

Aug 18, 1987

Hemlin Continues Weaving Tradition Of Finnish Family

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GILMANTON — When she began to work her first loom 15 years ago, Nancy Hemlin was continuing a family tradition that reached back to Finland.

"My family has always been weavers," the Gilmanton resident said. "I decided I would like to start weaving also."

All four of her grandparents immigrated to America from Finland.

Both of her grandmothers grew up learning what was then an integral part of daily life. Like homemakers had done for hundreds of years, they wove the necessities of life on their looms, from rugs to towels to the clothes the family wore.

Hemlin remembers her grandmothers' weaving "piles of rugs" on their looms.

"It was not a hobby. They made the rugs they all used," Hemlin said. "That's all we ever had on our floors at home."

The craft now survives in the rugs Hemlin weaves and sells in crafts stores.

Her rugs are "more or less of a traditional Scandinavian way or design," she said, but have evolved into more colorful products.

"I have adapted my grandmothers' rugs... in order to weave what people have wanted in their homes," she said. "There are a lot of interesting colors and textures of wool that are available now that weren't back then."

Her brother, who also had done some weaving of his own, started her off by making her a four-harness loom of hard maplewood 15 years ago.

He later bought her a smaller loom that she uses for household items such as placemats, dish towels, table runners, and fabric to make clothes.

Her main occupation is making ragwool rugs, which she weaves on the larger, sturdier loom.

She has been marketing her rugs for 10 years, which is about how long she's been state-joined by the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen.

She also does work by commission and special orders, and weaves items for family and friends.

She orders the wool fabric and usually uses whatever material is available.

Sometimes a customer is looking for a particular color or something to match the colors of room in a house, and she will make a special trip to the store to pick out the fabric herself.

"For ordinary weaving, whatever they send I just try to put

together," she said.

"The people who like the rugs I make are drawn to them by the colors," she said.

"I can't tell you how I arrive at them. I will think about what I

Off The Main Road

might want to do and select three to four... tones. I think about what I will accent the rug with, and then I blend," she said.

Hemlin says she never uses charts or patterns to make her rugs, relying instead on her own intuition.

"I start a rug, and it develops," she said. "After the first 10 inches are done, the rug takes on its own design, and I just finish it."

"Occasionally I get a rug I'm not as happy with as some of the others, but usually it turns out all right."

Because she uses no pattern, no two rugs are the same.

"I don't even think about making two of the same rug. It's not in my nature," she said.

Her rugs are usually 30 inches wide, and the length can vary from 40 inches to 10-foot long floor runners. And they are durable, she said.

"It wears a long time," she said. "It's a good quality, and, therefore, the rug will last as long as you take moderately good care of it."

Hemlin and her husband David, who is also of Finnish stock, moved to New Hampshire from Massachusetts 27 years ago.

They lived for nearly 20 years in Laconia, where she taught first and third grade students at the Washington Street and Elm Street schools and he worked for the Forest Service.

The Hemlins moved to Gilmanton eight years ago.

"We were both brought up in very rural areas," she pointed out. "We wanted to move out of what we called the city at some time."

They settled into what was known as the Lougee farm at the end of Range Road, once the main road from Loudon but now a remote dirt road off the south side of Loon Pond.

The road dead-ends at the Hemlin farm, becoming a small cart path through the forest.

The Hemlins renovated the farmhouse, and now keep about 13 sheep in the pasture of their 40-acre farm.

"We like it out here. It's pretty quiet," she said.



Rug Weaver

Nancy Hemlin works on a loom at her Gilmanton home, above, and, at right, shows off one of the rugs she makes. There have always been weavers in her family, which hails from Finland, she said.

Hemlin spends about six to seven hours a day doing some weaving-related activities, either dressing the loom, cutting fabric, tying the warp, or the actual weaving. She weaves every day.

Dressing the loom is the most "time consuming and mechanical," and least enjoyable, part of the process.

The preparatory stage of weaving, dressing the loom consists of tying in the warp, the lengthwise side threads that are woven around the fabric material.

To set up the warp, Hemlin has to string 270 cotton threads, of 10 to 15 feet in length, a process that usually takes a day of work, she said.

Once she begins weaving, however, she can produce three or four rugs at a time from one warp, taking a little over two hours to weave one rug.

Hemlin keeps a basket of one-inch hand-cut strips of fabric beside her as she weaves, pulling out different colors as a pattern begins to emerge.

"I like to see the development as you go along. It's fun to do," she said.

Once off the loom, the warp threads at the end are tied by



hand into knots, and the rug is finished.

Hemlin has also been spinning wool for about two years, using fleece from a Corriedale lamb that is part of the Hemlin's flock. However, she still considers herself a novice spinner.

A man is hired to shear the wool, and Hemlin washes it, cards it, and then spins into yarn for knitting.

"If you're going to spin and you're going to have wool, you have to knit," she said.

She knits hats and scarves for family and friends, and says she is going to attempt a sweater.

The Hemlins have three grown sons, Tim, Steve, and Ted, a carpenter who still lives in Gilmanton.

Hemlin's mother, who is 80 years old, "still weaves regularly," but she said the weaving tradition in the younger generations consists of only herself and a cousin.

"We are the only two who are weaving," she said.