: Company functions?

MG: Yes, and we went to churches to sing, too. That was a big group to go to church to sing. We did it, too, for our enjoyment.

PT: You went to churches, did you go to other community functions?

MG: Yes, we did. Everybody was so faithful in coming and practicing. It was just an enjoyable thing, and we all thought that was pretty nice to sing in the Herman Miller choir. That was really something, because Herman Miller is highly thought of in Zeeland, but now it's so much different—the De Prees are out, you know, and it's so much different. But I said to Ron, "They could not have given you a better retirement thing than what they did." It was just unreal. To top it off, when I was going from his...they had it at the shop...they said, "Here, you take all this food home." With the two/three of us, what was I going to do with all that leftover food? [laughs] I never expected that; I never even thought about that. I still have some in the freezer. They are a wonderful company, well they were. I don't know much about it now because we're out of it. [still looking for something] I'll have to take your telephone number, and I'll find it. It's gotten be in here, because I had it.

PT: Let me give you my card.

MG: Oh, that would be nice. That's kind of a nice thing to do, to try and find out about things that were done in Zeeland. When we were in that choir, boy, they all thought that was pretty nice that we could sing in that choir.

PT: So everybody in the choir had some tie in some way or another to Herman Miller?

MG: Yes. I have a friend, she's in the hospital now, but she might be able to answer some of my questions, too. She's not quite as old as I am. [laughs]

PT: I have a list of a few people who were in the choir. Frank Baron, Shirley Nagelkirk, Mrs. Howard Mollard. Did you ever get a copy of the newsletter that they did?

MG: There it is.

PT: And that was before these robes?

MG: Yes.

PT: This is 1952, so you did the robes sometime after '52.

MG: It was after '52.

PT: I'll tell you what; I'll get a copy of that made. That's the only copy I have; that's the one that Howard Johnson gave to me, and I will send that to you.

MG: Okay, thank you.

PT: And I'll also send you a copy of our conversation.

MG: That would be nice, because that really was a tremendous project and that you could accomplish that really meant a lot to my mom and I. Because my mom wasn't so young when we did this, but we enjoyed it. Of course, we were together a lot, and she liked that because she was alone. So, she liked it that I was there. I had to go every day—we just had to sew every day in order to get it done in the amount of time. But it was fun, and it's done. I'm glad that after all the work that's done on them that they still want to keep them. I don't think that was too many years ago that they had more made. I suppose at Hope there comes more young people that join the choir. That was a wonderful gift to Hope College.

PT: But you don't remember who made the new robes? The extra ones.

MG: I don't know that. I never did find that out because I wasn't in it anymore. Not only that, but I don't even know who would be able to tell you that.

PT: Well, we're finding all kinds of people.

MG: Yes, we'll find out. I'll talk to this girl that I know, too. She was in the choir; she's a little sharper than I am right now. When you're 88 years old, you aren't so sharp anymore.

PT: But you're doing very well, and I thank you for your memories and your recollections.

MG: If I can think of any more or find out anymore, I will let you know.

PT: I'd appreciate it very much.

MG: Well, I can see where you like to have as much as you can on it.

PT: What I did not get was your mother's name.

MG: Doris Scrottenboer.

PT: And was your father still alive when you did that?

MG: No, he was gone. That's why she liked it so well, because then I was there every day. And she was just lost after it was done, that I didn't come there every day. She was a wonderful mother. We would sew so many hours a day. You can't keep that up all the time and not have a break, and then at night she'd be sewing again. She just loved to do it. We managed to get it done.

PT: Did your mother do other sewing for people?

MG: Yes.

PT: Dresses and...?

MG: She did alterations. She loved it. She loved to sew and make things look nice. Every Christmas, she would make the grandchildren a nightie—a flannel nightie. I don't know

if I have a picture of it anymore or not, but every year we take a picture because there would be more added to it. So that was a nice thing for her to do.

PT: But you did not do any sewing?

MG: No, not for other people. I did sew for myself. No, I never got into that. That is quite a thing to do, because sometimes you get a terrible hard job to alter, and I wasn't that good at it. So, I never did it, but she did. In fact, when we had this one minister, she always did all his alterations. Different things like that. And that kept her busy from being alone, kept her very busy and that was kind of nice.

PT: Well, I thank you so much.

MG: You're welcome.

PT: It was really wonderful to be able to sit down and talk with you.

MG: Well, thank you. I don't think about it too often, but when I talk to you now it all comes back, not everything, but a lot of it. We had to press them all. It wasn't just making them; we were pressing them too.

PT: I would imagine that was a big job, because they were so large.

MG: Yes, that was, because our ironing boards, they're only just so big.

PT: Thank you so very much; it was a real pleasure to be with you. It's been a wonderful half hour.

MG: Yes, well, that's nice. I'm kind of glad now. I didn't want you to get what I've got—I didn't want you to get a cold or anything. Mine just came on overnight, and I've been under the weather for the last five months. I said to my husband, "Christmas is coming, I better not let him come." But I don't think you would catch anything.