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EC5558 Appreciating Grandmother's Handiwork

Grace Margaret Morgan

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Nebraska
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK
IN AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS
1930 U. of N. Agr. College & U. S. Dept. of Agr. Cooperating Extension
W. H. Brokaw, Director, Lincoln Circular
5558

APPRECIATING GRANDMOTHERS' HANDIWORK
Grace Margaret Morton

A short while ago our University Department of Home Economics held an exhibition of lovely hand woven things, which came from Berea, Kentucky. There were luncheon sets, towels, table scarfs, rugs, coverlets, dress patterns, etc., all made by the mountain women in their own homes. Our students and Lincoln friends were so fascinated by them that we began to wonder if many rural club women in Nebraska would be interested in learning more about the textile handicrafts of our grandmothers' time. Indeed this paper is written in the hope that many of you owning a fine old coverlet or patch work quilt will come to cherish it all the more. Or perhaps you can rescue the fragments of a precious one from some ignominious use. Eliza Hall in her book on "Hand Woven Coverlets" says, "You will find them in the most astounding places - as careless covers for swinging hammocks, or ironing boards, or chair seats, as patches on old carpets." One very fine one was found hanging on a clothes line having been used as a horse's saddle.

Reviving a Lost Art

The art of hand weaving and quilt making today would be practically a lost art were it not for the knowledge and skill of the aged so called "Mountain White" grandmothers. Probably all of you know that there is living in the mountain region of Tennessee, Kentucky, and the Carolinas a very remarkable people. Isolated in a backward country, they are living today in exactly the same way as our colonial ancestors of 150 years ago. In their homes there are the same industries of brewing and drying, hackling and dyeing, spinning and weaving, that our great, great, great grandmothers knew before the time of our Revolutionary War.

Berea, Kentucky, from where our collection of hand woven textiles came, is one of a number of industrial centers in the south that are engaged in a noble work. They are utilizing the knowledge and skill, of their aged mountain workers in saving the old handicrafts from extinction. At the same time they are bringing prosperity to poverty stricken communities, encouraging new interests, training the younger generation in habits of thrift, and bringing new happiness and purposefulness to a backward people.

Miss Palmer in Country Life says, "It is a wonderful thing to watch the change coming into the lives of these mountain people through the growing interest and pride in their work. New patterns and new secrets come to light and new interest in the world outside is born." Miss Prichart, one of the last wool weavers of her section gave daily demonstrations at one of the recent Live Stock Expositions in Chicago, which won the admiration of thousands. Mrs. Jean Thompson illustrated the art of spinning on a loom over 200 years old. No one can tell how far reaching in its influence will be their renaissance in the mountain white districts.

In these days when women are so busy rushing hither and thither doing the work of the world outside of home, do you suppose we really are any happier than in those old days when time was crowded full of humble duties in supplying the family's simple needs? In Hutchinson's novel "One Increasing Purpose," Sim is made to discover that "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you" and is not happiness found just as quickly by oxcart as by automobile? We need not pity those splendid toilers of long ago. They must have known real joy in their hocking and quilting, knitting and weaving for is there any earthly joy to be compared with the real joy of creating?

The American Art of Weaving and Quilting

You see I am calling the work of these women of old and now again in the 20th century, an art, a truly American art, the art of the hand woven coverlet, the patch work quilt. John Willard says "It is a pity that when we think of art we think of something quite remote from the life of all the people. The word art should carry as common and universal a meaning as the word of life and love."

Colonial coverlets, patch work quilts, hooked rugs and embroidered samples are indeed truly American art products. They are worthy to rank with early American silver and early American furniture. The lives of our grandmothers and great, great, great, grandmothers are woven into their warp and woof and much of genuine folk lore.

"It's a power o'trouble to make a 'Kiver'" as the mountain women would say. Altho they have not read William Morris or Thoreau they know that the value of a thing is measured by the amount of life or work that has gone into it. Almost a year of a woman's life went into the making of the fine old coverlets. They were made of the substance called human life, and the wool of the woof are the rainbow tints of a woman's hopes and joys."

Our southern ancestors did not hesitate to work in the fields - hoe the cotton or flax, pick it, card and spin it, then shear the sheep, wash the wool and set the dye pot. The dye pot stood near the fire place and was kept at a temperature never over 60 degrees till it fermented.

Most women of the old days knew how to make dye from the bark of the native trees, leaves, roots, shrubs and herbs from which they were able to get beautiful colors, black, purple, blue, red, yellow, green, when properly made were of a quality as lasting as the wool itself. Low sumac made purple; walnut, reddish brown; coreopsis, orange; post oak, green. White oak made black so fast that no vicissitude of fortune could fade.

Our recipe from the south reads: "Get brown sage and bile' it, and put in a little alum. It makes the prettiest yaller that ever was." From North Carolina, another recipe says to boil the flower of black-eyed Susans and set the color with alum. Think of owning a coverlet colored with the flowers of black-eyed Susans!

In the early days in the north, coverlets were all woven of flax over-shot with wool. Today they are made by the southern workers with cotton warp and wool filling.

Hand Woven Coverlets

The patterns for these Colonial coverlets were innumerable. Mrs. Hall in her book of "Hand Woven Coverlets" records the names of 350. Many original patterns can be traced back to the traditional designs of England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, France and Germany - the countries from which our nation sprung. Some of the patterns have gone through many changes, others are found in widely separated parts of our country only slightly altered.

Before me as I write is a white fringed napkin which came to me from Sweden containing a strikingly similar design to a fragment of a very old coverlet in red and green and blue which belonged to a German ancestor.

If you have not seen many of the fine old ones I wish I could convey to you some of their beauty. How soft and glowing their coloring! Majestic roses, gentle browns and greens, marvelous blues; and simple geometric designs showing beautiful distribution of the darks and lights. One I remember dated 1825 is called Snow-Ball and the soft whites in their jewel like beauty are as lovely as a Bokhara rug!

There is poetry in the names of the pattern, Whig Rose, Pine Blossom, Rose in the Wilderness, each with its human story if one could know it. In imagination one can see prospective brides working happily at the loom over "Lover's Knot" or "Rings and Chains," and some aged woman, tired but triumphant, battenning, the last thread of "Work Complete."

Do you know of one you can rescue? How lovely it may be as a couch cover, portier, or cushion! Some indeed are too precious to use in any other way but as a hanging on the wall, hung as a picture or a tapestry.

Double Weave Coverlets Were the Work of Professional Weavers

One type of coverlet which is exceptionally fine and much sought by connoisseurs is the double weave coverlet. This kind is made with two webs, and the patterns are interwoven in the edges of the design. Thus a white coverlet with blue figures on one side would be on the other side blue ground with white figures. Floral designs as well as geometric patterns were woven in these coverlets. The making required more skill than housewives could achieve so that they were usually done by traveling weavers who traveled from village to village, plantation to plantation, bringing their patterns with them, as well as tales from the outside world. There are some splendid examples belonging to museums and private collectors in this country done by these professional weavers. In the Pennsylvania Museum is a book of patterns for weaving by John Landes, who appears to have been a professional itinerant weaver before the Revolutionary War.

Quilt Making offered the Pioneer Women a Means of Self Expression

Then there are patch work quilts. When women of our American beginners wanted respite from the toil of weaving for the needs of their households they rested by piecing quilts. Every scrap of woolen material left from clothing was made use of. Many fine old quilts contain the finest silks and satins, velvets and brocades from the imported costumes of wealthy colonists. But usually quilts were made of cotton and linen pieces. Alice Morse Earle in her charming book "Home Life in Colonial Days" tells us "Feminine love for color and decoration found riotous expression in needle work. Eagerly they exchanged patterns with one another - they talked designs, admired bits of colored calico, and pondered combination with far more zest than women of today discuss art or examine high art specimens. Real India chintzes are found in these quilts, beautiful artistic stuffs and the firm unyielding high priced real French calicoes."

Quilt Names

Among the interesting features of quilt lore is the number and variety of names of quaint designs. A distinct individuality seems to be worked into every quilt - the days spent in creating even a very simple one give ample time to ponder over a name. Events, great names in history and hardships of pioneers inspired many names, Washington's Plume, Texas Tears, Mexican Star, Bear's Paws, and Star of Bethlehem are well known ones.

Here is a fascinating quilt story which I believe you will enjoy. It was in the days when farms were being taken up in Iowa and families in the east were tearing up and crossing the country in covered wagons. A French family named B_____ from Philadelphia, in true adventurous spirit, left their home and took with them only such of their treasures as they would not part with. Among them was a case of books and a large family Bible wrapped in a treasured quilt of a beautiful design called Oak and Acorn.

The farm they had bought all "sight unseen" proved to be a quagmire. One of their wagons was overturned and the contents swept down the river. Disillusioned, this family stayed through the long winter with another family already settled there, S_____ by name, and during the long winter days and evenings the two women pieced quilts. The older settler was very pleased with the new patterns which her new found friend brought from Philadelphia, especially the Oak and Acorn design.

In the spring the French family returned to Philadelphia. Years went by and the settlement in Iowa prospered. Then one day Mrs. S_____ went on a visit down the river to a friend and there on the best bed she saw an Oak and Acorn quilt exactly like the one Mrs. B. had long since lost, and in the corner in fine stitches were the initials - J. B. 1829. How amazed were the people when she told them that she knew the owner of the box of books that had floated down the river 20 miles to land high and dry on their claim!

No one had known who J. B. was and the books in French had told them nothing. So they had saved the books all water stained and had put the beautiful quilt on their spare bed.

Mrs. S_____ saw that the quilt was sent back to the woman who she loved so dearly. Years afterwards her own grandson went back east and there he met and loved the granddaughter of Mrs. B. and the lovely quilt was given to them as a precious wedding gift.

Then I know of another lovely quilt done in palest pinks and yellows in a quaint basket design, and the owner who is now 90 years old says she pieced it when she was 16 for her wedding things. Those tiny stitches - each small piece of cloth set in its block as carefully as a mosaic. It is a picture in thread and cloth, more than that! It represents the means where-by thousands of women have been able to express their love of the beautiful.

I wish I could introduce you to Marie Webster's charming book "Patch Work Quilts and How to Make Them." I want you to see the pictures and read their names, but perhaps you are thinking right now of lovely old ones that belonged to your mother or grandmother and which you prize among your treasures.

Or, perhaps, you are a young homemaker who has an instinctive appreciation of fine old furniture and textiles and pewter. Did you know that today you can purchase reproductions of the charming old calico materials? Why don't you have your 8852r

clubs study the old designs in the books I have listed in the bibliography and copy one or more of these designs in the new printed cottons. The bibliography you will find in the year books. The Extension Service of the University will be glad to send you addresses of firms where you can purchase them and one of the Clothing Specialists can advise you about colors to go well together and that will harmonize with your other furnishings.

White Quilts are Rare

I must not omit to tell you about the beautiful white quilts which are now so rare and which, if you own even a fragment, you should cherish among your most prized possessions. They were made of fine white muslin or homespun linen. Their beauty depended on the design which was outlined in fine running stitch. After the design was thus quilted prominent features such as leaves, flowers, and stems were stuffed with cotton. Tiny holes were made on the wrong side of each section and the cotton was pushed in with a long needle till the section was full and tight. Thus we have the original design in a base relief. I have before me a picture of one famous white quilt from Salem, Massachusetts. It is dated in the 18th century and its quilting is as perfect as intricate carving in stone.

"Thank Heaven, say I for those loving, unresting, always occupied fingers, that, working so steadily, left behind them tangible visions of the real homely beauty they saw and tried to reproduce. Patch Work? Ah No! It was memory, imagination, history, biography, joy, sorrow, romance, life, love -----the love of the artist for his work - the soul's longing for earth's immortality."

Just as fascinating as hand woven coverlets and quilts is the story of hooked rugs and embroidered samplers. Perhaps some time you will want to hear about them.

Quilting and Weaving Almost a Lost Art

The year 1880 is an important date in the progress of womankind. It marks the capitulation of hand crafts to the products of the machine. The year 1880 saw colleges for women spring up over the land. It saw opening of the door of Universities to co-education. It saw the beginning of a new system of economics, which took women outside their homes into the professions and business.

Women of Leisure and Culture Reviving the Early American Handicraft

Altho women will probably never again spin and weave and quilt to provide their household with the comforts of home, women of leisure and education and sensitiveness to beauty are everywhere appreciating the old things, and collecting them for their homes or even weaving and quilting in their homes.

There is nothing to hinder you or me from setting up a loom and making in the old way, with great joy, things as beautiful and useful as the charming old coverlets of day before yesterday. Unlike painting and sculpture, weaving and quilt making require no elaborate training. Anyone can weave or quilt, there is no mystery about it, homemakers in all ages have accomplished it.

And the joys of accomplishment are the joys of a Michael Angelo or a William Morris, beyond all price, a happiness within reach of all.