



By Jerry Sowden

Betty Stempin of Oil City (left) and Mary McElhattan of Franklin separate and organize wooden blocks by color and shape to make several wooden building block toy trains.

Retired 'elves' busy making toys at Franklin Industrial Complex

By TOM VANBUREN
Staff writer

Not all the toys in Venango County are coming from the North Pole this Christmas.

About 3,300 miles from Santa's Arctic abode is an entirely different kind of workshop — one tucked away in a dark corner of the Franklin Industrial Complex, down a dark brick pathway lined with stacks of lumber, sealed off from the deafening crash of rebar being rolled and collected into massive bundles.

It's the workspace of the Venango Toymakers, a non-profit organization that crafts handmade toys for area children. And with the holiday rush upon them, volunteers are working to design, saw, sand, paint and distribute as many toys as possible before Christmas.

"It's fun," said member Betty Stempin of Oil City. "We never know what we're going to make next."



Stempin is working alongside Mary McElhattan of Franklin, assembling toy trains out of brightly colored wooden blocks. They're surrounded by shelves carefully packed with wooden, hand-painted toys — helicopters, dinosaurs, trucks, jewelry boxes, school buses, space shuttles, airplanes and more.

The organization has recently given away about 1,000 toys and predicts it will donate at least 1,000 more this season.

"Simplicity — sometimes makes the best toys," said longtime member Gene Gibbs.

But then, this operation of about 20 members — all retirees — is anything but simple.

It begins in the wood shop room, where Gibbs and other men are working with quiet determination to cut out stenciled shapes. They have 200 clowns to construct for the Pennsylvania Head

Start Association — clowns that right now are little more than designs penciled on lumber and a box of misshapen ovals that will become their feet.

Nearly all the wood is donated by Weyerhaeuser in Titusville. Toymakers owns all of its own supplies — workbenches and cabinets stocked with table saws, power drills and sanders.



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James Stoops (left) of Franklin and William Clyde of Oil City make the feet and push poles for several wooden walking duck toys.

'Every one of us looks forward to coming in'

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The cut and sanded parts move into another room, where women sit and paint wooden mallards at a table crowded with brushes, screwdrivers, sponges and dozens of paint bottles. One of the women is Judy Neidich of Franklin, her fingers speckled with fresh paint.

"I look forward to this," she said. "I get to be creative."

Neidich, a painter for more than 40 years, relishes the opportunity to pursue her lifelong interest while helping others — many of whom don't necessarily join Venango Toymakers with any experience.

"This is play work for me," she said. "Most everybody that walks through that door doesn't know anything about painting. But these girls are

coming along fabulously."

In a small adjacent room, more women work at a sewing machine, preparing patterns for stuffed kittens. Toymakers doesn't only furnish charitable organizations like Head Start, Community Services and the Salvation Army with toys for children — they also help groups like the Humane Society, for which they're using spare fabric to fashion blankets for unadopted animals.

The history of the organization is unclear. It began in 1983, according to its Web site, and various newspaper articles claim inception years as early as 1973 and as late as 1992. Even nine-year member Don Smith of Oil City, who has been with Toymakers since its humble years in the basement of the 13th Street Salvation Army in Franklin, isn't sure,

and neither is Gibbs.

Maybe, though, it doesn't really matter how long the group has been around. Perhaps it's enough to consider it as timelessly charming as the thousands of toys it produces year after year. In that back room in the industrial complex, surrounded by buckets of colored wooden blocks and thank-you-cards from local children, the men and women of Venango Toymakers are losing track of the time by having fun while making a positive impact in their community.

"This is recreation," said Stempin, painting a toy duck. "Every one of us looks forward to coming in."

Venango Toymakers meets from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tuesdays. Individuals interested in joining can reach Gibbs at 437-7793.