

Cranbrook artists changed islands' economy

By Corinne Abelt
staff writer

Irene Murphy of Birmingham has always been action person — except when she sits down for a buffet supper.

Then she wants a lightweight, sturdy, unbendable, unbreakable surface for her food. Is that asking too much?

Hardly, since she is directly responsible for an item with all these characteristics plus natural aesthetics being made in the Philippines.



MINDY SAUNDERS/staff photographer

Julie Landry of Rochester finds the fish tray, so-named by Irene Murphy because of its shape, is comfortable, well-balanced and easy to use. There's just enough flat area in the small flange to accommodate a cup.

In addition to her longstanding Philippine connection (she spent many years there as social worker and consultant on social welfare), this story has a strong Cranbrook connection.

What she calls (and sells) knee-to-knee, wood "fish trays" evolved as a Philippine export, for which Murphy may take the lion's share of the credit.

HER BROTHER-in-law, Frank Murphy, then governor-general of the Philippines asked her to return there after World War II to help find some way for the Filipino people to help themselves.

Cranbrook Academy of Art provided her answer. The result was a plan which was the forerunner of what today is officially called the Trickle Up Program (TUP), used widely in underdeveloped areas.

Murphy invited five Cranbrook-trained designer technicians to go to the Philippines to work with the people on developing and making items which would be popular in world markets. The United States and the United Nations agreed to help.

THOSE WHO WORKED with her were: John H. Risley, sculptor and furniture designer; his wife, Mary Kring, ceramist; Marianne Strenge, textile designer; her husband, Olaf Hammarstrom, furniture designer; and Lysbeth Wallace, textile designer.

One of the noteworthy things which came out of the program was the Strenge Fly Shuttle Loom, designed specifically for village weavers (and still in use today) which saved time and increased output. Strenge also created upholstery textiles from local yarns.

WALLACE found a local weed that could be used in making heavy baskets and furniture. Hammarstrom devised a new kind of rattan furniture that blended old and new skills and materials.

The "fish trays," designed by Risley, carved from the wood of the acacia tree, were not only practical, but, their natural grain finish and clean-line look made them very attractive.

Murphy said, "What these artists did led to the fifth largest dollar earning export in the Philippines."

FOR A WHILE, the production of the trays was halted as the acacia wood became scarce. Then, a while back, Murphy wrote to one of the villages seeking a new source.

The Philippines has 7,000 islands. We found plenty on one of the small islands.

So, the trays are back in production and Mur-

phy is the local distributor.

And while she may have handled hundreds of them, this relatively simple piece of well-designed craftsmanship never ceases to amaze her.

SAYING THAT each tray is grooved just right on the underside so that it rests comfortably on the knees, she added, "The bamboo and silver can be placed in the right flange and there's three inches of flat area for a cup or a glass."

She noted the light sturdy tray helps buffet supper guests stay gracefully mobile so if they want to get up from a particular group, to find different conversation or a second helping, they can do so easily.

For the hostess, Murphy said entertaining is immediately simplified.

THE TRAYS ARE simply sponged off like wooden salad bowls, left out to dry and then stored, two by two, top sides facing with a rubber band to hold them. This keeps the food surfaces clean and ready to use. They are best stored outside, Murphy suggested the garage as a good place.

"Leave them outdoors," she said, "they like humidity. A dinner for 20 with these is easier than a formal dinner for four."

The trays are not kiln dried, as Risley directed. Murphy said Risley explained that wood cracks when the humidity is trying to escape. These are made as thin as possible to allow that to happen naturally and easily.



The Cranbrook group that went to the Philippines with Irene Murphy (second from left) and, with creativity and ingenuity, turned the economy around are (from left): Lysbeth Wallace, Murphy, John Risley, Mary Kring, Olaf Hammarstrom and Marianne Strenge.



In the modern world, eating from wood wasn't particularly popular until that innovative, internationally known American designer, Russell Wright, (also a friend of Irene Murphy's) introduced the wooden salad bowl in the 1930s. At left is a close-up photo of the fish tray, which is sculpted on the bottom so it fits comfortably on the knees.



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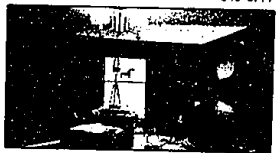
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