



# **(Un)Seen Work: Traditions and Transitions**

**JANE GILMOR**

**2010**



# (Un)Seen Work: Traditions and Transitions

JANE GILMOR

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM  
THE PEOPLE OF GRINNELL,  
NICHOLE BAKER, THOMAS BATEMAN,  
MATHEW BUTLER, CHRISTINA HUSMANN,  
MICHAEL MCHUGH, MARIA TERZOPOULOU,  
DAVID VAN ALLEN, AND ROBIN YOUNG

FAULCONER GALLERY, GRINNELL COLLEGE  
2010



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS

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Faulconer Gallery commissioned artist Jane Gilmore to create a community-based work of art for the exhibition *Culturing Community* (Fall 2010). Her piece, *(Un)Seen Work: Traditions and Transitions*, draws on Grinnell histories and experiences of work, particularly the unseen work done in occupations that keep a community going. Through a series of video interviews begun in February 2010 and conducted by community coordinator Robin Young and Grinnell students Nichole Baker '10 and Michael McHugh '12, fifty people contributed their work histories to the project. Gilmore also held workshops to help participants create metal foil books with text and images expressing their experiences of work. In addition, she created a web site, [www.unseenwork.com](http://www.unseenwork.com), to allow more public participation in the project and to let others to read the contributions.

Participants were asked to address these and other questions:

What is your personal work history?

What work would you like to be doing?

What kinds of work do other members of your family do?

What kinds of work were you raised to do?

Using videos and transcriptions, archival materials, objects brought by Grinnell participants, and other Grinnell/work related materials, Gilmore fashioned a giant walk-in scrapbook about work in a small Iowa community. The piece incorporated the words and images of the “unseen” workers, video, and hands-on activities. The scrapbook was installed at the Faulconer Gallery from September 24 to December 12, 2010.

Copies of interview videos and transcriptions completed as part of this project will be donated to the Iowa Labor Archives of The State Historical Society in Des Moines as well as the Drake Community Library in Grinnell.

Here is some of what we learned about unseen work in Grinnell (quoted from transcriptions of interviews conducted between February and May 2010).





## [what I like about work]

*Sometimes people working in the laundry think that we are on the bottom of the totem pole. We get along good, though. It takes all the departments—it's teamwork to make a facility run. It's not one area alone, it's working together.*

MELODY MONTGOMERY

*My wife says "when you're working at the Water Department you're like a duck in water." I wouldn't venture a guess the number of times we were heading out the door and the phone rang and I'd say, "Sorry, Dear, I gotta go to work."*

PAUL McDONALD

*The cemetery, like I said, you gotta dig, you gotta*

*bury people, which is not a great job, but the advantage is that you are outside all the time.*

KEITH STEWART

*Work is rewarding, because at the end of the day, you have made a difference. You might have a pile on your desk, but... you can look over and see if it's a done pile. You know, it's never ending.... If you can get it whittled down to just new requests and just a few requests, you're always going to have something there for the next day, but you can turn and go: I did that much! Then you feel like you've accomplished.*

ANONYMOUS

## [various jobs]

*I've cleaned all over the*

city. I've done the police station, the fire station, the library (both new and old). I've done the street shops, the community center, the Memorial Building. I've done 'em all, sometimes in one day.

TRUDY TISH

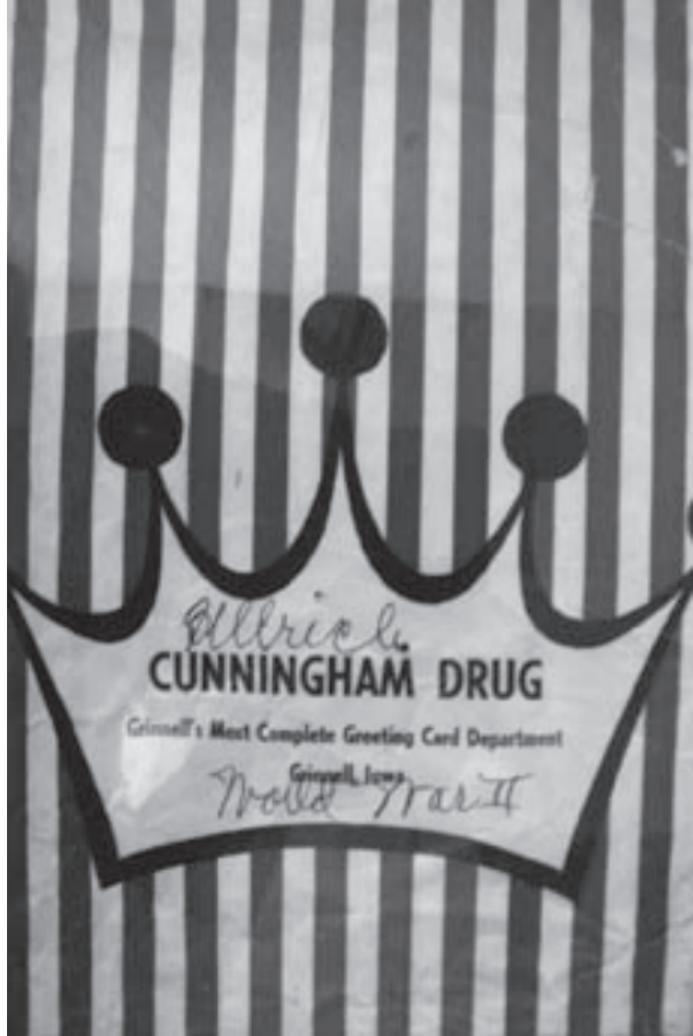
You know I always thought I was going to be terrified the first time, but I went to the first fire and I wasn't that scared. It was a little scary—you can't see in there—you have to think, "is the roof going to collapse? Is the floor too wet?..." It's nerve wracking but you are trained to know what to do. I lucked out on my first fire. It was actually a semi-trailer full of cereal—rice crispies—burning!

KRISTINA HELLESO

I'm standing here working on a motorcycle, getting my hands dirty, tool boxes everywhere with wrenches, socket sets, screw drivers, drills everywhere. I've grown up working on cars and trucks with my uncles and grandfather. I think this is the field my grandfather would want for me—what he would want me to do with my life.

RYAN RICE, NEW HORIZONS  
ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

I've done a lot of things—plumber, electrician, truck driver, carpenter, cook, worked for General Telephone, taught Arthur Murray dance classes for a month. (You got paid by how many people you could talk into taking lessons, so I gave that up.) But the first day I walked into a





*classroom, high school, I knew I was gonna be a teacher.*

**JACK MARCUM**

*If you're going to be a pastor, you have to be a self starter. Because, especially around the house, there's going to be a TV; it's really easy not to do anything very much. It's basically writing. That's a creative thing and...you don't just come up with it. Sometimes it just makes really good sense and sometimes you strain and strain to make it through. And sometimes it looks good. But the creative process is different than doing rote paperwork, where you have to sort these piles.*

**HARLEY SCHULL**

## **[food industry]**

*I like working in a small town, especially when I was in the restaurant business, because almost every restaurant has their regulars. Coffee drinkin' men that are there all morning, you know? And you get where you know them by their first name and you know what they want when they walk in the door without even taking their order, and you know personal things about them and they know things about you, and, you know, that's what I like about Grinnell.*

**LUANN MONTGOMERY**

*The hardest work I've ever done would be working in the kitchen. You're so completely stressed, you're pumpin' out twenty million orders,*

*people are yelling at you, people are yelling at your boss, your boss comes in and yells at you, you make sure all the food is going right and it's a kitchen so everyone is getting really hot, so tempers are flarin', waitresses are conflicting with cooks and cooks are getting mad at waitresses, and the boss is mad at everybody and you just gotta keep running around and taking it as it goes and at the end of the night you are completely and totally fried—and you still have to clean up the whole entire mess! I never want to work in a kitchen again in my life. A lot of angry people in kitchens.*

JARROD DIEHM

## [gender issues]

*So they hired me in a man's position to write*

*headlines and I worked with this little man with red hair who he smoked 12 cigars before lunch. And he sat across this big desk from me. And I'm not sure he was pleased to have a female across the desk.*

BETTY GERBER

*I worked straight through from like 10:00 to 3:00 every day, ate at my desk, and then one day I went in and some of the girls had gotten a fifteen cent raise and I got a nickel. I was typing up a bid and when I heard that I went to the boss and said, "I'm typing a bid now; when I get it done, I'm through." And I walked out.*

ESTHER ADKINS

*Well, Women's Lib came with the Depression, 1929. My mom and sister did wallpaper—had a*



# Escort

women's best friend  
is a comfortable  
shoe.



# Perkies





Sanderson Farm



*good reputation. In Grinnell we also had a canning factory—canned corn—southeast side of Park Street. The south of town was a very poor district at the time. The canning factory usually went for twenty-four hours a day. It was a lifesaver. I don't know how much it paid, but we didn't go to jail so it must have paid the bills.*

JACK MARCUM

### [farming]

*I started my working career as a young lad walking behind cultivators, pulling morning glories. After the Depression I worked for farmers because I was born on a farm, pitchin' levels. And I worked for farmers—I've worked in the hot sun fifteen hours*

*a day since I was fourteen years old.*

WENDELL SLEEUWENHOEK

*After I got big enough to handle the milking machine, I did the milking and we milked fifteen to twenty cows. You got up and you did that before you went to school and you did it again when you got home after school.*

PAUL McDONALD

*This is my job because it's the only thing I'm good at. In farming you work until the job gets done.*

NEW HORIZONS ALTERNATIVE  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

### [hard times]

*I took a couple ones out of my husband's wallet to pay this bill. Take this much and be satisfied for right now. We have to*

*pay the car payment and for my tape recorder, etc.*

FROM BARBARA WOLF'S  
COLLECTION OF NOTES ON  
RETURNED TELEPHONE BILLS

*Well, I've always worked two jobs. I was a farmer on the side and whenever I got done with my day job at the railroad or whatever, five or six o'clock at night, I'd jump on a tractor—cultivate or something.*

WENDELL SLEEUWENHOEK

*Our rent was six dollars a month and the man that owned our house was in Newton, so my dad would save up money from working, enough to buy gas so we could drive to Newton and back on old Highway 6 to pay the rent—and that was a monthly trip.*

JACK MARCUM

*I'll be 65 this summer.... For now because of insurance and stuff and trying to pay off my house, I'll probably work as long as I can, but I have no idea. About 10 years. I probably won't be around.*

AUDREY ENGLAND

### [caregivers]

*I was never really directed in the care (giver) direction, but (as a child) I tried to help birds and one time I brought all the cats in because it was raining—and I got in trouble for that. When there was a storm and I'd see a chicken out there, I'd get boxes to cover 'em up. That's just what I did. I tried to rescue.*

CAROLYN SCHREINER

*People used to come to the hospital and stay a long*





*time. Now they come in sicker and don't stay long. They are now doing things at home they would have stayed in the hospital to do before.*

PHYLLIS PHIPPS

*I've been with residents until the end. For me it's not death. It's the beginning... I sing to them. I put lotion on their hands. Show them someone's there. That it is okay. I simply feel if it is their time, it's their time. I'm blessed to have been there, blessed to have known them...*

KIMBERLY KAISAND

### **[factory work]**

*We have fans but there is no air-conditioning, it does get very hot. It gets sweaty and I have heard of some people fainting so*

*it is very uncomfortable in summer. In the winter, there are heaters but a lot of people are wearing sweaters and so...there is definitely a temperature issue. And there is also a noise issue. There is a lot of machines so I wear ear plugs all the time just because there is so much noise.*

ANONYMOUS

*I'm standing in a large factory with machines and computers everywhere. With each button I push and each lever I pull I hear sounds of very large contraptions with motors. I smell crude oil and grease. I can feel the cement floor under my steel-toed shoes. There are not many girls in my line of work. I work ten hours a day and, granted, I come home dirty and*

*tired but I still enjoy it.*

KAYLA EVANS, WORK FANTASY  
VISUALIZATION, NEW  
HORIZONS ALTERNATIVE  
HIGH SCHOOL

*I remember working in the factory where there was lots of noise, cement floors, other workers, dirty walls....I was putting linen in the pressing (ironing) machine rollers when my fingers got caught. I was yelling "push the OFF button," but the noise was so loud no one could hear me.*

RAMONA WASHINGTON

## [job struggles]

*So I think partly I've stayed in that job simply because of momentum. I didn't, I didn't want to leave the town, I had a job so why... I mean this is true, after about ten*

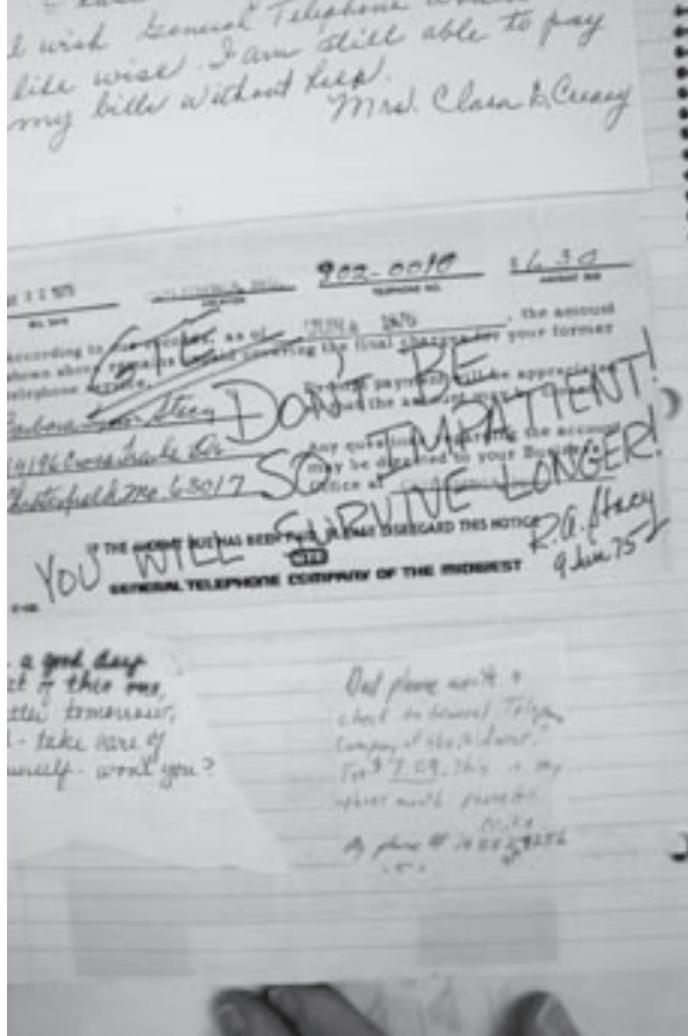
*years I started looking at the papers to see what... But it also seemed like I'm not qualified for anything anymore. I mean I used to work in a clerical field... but I... now everything says "must know this or that"*

ANONYMOUS

*One of the things at the collection agency: they always closed after talking with somebody and ringing them about, you know, 'we are gonna sue you,' and they would always say "Have a nice day!" To this day, I have never used that expression just because of that-- because it is just so horrible to me.*

CROSBY

*The American Dream is based on the premise that hard work will result in*





*prosperity. My family is fully ensconced in this belief. As members of the often ignored working class, my mother works because she is passionately in love with her occupation, my father because he loves work itself. Both judge their worth in their ability to do their work. Because of the momentous importance of work in defining my own value, I have frequently been troubled by the invisibility and marginality of the jobs I have had.*

**NICHOLE BAKER**

*We'd tell them, "it looks good on paper, but it doesn't work very well." But that's how management was... "It's on paper, it'll work." But we were the workers and*

*we were telling them--it's not that easy. "Oh, you'll get used to it." Okay, it's 100 degrees in the factory, fans blowing hot air, I mean...they once made me walk around with popsicles. "Oh, here you go." But you gotta keep working with your popsicle. ....How's that gonna work?!*

**ANONYMOUS**

*When you're working all the time, it's sad that you don't get to spend enough time with your family, friends, loved ones. You know it goes by fast and kids grow up and you're always at work to pay the bills. And that's something that I find depressing....You spend more time with your coworkers than your family and friends. And they're more important,*

*but you have to do it.*

TERRY MONTGOMERY

## [getting out of bed]

*Question: What's the hardest work you've ever done? Response: "Getting up in the morning."*

ED ADKINS

*It gets tiresome waking up at 3:00 every morning.*

*You know, you just have to drag yourself out of bed, put your clothes on, car up, put those newspapers together and take off. Someday I'll just stay in bed and snuggle up!*

VICKY CLINE

*And he's like, why don't you call in sick? I don't call in sick unless I'm really sick. I think I've called in sick, well zero times since I've been at*

*West Side and I've worked there since I've been a junior... Maybe, I've only been sent home once.*

SAMANTHA MOYES

## [philosophical]

*Work is to me, not a job. It's enjoyable, it's satisfying, it's challenging, it is—it's what makes me who I am.*

DWIGHT LAIDIG

*I have come to realize that all of us stand on the shoulders of those who worked before us. Simply, we owe our success to others. The more we recognize that fact, the more we can recognize the worth of unseen labor. We will then be inspired to lend a hand to the less fortunate and work for causes that result in something more than a*



*salary. We will give our own labor to building a more equitable, fair community, where starting points don't determine the ending point.*

MICHAEL McHUGH

*For me, I miss work. I'm trying very hard so that I can do something productive again. I have good days and bad days. But after working so many years and building a good career, then to have it yanked out from under you by illness—it's crushing.*

DAN DIEHM

*Q: If your job was a song, what song would it be?*

*A: The only one that's coming to my head is, it's really funny, because my stepmom's name is this. 'Help Me Rhonda'*

*because I always need help, everybody needs help. Because I usually have aides with me for swimming and the other waitresses at West Side and the boss, so just help.*

SAMANTHA MOYES



FAULCONER GALLERY

Thank you to all the *(Un)Seen Work* participants, including those who chose to remain anonymous but are not forgotten. A complete listing of participants can be found on the “thank you” poster for *Culturing Community*.

This publication documents a component of *Culturing Community: Projects about Place*, curated by Lesley Wright and presented at Falconer Gallery, Grinnell College (Grinnell, Iowa) from September 24 to December 12, 2010. [grinnell.edu/falconergallery](http://grinnell.edu/falconergallery)

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