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"How Little Men In Black" Tell America's Depression Story

THOUSANDS of years ago prehistoric man painted and scratched on the walls of his cave in crude fashion the story of his time—the record of his victories, the strength of his armies and the story of his people.

Today in a drab little drafting room in Washington the story of our time is being written in a modernized version of the pictographs of the cave man. Four young men lean over great drawing boards and direct the march of pictorial robots in India black across great wastes of barren white.

These simplified symbols of more than a score of types express more eloquently than words the tragic story of our time. These little men in black marching across the drawing paper tell this story in a new medium—pictured symbols.

A varied crew of draftsmen in this bare and unpretentious drawing room has blazed a new and epochal trail of pictured knowledge. They are pioneers doing one of the most significant tasks to result from the entire New Deal.

The depression brought the government many a hard problem, among the most important of which was to operate successfully a highly-geared relief machine. But to perform this task in the interest of those in need and those who pay the bill—the taxpayers—the FERA has had to collect, assemble, correlate and interpret significant social data.

Hunger, want, jobs and a myriad of other factors are expressed in terms of statistical studies which must be properly handled in order that the most good for the greatest number of needy might be accomplished.

Corrington Gill, nationally recognized statistician and analyst, an assistant administrator, is charged with the task of assembling data for the use of Administrator Harry L. Hopkins, for technical and relief agencies of the government and for the information of the general public. Under Gill's direction the Division of Research Statistics and Finance is waging a constant offensive in the realm of the unknown to bring statistical order out of numerical chaos.

In order to visualize data into readily comprehensible form, a graphic unit of the research section is maintained. Headed by Frederick Seiver, former mining engineer, draftsmen and analysts make the drab numerical data graphic, in both a literal and figurative sense. A constant procession of graphs, maps, etc., emerges from this section.

Just as the Chinese believe that one picture is worth ten thousand words, the exponents of this pictorial Esperanto believe that a few standardized symbols on charts can convey to people more effectively the significance of social facts than can reams of words or miles of arithmetical tables.

A "VOCABULARY" or "dictionary" of symbols has been compiled to which are added new symbols as new types of data are used, according to the ever-changing demands of the graphic work.

Thus a simple black outline figure represents a block of men. Different subdivisions of men according to occupation can be indicated by superimposing on the black figure a small white symbol representing a particular class. Symbols are also used representing family groups, age groups, areas of land, background (urban or rural), etc.

Three of the draftsmen work under the close tutelage of one of their colleagues, Marshall Schaffer, regarded as perhaps the foremost exponent in America of the new method of pictorial presentation as originated and developed in Europe. Theodore Jung, expert photographer, and Henry Geiger, architectural student, do the layout work on the charts while Burns Price, an artist, designs the symbols which are becoming a part of a new language.

These draftsmen set forth the symbols in black on drawing paper in accordance with a definite method of schematic representation. FERA's draftsmen are indebted, however, to pioneering work done in Europe in originating and developing the new technique of pictured data.

Dr. Otto Neurath, an Austrian physicist and mathematician, originated the technique and founded the Vienna Social and Economic Museum. The Neurath technique is spreading its significant influence the world over, but not until Gill added Schaffer to Seiver's staff had the method been given any particular attention in America.

Working on the basis of the Neurath technique, the FERA draftsmen have forged forward developing new symbols and expanding the possibilities of pictorial presentation. Tremendous possibilities have been noted in this method in the field of adult education.

Since data of a social nature cannot be photographed like construction progress on a building nor handled like a formula in chemical test tubes, it has been necessary to devise a new method of presentation.

THE limitations of the abstract qualities of social data are overcome by showing quantitative "weights" by pictured symbols. In other words, by this method columns of statistics are reduced to easily-understood pictures.

To illustrate: In the bouncing days of prosperous 1929, unemployment in the United States nearly reached the three-million mark. In February of that year the maximum peak of jobless was 2,817,000 while the minimum load occurred in October when 480,000 were without work. The chart shows all of this information, and more, merely at a passing glance.

Schaffer, who is in direct charge of pictorial presentation, is a functionalist to a marked degree. A mining engineer by profession, Schaffer turned to architecture where he thought he could find an outlet for expressing some views of functionalism. He was associated for a time with Richard Neutra of Los Angeles, a functionalist whose work and ideas are recognized throughout Europe. Neutra and Schafer were delegates two years ago to the International Congress of New Architecture which met at Athens.

Less than a year ago this work came to the attention of some of the relief New Dealers and the young architect was added to the staff as an expert in charts and graphs.

President Roosevelt last year appointed the committee on economic security to study ways and means of establishing a system of social legislation including old age pensions, unemployment insurance, maternal welfare, etc. Schaffer was loaned by Seiver to the committee to execute charts and graphs.

At the national social welfare conference, called by Roosevelt in Washington in November, the committee on economic security issued a book of charts called "The Need for Economic Security in the United States." The booklet collated 15 charts which Schaffer had made from the committee's statistical data. This set of charts was destined to be a milestone in the presentation of important social evidence.

SO simple yet so dynamic are the charts that within 15 minutes the booklet can be perused and its factual data assimilated by the average adult. Although the circulation of the publication was made without the fanfare of ballyhoo, the reception of the book was instantaneous and startling.

Although no credit is given in the booklet for graphing, the work was done by Schaffer and his associate draftsmen from the FERA Division of Research and Finance Statistics. Their work has been one of pioneering and pushing back a new frontier of knowledge. They have inaugurated in arresting form the movement for pictorial illustration of statistical data.

Efforts are being made to widen the horizon in this new method of showing data by pictured symbols. Schaffer has prepared, in his spare time, two maps for the Nye Munitions Investigating Committee which illustrate the inter-play of forces behind the munitions makers.

These maps tell the amazing behind-the-scenes story in graphic form of the "co-operation" which is a large part of the program of the merchants of death.

The New Deal can well claim pre-eminence in accelerating the impetus of pictured knowledge. Although other agencies in the United States have made some attempts in this medium, the FERA draftsmen remain the foremost exponents of the medium.

The American Federation of Labor and the National Education Association have used pictured charts, but both the character and extent of their activities are overshadowed by the excellence of the young draftsmen of Gill's division.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics under Dr. Isador Lubin has made some advance in graph usage. Rudolph Modley, young Austrain, former assistant to Dr. Neurath, has made an attempt to commercialize the method of independent action. Another worthy endeavor has been made by pictorialists employed by the Pennsylvania Planning Board.

The interpretation of data in terms of pictorial Esperanto shows as impartially as a laboratory test tube the actions and reactions of the great forces of our time—forces which are creating jobs and are causing unemployment; which are distributing wealth and concentrating power; which are saving life and causing death and suffering.

As these interpretations are being made, America forges forward in this new medium of expression and in this forward procession four young draftsmen are in the van blazing a brave new trail on the oldest yet newest intellectual frontier—pictography.

It's not easy to digest long columns of figures, so FERA artists went back to the cave man for graphic symbols by which a tangled tale of relief needs can be made clear

Four members of the graphic unit section of the FERA examine a newly completed chart. Left to right, they are Theodore Jung, Marshall Schaffer, Burns Price and Henry Geiger.

How pictures tell a story—a page from the graphic pamphlet, "The Need for Economic Security in the United States."

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