

# POPULIST MECHANICS

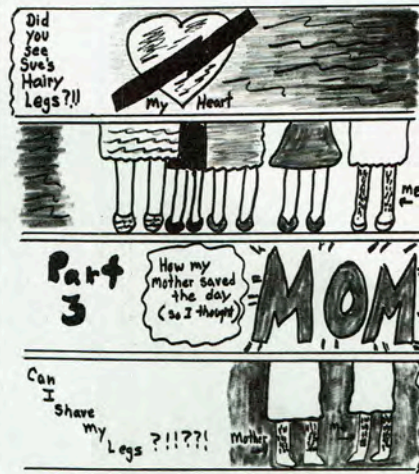
## WHAT'S A CRANKIE?

Cranky is a frame of mind, but a *crankie* is something else again; it is a homemade storytelling device very much like a paper television. It gets its name from a scroll of paper that is *cranked* from left to right, pulling the pictures, words, shapes, and forms painted on it across the screen.

The first crankie I ever saw was made by a friend of mine to portray an antiwar story. She didn't consider herself an artist and drew stick figures with a black-ink felt marker. I was surprised by the way the simple drawings conveyed her story so effectively. Then I began to think about this ingenious device—and some of its possible uses for teaching and learning, for political organizing and communication, and for expressing one's own feelings and sharing them with others.

The first crankie I ever made was based on one such expression of feeling: the shame-filled incident that forced me to shave my legs in the eighth grade. As I drew, my feelings of pain and sadness were spontaneously and effectively transformed into colors and shapes. Along with the stick figures that told the story, I found that my bad feelings became huge gray masses, sad feelings became tear-drops, and happiness had to be splashes of bright colors. Because the paper was on a continuous roll, the end of one pic-

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An excerpt from the "hairy legs" crankie

ture became the beginning of the next; that is, the same figure could be in two situations—at the right in one and at the left in the other.

It all worked so well that, for the past two years, I have been performing my "hairy legs" crankie for college students and feminist groups. On each occasion the audience, totally unfamiliar with crankies, reacted with enthusiasm and understanding (perhaps even more so because of the obvious amateurishness of the drawings).

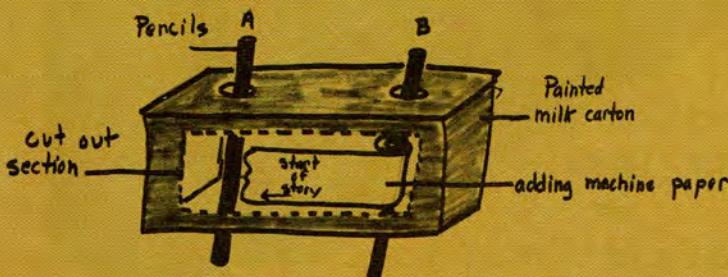
Since I've become a "crankie crank," I've seen crankies performing their magic in many situations. In consciousness-raising groups, for example, women who are trying to share life experiences have used crankies to express individual feelings and also to express shared feelings when the whole group creates one together.

My theater group illustrated poetry with crankies. For a poem about the struggles of women throughout history, I set the verses to music, transferred the notes to a crankie roll, and we all sang along as the crankie revolved. In fact, we were so turned on by the form that we created a human crankie using our bodies as the materials.

A woman's group from San Francisco mounted a large crankie on a stepladder (for greater visibility) and used it for street theater. Their theme was the "herstory" of women; while one woman operated the crankie, another narrated. Because this crankie was large and portable, the women were able to reach greater numbers of people. (For information about their crankie, write to The Woman's Street Theater, Peoples Press, 968 Valencia St., San Francisco, Calif. 94110.)

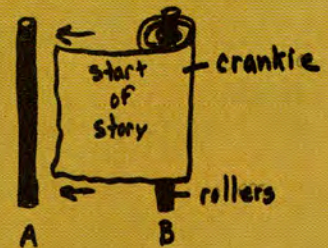
The teaching possibilities of the crankie are unlimited. A friend of mine worked with an after-school program in Harlem

Milk-Carton Crankie Frame



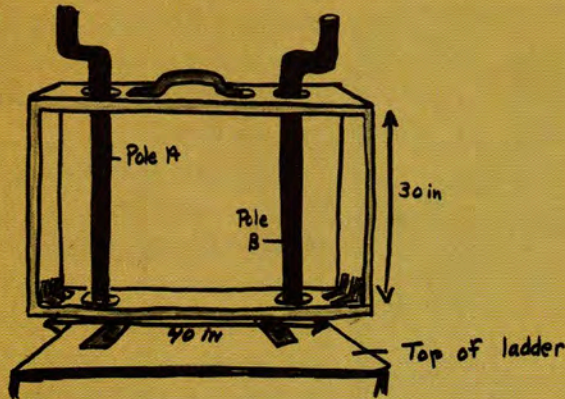
A painted milk carton with the front cut out and with pencils for turners makes a good frame for an adding-machine paper crankie.

Crankie Without a Frame



An adequate margin should be left at both ends of the story to allow for tape and leverage. Attach the end of the story to pole B and roll back to the beginning. Then attach the front end to pole A.

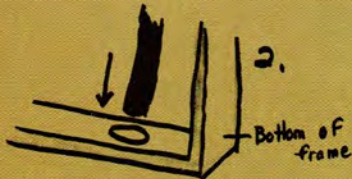
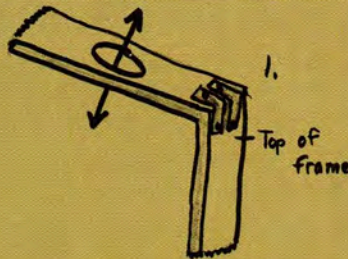
Wooden Crankie Frame



The size of the crankie is usually determined by the width of the paper roll. The wooden frame should be at least 2 inches higher than the width of the paper roll. To attach the paper to this frame, wind the end of the story around a cardboard tube and roll back to the beginning, attaching the beginning to pole A. Slip pole B through the cardboard tube.

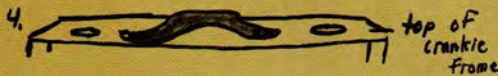
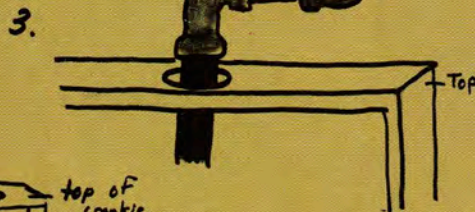
Building the Frame

1. Use clear pine board or any suitable substitute for the frame and put iron braces in the corners for stability. Make holes in the corners for the rollers. The rollers should be at least 2 inches higher than the frame. The rollers can be wooden or cardboard.



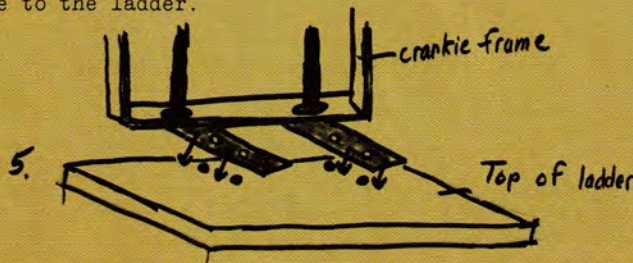
2. Cut shallow holes in bottom board for rollers (poles) to rest in.

3. Construct the crankie handles from one-inch dowels, using copper tubing elbows for the angles.



4. Attach handle for easy carrying.

5. To attach crankie to ladder -- One way is to attach metal braces to bottom of crankie box, drill holes for screws in metal braces and ladder, and bolt the brace to the ladder.



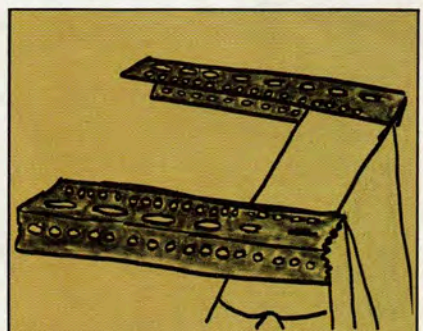
and introduced the class to storytelling through milk-carton crankies (illustrated here). The children in the class had great fun making their own, and finally put on a performance for their parents.

Crankies can be made in any size with almost any kind of paper. I have used adding-machine paper, which is plentiful and cheap. A painted milk carton with the front cut out and with pencils for turners makes a good frame for an adding-machine-paper crankie. For larger crankies, I prefer plain white shelfpaper in rolls. Large rolls are available in hardware stores; thicker, supersize rolls can be found in art supply stores. Pencils, pens, crayons, ink felt markers, fast-drying watercolor paints and acrylics are excellent drawing tools. Bright-colored Con-Tact paper and stickers like gold stars work fine to illustrate high points in your crankie.

A crankie frame is not a necessity—you can improvise by attaching the paper to pencils or cylinders and rolling the crankie by hand. A frame, however, does make frequent showings easier.

It all sounds so simple, almost childish, that until you are actually scribbling or cranking away, you cannot anticipate how effectively the most intense and personal stories are reduced to a simple clarity that gets right to the heart of the matter.

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6. Another way is to attach 2 metal braces at the top of the stepladder to extend out to the audience. Drill 4 holes through bottom board of the crankie and bolt the crankie to the braces.