Richard Henderson Wiley (1919-2013)

By Ulrich H. Hardt

Richard Henderson Wiley, one of Oregon’s most successful commercial artists, is best known by
millions of people for his illustrations of the Dick and Jane reading series, published by Scott,
Foresman & Co.

Richard Wiley was born July 26, 1919, in Lynchburg, Virginia, the youngest of five children of Edgar
Clarence and Maud Stanley Wiley. He showed artistic interest early, and his high school art teacher
especially encouraged him. Wiley enrolled at Syracuse University College of Fine Arts, but his
education was interrupted by military service. Following basic training at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, he
was assigned to the 29th Topographic Engineer Battalion, where his artistic talent was put to work
drawing topographic maps and promotional posters. He also received valuable photography
training, something that stood him in good stead later in his professional career when he
photographed models for his drawings.

Wiley was stationed in Portland during World War II, working out of Glenhaven Elementary School
on N.E. 82nd and Tillamook Streets. During his off hours, he and his Portland friend, Jack Loomis,
worked for Associated Designers studio downtown. When he was discharged from the army in
1946, Wiley returned to Portland and joined the studio fulltime, beginning his life-long work as a
free-lance illustrator. He met his wife, Lois Wilson, at the studio. His first job was drawing an
advertisement of men’s hats for Lipman, Wolfe & Co. department store; he would later work for
Oregon clothing giants Jantzen, Pendleton, and White Stag.

In 1960, when editors for Scott, Foresman were looking for a new illustrator for their Dick and Jane
series, they remembered seeing a Wiley drawing. They got in touch with a New York agent to help
find him, and Wiley met with the original Dick and Jane illustrator to discuss the work. For a
freelance commercial artist, it was a singular opportunity. Wiley now had an agent in New York and
a publisher in Chicago—and not just any publisher. The reading series was used in four-fifths of the
nation’s schools and was read by eighty-five million American children from 1930 to 1965.

When Wiley took over the illustrations in 1960, he was the only artist for the Sally, Dick, and Jane
pre-primers (We Look and See, and so forth), junior primers (Guess Who), and primers (Fun with
Dick and Jane). He photographed children from Lakewood Elementary School in Lake Oswego and
used the photos, as well as his wife Lois and their three children, as models. His illustrations not
only appeared in the reading series but also on posters, calendars, magnets, and shirts.

Wiley was particularly proud that he included African American characters in the book series in the
early 1960s: Mike, his twin sisters Pam and Penny, and their parents (Fun with Our Friends). When
the characters were used to teach subjects such as health and hygiene (Good Times with Our
Friends), a team of illustrators drew different sections of the book. Wiley worked with Ellen Segner,
Keith Ward, and Robert Childress.

Since the early 1930s, Dick and Jane, their families, friends, and pets entered the popular culture
as symbols of childhood, and the books became synonymous with learning to read using the
look-and-say or whole-word method. The popularity of Dick and Jane readers declined as an
emphasis on phonics increased, and the nostalgic American landscape of white picket fences in the
suburbs that Wiley had illustrated waned.


Sources

Gray, William S., and Dorothy Horton. On Their Own in Reading: How to Give Children
