

Western Kentucky University

From the Selected Works of Sue Lynn McDaniel

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Dorothy Grider: Her Life In Pictures

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Dorothy Grider: Her Life in Pictures

Sue Lynn Stone McDaniel & Sandra Staebell



Dorothy Grider with her painting of Old Pete. Unless otherwise noted all photos for this article courtesy of the Special Collections Library, WKU.

Born in Bowling Green, Kentucky, to Rufus and Patricia (Fenwick) Grider, Dorothy Grider demonstrated an aptitude for art at an early age. Dorothy recalled that by age five she would lay on their front porch, drawing the comics from the Park City Daily News. Self-described as "determined about everything," this promising artist took advantage of her opportunities. While completing her education in the Bowling Green city schools (class of 1933), she registered for art classes taught by Mildred Curd Hawkins and Reed Potter and twice won state poster contests sponsored by the Kentucky Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs. Her submission in the 1930 competition won second place on the national level. Beginning at the age of 14, Grider spent her summers studying in the Madison Avenue penthouse of the Phoenix Art Institute of New York, whose faculty included Norman Rockwell and Franklin Booth.

Grider continued her artistic education while attending Western Kentucky State Teachers College. During her freshman year, she studied under Ivan Wilson and joined Mrs. Wells Covington and Mrs. J. A. Robenson at the latter's

studio in her Scottsville Road home to create oil portraits in four sittings. To win a scholarship from the Phoenix Art Institute for her fifth summer of study, Dorothy submitted a pencil sketch of an old rundown house in the country and a portrait of Pete, an aged African American man who worked for Colonel J. W. Kreuger. Determined not "to waste any more time," Dorothy completed her undergraduate degree in English from Western in three years (1936) and immediately accepted a summer position as Camp Bon Air's counselor responsible for arts, crafts and land sports.

Dorothy then moved to New York City, living at the Three Arts Club where all residents were female dancers, artists, or musicians. In return for working as an assistant monitor, Grider received free tuition for her studies at the Phoenix Art Institute. During this time, she paid her bills with commissions from freelance work, including illustrating beauty parlor posters, sheet music covers and Catholic holy cards. In 1939 Dorothy gave public school teaching a try by accepting a position in the mountains near Clinton, Tennessee. There a third grader told her she was "too small to be a teacher." Saving her money that school year, she returned to New York City. For the next two years, the U. S. Playing Card Company of Cincinnati, Ohio paid her a weekly salary of \$35 to illustrate playing cards. Outstanding among of her freelance assignments for this period is the October 1940 cover of *American Girl*, a Girl Scout publication. In 2009 Grider wrote: "That is what I wanted to do, magazine illustrations, but the camera came into vogue and photos took over."

Trading greeting cards for playing cards, Dorothy next accepted employment with Norcross Greeting Card Company. From stylized Christmas cards depicting Santa Claus, carolers, and altar boys to other occasion cards featuring cocker spaniels, a favored motif, Dorothy's talent brought smiles to recipients across America. When her ballerina design caught the eye of the Ballet Russe, it became their official Christmas card. During World War II, Dorothy created several cards in the Norcross series for American servicemen. An article in the December 1942 issue of *Charm* magazine recommended them as a first "maneuver" for securing a boyfriend's attention and heart. Likely inspired by a song popularized earlier that year by Glenn Miller and the Andrews Sisters, one of Grider's cards featured an attractive brunette under an apple tree with the wording "I won't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but you." Intended to be displayed, the card provided a small sheet of notepaper on which to write confidential messages that would be transported inside the card with only the words "To My Boy Friend In The Service" visible from the slot that held the notepaper. Friends in Bowling Green read all about

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Left: Dorothy with her nephew John Grider. Courtesy of John Grider. Right: A book of Elizabeth Taylor paper dolls designed by Grider.



it in the "What D'Ya Know by Linda Listens" column of the Park City Daily News.

Dorothy's big break occurred when a Norcross co-worker showed illustrations of her whimsical pink and blue dogs to an agent for children's book illustrators. Within the first year of utilizing an agent's services, Dorothy illustrated her first book, *The Little Rabbit Who Wanted Red Wings* (1945). Contracts with children's book publishing leaders Saalfield and Rand McNally led to as many as six book assignments at a time. Grider quickly became known for the accuracy of her work and believed "a natural curiosity into almost every subject and the ability to draw everything from fire engines to horses are the prime requisites of a good illustrator." Dorothy researched onsite at North American Van Lines, Inc., for *Moving Day*. The *Saturday Review of Literature* (May 11, 1946) recounted the visit to C. Scribner's Sons of the model for *The Biggety Chameleon*. Dorothy sometimes used family members and even herself as models for her illustrations. Readers familiar with *We Love Grandpa* (1956) are interested to learn that her cousin, John Grider of Bowling Green, served as her model with Dorothy aging him appropriately. *A Moth Is Born* (1968) is an excellent example of her later realistic work for the *Start Right – Elf Book* series by Rand McNally.

Throughout her career, Dorothy sought the opinions of her editors. After sending only payment for her illustrations for a filmstrip, the Director of Filmstrip Production for Family Filmstrips, Inc. wrote "I thought the absence of a letter would let you know that the drawings were wonderful, the new style for SHOPPING was great, and that you are way up at the top of our list!" He added: "On future illustrations, you might want to use a somewhat darker flesh tone. Some of the faces come through a little pale." In July 1948, Rand McNally's publicity director wrote: "With [My Truck Book, A Day on the Farm] and Tell Me About Prayer, you have really covered quite a varied field this year, haven't you? I hope you have enjoyed doing the books as much as we have enjoyed having them."

Although the publishing process seldom gave illustrators and authors direct communication, several writers contacted Dorothy. The author of *Animal Stories We Can Read* (1947) wanted Grider to illustrate all her future

publications with Rand McNally: "How did you read my mind? . . . My friends are so greatly pleased with them that they say the illustrations will sell the book." Grider gave the animals in her drawings personalities and the people sweet expressions. The author of *My Truck Book* (1948) evaluated her contribution as "a marvelous job." Despite all the praise, Dorothy sought perfection as her own toughest critic. Grider critiqued the book *Backyard Circus* (1967): "The colors are dirty and too heavy. The lettering on the cover is AWFUL. D."

Recognized as Rand McNally's most popular children's book illustrator, Dorothy's work also appears in coloring books, puzzles, paint sets, sheet music covers, family film strips, textbooks, and trace and color sets. Rand McNally, Saalfield, Artcraft, Whitman, C. Scribner's Sons, Dennison and Grosset & Dunlap all published her freelance work. Her commercial work included manufacturers' catalogs, magazine advertisements and real estate publications. Some of her paper dolls depicted film and television stars such as Liz Taylor, Kim Novak, Eve Arden, Shari Lewis, and Loretta Young as well as the casts of *The Partridge Family*, *The Nanny*, and *Lost Horizon*. In the late 1960s, Grider returned to designing for the United States Playing Card Company as a freelance illustrator, earning \$35 per design.

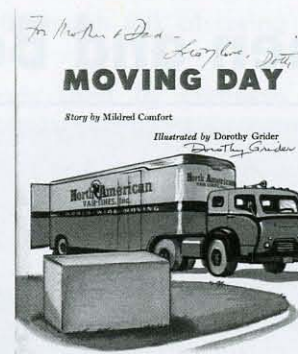
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An illustration from Dorothy's book *The Little Majorette*. Notice the W on the flag, harkening back to Dorothy's days as a student at WKU.



Grider at her work table.



An independent woman, Grider "wanted to travel, to write books, to illustrate." In 1950 she went to France on the commission she earned from designing a set of limerick-themed napkins for Dennison. Originally planning to have a two month vacation and armed with \$2000 in traveler's checks, the artist ultimately stayed for seven, completed several freelance assignments while in Paris, painted a portrait of the former model for Rodin's sculpture *The Kiss* (1889), studied art at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris and visited ten countries. Wherever she traveled that year, Dorothy photographed scenes that inspired her and found time to paint, draw, and sculpt. Other trips included Cuba, the American West, Mexico, Nassau, and numerous destinations across Europe.

Dorothy had diverse interests. While living in New York City, she enjoyed being a "first nighter" at theaters and was occasionally hired in the non-dancing role as a "super" or "walk-on" at the Metropolitan Opera. Grider turned her love of the opera and ballet into a children's book manuscript entitled "Bravo Goes to the Opera," but C. Scribner's Sons turned it down as too sophisticated for children. An avid and accomplished photographer, Dorothy enjoyed woodworking, gardening, and swimming. The latter was perhaps a nod to the time she spent at Limestone Lake, her parents' private fishing resort at the northwest edge of Bowling Green.

While Dorothy spent most of her life in the northeast, she remained connected to Kentucky, particularly to her hometown. Beginning in the 1930s, the Park City Daily News, most especially the "Suds" and "What D'Ya Know by Linda Listens" columns, routinely updated area residents on "Dottie" and her career. In the 1940s and 1950s, Louisville Courier Journal columnist Rhea Talley also reported on her

comings and goings. *The Little Majorette* (1959), which she wrote and illustrated, featured pennants and flags sporting a "W" in honor of her alma mater. From time to time, her work was exhibited in Kentucky, including four shows at her alma mater; in 1951 the Art Director of the Speed Museum in Louisville expressed interest in mounting a one woman show of her work. In the summer of 1957, Dorothy appeared on WKCT radio and signed books at David Helm's book and record store. When Miss Grider spoke to several hundred third graders gathered for a program at WKU's Kentucky Museum in 1987, she told them: "if you want to draw someone in blue jeans, put on your blue jeans and sit in front of a mirror."

Grider welcomed opportunities to exhibit her paintings and photographs. In 1937 the work of Dorothy Grider and Norman Rockwell hung in a New Rochelle, New York, public library. Dorothy exhibited her paintings at the Gramercy Galleries in New York City in 1946; one year later she had a one woman show at the Barbizon Hotel. In 1950, the Studio Guild of New York City selected Grider as one of four artists for a nationally traveling exhibition. The next year her watercolor of Notre Dame Cathedral hung at the Contemporary Galleries in New York City before being acquired by The Collectors of American Art. Dorothy's most recent show was in 2011.

Dorothy Grider passed away on February 18, 2012, but leaves an enduring legacy. As the illustrator of more than 150 titles, her work is available today in more than 200 libraries around the world, with the most inclusive collection residing at the WKU Special Collections Library and the Kentucky Museum. Over the years, Grider and her estate have donated to WKU more than 300 story, coloring and activity books; 75 greeting cards; 70 paintings and drawings; 20 paper doll sets; 20 playing card designs; and nine puzzles. Readers interested in her work and career can see an exhibit of her paintings, a partial recreation of her studio, and a sampling of her illustrations in a recently opened exhibit, *Dorothy Grider: Selected Works*, at the Kentucky Museum, WKU. Gallery hours are 9 am to 4 pm Monday through Saturday. For items not currently on display, utilize KenCat, the online catalog accessible from the WKU Libraries homepage www.wku.edu/library, to identify story books and other paper items accessible in the Special Collections Library. Summer research room hours are from 9 am to 4 pm, Monday through Thursday, and 9 to 12 noon on Friday; with 9-4 Monday through Saturday hours resuming on August 13, 2012. ▲

"When you strip away the rhetoric, preservation is simply having the good sense to hold on to things that are well designed, that link us with our past in a meaningful way, and that have plenty of good use left in them."

– Richard Moe, Former executive director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation