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**Churchill Weavers
80 Years of American Handweaving**

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Figure 1 Eleanor Churchill weaving on a Churchill loom.

Churchill Weavers is a handweaving business that has been in operation in Berea, Kentucky, for over 80 years. In the spring of 2003 Ginny Daley, then archivist for the Southern Highlands Handicraft Guild of Asheville, North Carolina, stood before a group of people assembled in the basement of Churchill Weavers, explaining the work she had done. Over the last year she had reboxed, arranged, and catalogued the history of Churchill Weavers. On several long tables Ginny displayed items from Churchill's past and talked of the richness of the objects and what might be learned from them.

During its long history Churchill had saved a sample for each production item in their line. Originally when told of this, I thought they meant a swatch of material, but Churchill stored a whole piece of everything they made in cardboard gift boxes. On the inside lid was written information on the weave structure, yarn type, colorways, and other production details. In Churchill's un-air-conditioned basement these boxes accumulated on rough wooden shelves, generally stored by year of production. Until Ginny tackled the cataloguing job, no way existed to unlock the secrets of these boxes without opening the lid and peering inside. She also discovered other physical records of the business: design experiments, paper patterns for constructed items, colorway swatches, weaving patterns, and specialty order samples. This collection resulted from the precision of a weaver that

keeps things in straight lines, combined with the instincts of a packrat that holds onto stuff because of an unknown but suspected value.

Churchill Weavers survived as a handweaving business for over 80 years because it has continually offered good design and good quality in an array of items, under good management, with good marketing. While management and marketing hold the keys to success, the starting point is a good product design.

From the beginning of the business, Churchill endeavored to create its own market niche and has succeeded in making a name for itself, especially in small blankets or couch throws. Also, baby blankets consistently proved a major seller. As any handweaving business, Churchill primarily pursued products that required minimal finishing, such as scarves, shawls, napkins, placemats, and tablecloths. They concentrated more on blankets, scarves, and shawls, rather than the household items that were the mainstay of the other Appalachian handweaving centers.

During the formative years, Churchill produced a wide variety of items. In constructed items, they produced purses and bags, in a wide variety of designs for daily use and for special occasions. Although at different times in their history, clothing has entered their line, it usually occurred as an accent or accessory item. Men's neckties, both straight and bow, could be found in the product line until the recent years. The designs of the neckties attest to the changing of fashion in this standard of men's apparel. Supposedly to capture the gift market, boxed sets have been offered: a necktie and matching handkerchief, a coordinated clutch with scarf, and the tablecloth with carrying case. By 1940 the Churchill Weavers made baby blankets in 60 different styles, not counting the color selections.¹ Baby blankets often had embroidered designs, but added embellishments were not used with other items.



Figure 3 Some baby items produced by Churchill Weavers over their long history.

¹ "Catalog Price List -- Retail." Churchill Weavers, [1940]. Churchill Weavers Archives, Berea, KY.

Because handweaving is labor intensive, most handweaving businesses have relied on the quickest and easiest weave structure—plain weave. When using this simple structure, the major design elements are pretty colors and interesting yarns. Churchill certainly had its share of plain weave in nice colors and fancy yarns, but they have also employed a variety of weave structures for their items. However, the relatively simple twill structure in different types or twill combined with plain weave comprised the next most used interlacement. Many different weave structures have been used in their baby blankets, which employ a surprising diversity that includes decorative twills, Ms and Os, and a variety of lace weaves.

Although Churchill has never manufactured reproduction textiles, they have used traditional overshot in some household products. While some small blankets might have harkened to the Kentucky coverlet past, others displayed a contemporary use of color and even an op art pattern. In 1930 an elegantly produced 16 page catalogue, “Churchill Hand-woven Covers,” presented many different types of blankets, throws, and baby blankets. A photograph of each piece accompanied a carefully worded descriptive paragraph. One item, the Churchill “Kivverlet,” depicted a small continuous overshot pattern adapted from “the historic patterns of the Kentucky mountain weavers.”² The large 75" x 108" spread, woven in one piece on a wide loom, avoided sewing two sections together as in traditional coverlets made on narrow looms.

Eleanor Churchill (fig. 1) started out as the designer, later employing others for that position. However, any new additions to the production line always garnered ample suggestions and, of course, final approval, from her.³ The Churchill designers have never resorted to repeating themselves, but have innovatively used the elements of weaving—color, pattern, and texture—to continually add new items. Their use of color has always been good, although some color choices definitely reflect the period of their use. Designers always sought good quality yarns in an array of types and fibers. While Churchill became known for high quality wools, they by no means confined themselves to that fiber. While specializing in natural fibers, some synthetics or man-made fibers creep in, especially in the fancy yarns. The current very popular throws use rayon chenille yarns.

Because of the adaptability of Churchill, others sought out the company with special requests. Some limited production has been an extension of their own product line and probably even initialed by the sales department. More investigation needs to be done to determine who approached who in the case of the special designed blankets made for the Greyhound Scenicruser or Johnny Carson Productions. Other commissions definitely did not originate with Churchill, such as the fabric woven for the first astronauts’ suits or the material used in a major installation piece by artist Gerhardt Knodel.

The story of how Churchill Weavers started is involved and not complete. Berea, Kentucky, is known primarily as the home of Berea College, which dates from the middle 1800s. The school started as an integrated institution and evolved into one servicing Appalachian youth. The school charges students no tuition and requires work for a set

² *Churchill Hand-Woven Covers*. Berea, KY: Churchill Weavers, 1930:11. Churchill Weavers Archives, Berea, KY.

³ Bellando, Lila. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Berea, KY, 17 May 1993 and 15 June 1993.

number of hours a week to cover education costs. Some of the labor choices are in crafts industries, including weaving.

When William J. Hutchins assumed the presidency of the Berea College in 1920, he convinced his Oberlin, Ohio, boyhood neighbor, David Carroll Churchill (fig. 2) to join him in the move to Kentucky. Churchill took over as physics professor and auto mechanics teacher with the prospect of developing an engineering department. After growing up in an education-oriented family in Oberlin, D. C. Churchill received his higher education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His scientist father stressed knowing the reasons behind why things worked. At a young age Carroll showed exceptional talents as an engineer and inventor, with many anticipating a brilliant scientific career for him. Instead he fell under the influence of his mother and a young woman, who later became his wife, and dedicated his life to Christian service. As a Congregational missionary in India, he brought to bear all of his technical knowledge to found and administer the American Deccan Institute in Ahmednagar. The institute trained young men in marketable skills, such as carpentry, blacksmithing, and machine repair.⁴



Figure 2 David Carroll Churchill in the basement of Churchill Weavers, working on improvements to his redesigned fly-shuttle loom.

While working in India, Churchill turned his attentions to an analysis of the handweaving industry, which employed more people than any other profession other than agriculture. In his consideration of all aspects of the weaving trade, Churchill traveled to many countries studying both domestic and small commercial handloom industries. He concluded that industrial mechanization and consolidating the household industries into

⁴ Chamberlain, Ernest Barrett. *The Churchills of Oberlin*. Oberlin, OH: The Ohio Historical and Improvement Organization, 1965.

factories would not benefit the workers. He proceeded on the premise that improving the efficiency of the small handloom operations offered the greatest flexibility and fulfilling lifestyles for the weavers. Combining his careful analysis of weaving with his knowledge of mechanics, he redesigned the fly-shuttle loom, adding several innovations that allowed the weaver to significantly increase production. At the Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition of the India National Congress in Bombay in 1904, he won a first place gold medal in the open competition for his loom adaptations.⁵

Two years after the death of his first wife, Carroll married Anna Eleanor Franzen on May 5, 1914. This wedding took place in India, where Eleanor directed a boys' school. Born in Connecticut, the daughter of a Swedish Lutheran minister, Eleanor graduated from Wellesley College.⁶ When World War I precipitated a furlough from missionary work, D. C. returned to Ohio with his family. Contributing to the war effort, Churchill worked for the Garford Manufacturing Co. of Elyria, Ohio, inventing the retractable landing gear for airplanes, among other aviation improvements. The Churchill family consisted of four children, two boys from the first marriage and two others from the second. They moved from Ohio to Kentucky in 1920, when Carroll assumed the Berea College position.⁷

The final report that Churchill submitted to President Hutchins after two years of teaching at Berea detailed his frustrated attempts to grapple with students who had little science background. He complained that his physics students preferred memorizing facts over attempting to understand basic concepts. He described his persistence in teaching as, "I never willingly let a pupil go until he understands what I am driving at." Using his own tools, D. C. taught an automobile mechanics class where he demanded so much of the students that only the ambitious few stuck with the course until the end.⁸ Churchill's standards proved too high for most of the inadequately prepared mountain students.

When Churchill left Berea College in 1922 the official reason was the failure of the school to commit resources for an engineering department. Although true, another decision by the college's ruling Prudential Committee factored very strongly into the decision. That year the Trustees Committee on Weaving issued a new policy: "We heartily endorse the attitude of the Prudential Committee in its refusal to permit any enterprise to be carried on by a commissioned worker for private profit during the school year. The manufacture of any product by a commissioned worker may be carried on only with the consent of the Prudential Committee. The Prudential Committee shall have authority to fix conditions of such manufacture, and the compensation if any." In this edict the term "commissioned worker" was substituted for "Churchill" which appeared in the original draft version. The policy meant to curtail Churchill's plans to manufacture the

⁵ Raine, James Watt. *Have They Found Aladdin's Lamp*. Berea, KY: Churchill Weavers, [1926]. Churchill Weavers Archives, Berea, KY.

⁶ "Churchill Weavers Founders." [1964]. Churchill Weavers Archives, Berea, KY.

⁷ Sinks, Alfred H. "Wizard of the Hand Loom." *Saturday Evening Post*, 21 February 1948: 30-33 and 122-24.

⁸ Churchill, David Carroll. "Final Report of Physics and Auto Mechanics." Berea, KY: Berea College, 1922. Special Collections, Hutchins Library, Berea College, Berea, KY.

fly-shuttle loom he had designed during his missionary service.⁹ Even though the original employment agreement with D. C. Churchill permitted him to teach part-time while pursuing his scientific interests, in reality the college could not tolerate dual loyalties. With this rather heavy handed policy, the college nipped in the bud the manufacture of the improved handloom and generated competition for the college's own weaving industry.

At almost fifty years old, Carroll Churchill embarked on a new career. He never recorded his actual reasons for staying in Berea and starting the handloom weaving business. When teaching failed to offer sufficient scope for his talents, he could have sought employment in many industries where his scientific knowledge and problem solving abilities would have been welcome. No doubt Eleanor figured prominently into the decision to remain in Berea. Churchill had made a small loom for his wife and she wove woolen scarves in their small college quarters.¹⁰ She found personal enjoyment in weaving, showing a real flare for design.

Weaving production combined the interests of both husband and wife. D. C. switched from the idea of manufacturing looms for others to making looms for use in this new family venture. Drawing on their missionary background, they ascribed the benevolent desire of providing employment for this area of Kentucky as a rationale for their business venture.

Each of the Churchills soon developed a particular niche in the business. Given the opportunity, Eleanor exhibited remarkable management skills. D. C. evaluated jobs and conceptualized them for efficiency, departmentalizing the weaving operations. Both men and women found employment as weavers, warpers, threaders, bobbin winders, mechanics, finishers, and packers. The weavers worked at fly-shuttle looms made by Carroll similar to those he had made in India. From his workroom in the basement of their building D. C. worked constantly, perfecting new devices to minimize stress on the worker while maximizing output in the many different steps of the weaving process.¹¹

Beginning with nothing in 1922, the business grew rapidly. From a very small shed on the edge of Berea, the Churchill Weavers building complex grew—as new wings were added, the center rapidly became a large maze of activity. In a 1948 article, the *Saturday Evening Post* romanticized Churchill's operations: "Here the flying shuttle of each loom follows the natural body rhythm of the weaver. Rhythm is the thing in hand weaving -- rhythm not only of the hands but of the feet, for the loom has foot pedals much like those on a pipe organ. The whole coordinated series of movements becomes the pattern of the finished fabric. It is a process which leads readily into song, real mountain tunes, like Possum up a Gum Stump or Sugar in the Gourd." Within twenty-five years the business

⁹ Hutchins, William. Report of Trustees' Committee on Weaving, [1922]. Special Collections, Hutchins Library, Berea College, Berea, KY.

¹⁰ *The Churchill Loom House: By the Side of the Road*. Berea: Churchill Weavers, [1930]. Churchill Weavers Archives, Berea, KY.

¹¹ Bellando, Lila. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Berea, KY, 17 May 1993 and 15 June 1993.

expanded to a work force of 150 people, grossing over \$500,000.00 a year.¹² Most of the employees worked in the large rambling building, but some finished products at home.

The fly-shuttle loom redesigned by D. C. Churchill operated by foot-power and employed a counter-balance mechanism for operating the harnesses. The weaver activated the fly-shuttle mechanism by pulling an overhead cord, propelling the shuttle through the open shed with a spring device. Churchill's adaptation utilized leather straps that allowed the weaver to pull straight down on the fly-shuttle cord, rather than jerking from side to side. The operation of weaving proceeded in the same manner as other handweaving, with muscle power activating the harnesses and beating the weft into place. Churchill redesigned some parts of his loom to reduce stress on the weaver.

Real innovation came in the organization of the Churchill weaving operation. They departmentalized the process of warping the loom, breaking it into different tasks that could be carried on independently. Parts of the loom detached and then could be reassembled into position for weaving. The back beam came off the loom to receive the warp and then heddles could be threaded and dropped back into the loom structure. This cut the downtime of a loom while increasing the efficiency of winding on the warp and threading the heddles. Although D. C. tinkered with the process, setting up the loom has remained amazingly standard throughout the history of Churchill Weavers.

In the early part of the twentieth century many weaving centers started in remote places in the Appalachian Mountains as a way to help women earn money.¹³ The other weaving centers criticized Churchill's fly-shuttle weaving, claiming that the speed of weaving sacrificed control. La Delle Allen of Arrowcraft in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, tried to explain the differences between their conventional loom weaving and the fly-shuttle weaving: "Standardization in weaving tends to give inferior products. ... There is a lack of feeling in fly shuttle weaving, that indefinable something called art, which can be produced only by the real artist and craftsman."¹⁴ With these subtle distinctions, she placed the burden of discerning differences on the consumer: "There is a difference in the two kinds of weaving which one with an appreciation of art and a discriminating taste recognizes." From examining a product, there is no way to definitively identify the type of loom that produced it. The fly-shuttle lends itself to one-shuttle weave structures with few weft changes. Therefore the real difference in weaving occurs in the type of products chosen for production rather than in discernable quality.

As Churchill Weavers grew, the weaving center at Berea College viewed this competition with concern. Anna Ernberg, the Director of the Fireside Industries, considered the Churchill establishment "a factory" and the products of the fly-shuttle loom not authentic handweaving. Ernberg expressed the real pressure felt by the Fireside Industries in her 1926 final report to the college's president: "One comparison will show the difference in cost of production. We are both weaving the kind of scarfs or shawls that women wear these days. On the Churchill looms a girl can make 40 to 50 in a day

¹² Sinks, Alfred H. "Wizard of the Hand Loom." *Saturday Evening Post*, 21 February 1948: 30-33 and 122-24.

¹³ Alvic, Philis. *Weavers of the Southern Highlands*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2003.

¹⁴ Allen, La Delle. "Hand Loom and Fly Shuttle Weaving." *The Arrow*, February 1932: 476.

and she is paid ten cents apiece. One of our girls can make no more than one in two hours and it is only after a good deal of training that she can do it nice and evenly. She is paid 14 cents to 15 cents per hour. Their scarfs are, as a rule, more scanty than ours, but they sell them at as good a price as we ask and claim them to be handwoven.”¹⁵ While the college may have felt that the two competed for the same buyer, in reality each had found separate markets.

The criticism that the products from the fly-shuttle loom were not 'handwoven' hurt both Churchill's pride and marketing strategies. They reacted to this accusation by including a detailed explanation of their weaving process in their brochures and by opening their Berea production facility to tours. In earlier years of the business, Churchill had guarded operating secrets, not allowing others even to see his innovations for the fly-shuttle loom. To counteract the criticism “that fabrics were not really handwoven,” Churchill Weavers responded, “by keeping the Loom Room open to the public and invited visitors to watch the work being done.”¹⁶ The tours took the public throughout their entire Berea establishment, viewing warp preparation, the actual weaving room, and the fabric finishing.¹⁷ Cameras have never been allowed inside the weaving room.

Arrowcraft and Berea College successfully kept Churchill Weavers from joining Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, the organization founded to promote and market mountain crafts. They based the rejection on the assumed inferiority of the fly-shuttle products. The Southern Highland Handicraft Guild denied Churchill membership, but they were accepted into the Tennessee Valley Authority's Southern Highlanders. These two very similarly named organizations had very similar missions and shared many of the same members. The two groups worked jointly on several promotional activities and one of the Churchills' sons, Charles, who had joined the business, worked with the Guild on several of these projects. In 1951 after several years of negotiations, Southern Highlanders merged with the Southern Highlands Handicraft Guild keeping the latter's name and absorbing all their members. Even when the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild honored Eleanor Churchill with a life membership, she never quite forgave the earlier slight.¹⁸ In recent years, the current owners of Churchill Weavers have taken an active part in the Southern Highland Guild operations, even serving on the governing Board.

From its inception Churchill Weavers developed an aggressive marketing strategy. Armed with a suitcase filled with her weaving, Eleanor Churchill knocked on the doors of big city department store buyers. Unlike many of mountain weaving centers, Churchill understood the difference between retail and wholesale pricing. Churchill's cost structure

¹⁵ Ernberg, Anna. “Report of the Fireside Industries.” Berea College, 1926. Special Collections, Hutchins Library, Berea College, Berea, KY.

¹⁶ Churchill, E.F. “Why Buy Handweaving?” *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*, April 1954, 398-9 and 413. and *A Tour and Background of Churchill Weavers*. Berea, KY: Churchill Weavers, [1954?]. Churchill Weavers Archives, Berea, KY.

¹⁷ *The Churchill Loom House: By the Side of the Road*. Berea: Churchill Weavers, [1930]. Churchill Weavers Archives, Berea, KY.

¹⁸ Barker, Garry. *The Handcraft Revival in Southern Appalachia, 1930 -- 1990*. 1st ed. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991: 23.

calculated expenses and profit for wholesale prices that allowed a standard markup for retail, making marketing to gift shops and department stores feasible.

Churchill Weavers also developed their own on-site shop, selling retail to people who toured their facilities. This venture into retail sales led to opening direct sales stores in Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Los Angeles.

While the Appalachian Mountain weaving centers sold through a women's network and essentially sold retail at what should have been their wholesale prices, they criticized Churchill for undercutting their prices. A Churchill Weavers 1928 "Trade Price List" indicated scarves priced between \$1.50 and \$2.40. With the standard retail mark-up, the scarves would have sold for \$3.00 to \$4.80. The Southern Highland Handicraft Guild members' scarves ranged between \$.60 to \$3.00, negating the assertion that Churchill sold for less than the mountain weaving centers. In 1933 several different mountain weaving centers produced baby blankets ranging from \$5.00 to \$8.50. During that same period, Churchill Weavers retailed a plain baby blanket for \$2.75 with larger more elaborate ones costing up to \$7.75, and the top of the line with embroidered designs retailing for \$10.00.¹⁹ Even when selling through shops that took their profits, Churchill competed within a comparable price range, not substantially lower than the weaving centers.

The *Saturday Evening Post* article about the Churchill operation commented on the marketing of mountain handweaving: "Do-gooders peddled the scanty output in cities much as they would solicit charitable contributions, painting a quaint picture of grandmaw weaving away in her backwoods shack. To Churchill, all this was sentimental nonsense. Unless hill people could sell their weaving on its merits and make a full-time living out of it, the art was doomed."²⁰ With this harsh criticism, the author predicted what the future brought—the success of Churchill and the demise of most of the other mountain weaving centers.

Over the last twenty-five years, Churchill Weavers has continued a multi-pronged marketing strategy. Churchill still has products placed in fine specialty stores and still maintains both tours and the retail sales store in Berea. As opportunities have expanded through the crafts community, Churchill exhibits at several craft fairs each year, selling both wholesale and retail.

Eleanor had not been pleased with the way her sons ran the business and regained control of the company. In 1973, Eleanor Churchill decided that Lila and Richard Bellando would carry on the business. Both Berea College graduates, Lila worked as a public school art teacher, while Rick organized the fair for the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen as their only employee. When this young couple refused Eleanor's first offer to purchase the business, she insisted. She had watched both of them and

¹⁹ The Churchill Weavers: Trade Price List. Berea, KY: Churchill Weavers, 1928., A Catalogue of Mountain Handicrafts by Members of the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild: American Federation of Arts, 1933., and Churchill Hand-Woven Covers. Berea, KY: Churchill Weavers, 1930: 12-14. Churchill Weavers Archives, Berea, KY.

²⁰ Sinks, Alfred H. "Wizard of the Hand Loom." *Saturday Evening Post*, 21 February 1948: 30-33 and 122-24.

determined that they would be the ones to carry on her business. She sweetened the deal considerably, allowing the Bellandos with no personal capital to take over.²¹

Rick and Lila found settled into their own parts of the business much in the way the Churchill had before them, drawing on their personal skills, some of which they didn't know they possessed. Lila manages the staff and production, while Rick handles advertising and marketing. Their daughter Tara now participates in the business, in the areas of design and marketing.

Churchill Weavers has succeeded as a business because they have always offered quality products, had good management, and aggressively marketed in a variety of venues. Churchill has also been a leader in crafts development in Kentucky and the region, as a consultant to many projects and active member of many organizations.

²¹ Bellando, Lila. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Berea, KY, 17 May 1993 and 15 June 1993.