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## **We're 50 Years Old! ~ A Retrospective on Trends**

By Joyce Newman

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Founded in 1958, the Burlington Handweavers and Spinners Guild are the oldest guild in the BAC. Weaving and Spinning are both ancient crafts, but they're also evolving. Spinning wheels have become smaller and lighter for portability, and spinners are spinning new fibre. The bigger changes have been in handweaving. In a time where commercial fabrics have become plainer, changes in materials and equipment have allowed Handweavers to create cloth that is far more complex.

Helen Amos has been a member of our guild since 1968, but learned to weave in 1958. I've been weaving since 1981, but have inherited samples and other treasures from the 50's from Victoria Wipper of St. Catharines. "Aunt Vic" was a close family friend, and my inspiration to become a weaver. What's changed? Let's look at 25-year snapshots, from **1958**, **1983** and **2008**.

### **What are we weaving?**

**1958** - Placemats, inkle loom belts, and woolly scarves for sale; blankets if you had access to a wide loom; yardage for special family clothing. I have a sample of wool tweed that Aunt Vic wove for a jacket for her husband. The fabric has 24 ends (warp threads) per inch, crossed by 20-doubled weft thread per inch. Helen ordered silk from Ireland to weave a wool and silk sports jacket fabric. But what Helen calls the "California Influence" was starting - bright, chunky yarns replacing fine threads.

**1983** - Helen's "California Influence" had created a trend for big chunky wall hanging. Mohawk College's weaving program required starting with 2 semesters of Off-Loom weaving, but that prerequisite was dropped about 1983. Placemats were still the biggest seller at guild sales, and we were still weaving woolly scarves, throws and shawls. 8 to 12 threads per inch in each direction were common, and everything over 15 was considered "fine" weaving. Some weavers wove fabric for clothing, but the heavier, more loosely woven fabric was not suitable for tailored, shaped garments. Weavers wore loose square cut garments, inspired by traditional ethnic designs.

**2008** - Placemats are less popular, but kitchen towels have become a decor item. Tea towels are our big seller these days. Most buyers don't want to care for wool, so throws and baby blankets are made with cotton or acrylic. Handwoven scarves are fashion accessories, often in silk or tencel at 24 to 30 threads per inch each way. Many of us are also using hand dyeing techniques for unique pieces, and some of us still make one-of-a-kind garments.

### **Supplies & Suppliers**

**1958** - Helen remembers weaving primarily with cotton or wool, and buying most supplies from South Landing Craft Centre in Queenstown, owned by Rie Bannister. Linen came from Fawcett's in Boston,



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finer wool from Scotland. You ordered from snippets of yarn taped to a sheet of paper, and the quality (or the lack thereof!) wasn't always evident. She also remembers a Winnipeg supplier, whose samples and 1958 price list I found in my treasure box. 2/8 cotton (the size we still use for tea towels) ranged from \$1.60 to \$2.55 a lb. (\$12 to \$19 in today's \$), depending on the colour. Lots of fine threads, some novelty yarns, including chenille, described as "silky type" - looks like today's rayon chenille, 4 colours, white, beige baby pink, and baby blue, \$2.35 per lb. From that price list "please DO NOT SEND POSTAGE STAMPS! IT MAKES OUR ACCOUNTANT VERY UNHAPPY."

**1983** - South Landing Craft Centre in Queenstown was still a major supplier, but we also had Handicraft Wools, north of Oakville, and mail order from Maurice Brassard et Fils in Quebec. Cotton and wool were still the main fibres available. That "California Influence" meant many of the finer yarn had disappeared, but we had lots of texture - yarns with lumps, bumps, loops and fuzz.

**2008** - Ted Carson of Handicraft Wool and Bill Bannister of South Landing (son of Rie Bannister) have both retired. With the decline of local knitting shops, and with Internet sale, Ontario's several mail order suppliers are now catering to knitters as well as weavers and spinners. Free trade has meant easier access to yarns from the US, some through those local suppliers, others by ordering them direct. We still use cotton and wool, but have so much more available - mercerized cotton, silk, and many beautiful new fibres like tencel, soy silk, corn silk, and bamboo with a great range of yarn sizes. What has remained from the "California Influence" is the wonderful colour selection.

### **Looms and Techniques**

In its simplest form, a loom is a frame to keep the warp threads in order and under even tension. For longer pieces of fabric, a roller with brakes is added to store a longer warp and the woven cloth. To speed up the weaving, each warp thread goes through a heddle. The heddles are suspended in shaft frames, so all the threads on the same shaft move together. The weaver can now throw a shuttle between the raised and lowered threads. 2 shafts allow the raising and lowering of alternating warp threads, for plain weave. 4 shafts mean you can move 1, 2 or 3 shafts together for more complex fabrics.

**1958** - Leclerc has been making looms in Quebec since 1901, and their 4-shaft counterbalance loom dominates the market. Most of the looms in the guild studio are Leclerc counterbalance - they're the ones with paired shaft hanging from rollers. Shafts are tied to treadles. Pressing the treadle pulls down the tied shaft(s) and raises the partner(s). The counterbalance means light treading, but treading an odd number of shafts may be a problem. Members wove twills and twill variations (fabrics with diagonal lines, herringbone, various diamond patterns), overshot (think - colonial coverlets), lace weaves, and more. Pattern books were available, or the weaver could design her own, filling in squares on graph paper to get a weave structure schematic.

**1983** - Leclerc is now producing the jack loom. Levers (jacks) under each shaft are tied to the treadles and pressing the treadle lifts the corresponding shaft(s) - a little heavier treading, but independent shaft movement. They're also making looms with more than 4 shafts, and a couple of guild members now



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have 8 shafts. 4 shaft allow only 14 possible lift combinations, but moving up to a loom with 8 shafts means 254 combinations - the patterning potential has just exploded. There aren't many 8-shaft books out, and designing is still done with graph paper and a pencil.

**2008** - Leclerc looms still predominate in Ontario but guild members now own looms from Louet (Holland), Glimakra (Sweden), Schact (Colorado), Macomber (Maine) and AVL (California). Fiberworks PCW is a computer design program introduced in 1988 by guild member Ingrid Boesel and her husband Bob. Weavers on every continent (other than Antarctica) use it to create original designs. The newest loom in the guild studio is a dobby loom from Louet. Think - player piano. With the increase in possible combinations with 8 (or more) shafts, the weaver quickly runs out of space and leg reach. The loom has a loop of wooden bars, one for each throw in the pattern repeat. Pegs in the bars press the keys to lift the shafts, eliminating the physical design restrictions. Several members also have looms in their studios with a computer-controlled dobby - instead of having to insert peg in bar, the computer design program fires solenoid pins to press the keys that lift the shafts. Those looms have 16, 24 or even 32 shafts. 2 members have drawdown for damask weaving. And looms for handweavers continue to evolve. Ingrid has now taken several workshops on a Jacquard loom that allow each warp thread to lifted individually for pictorial fabrics.

**So where are the fibre arts going?** Come and hear **William Hodge**, weaver and fibre artist, instructor at the Ontario College of Craft and Design, at our luncheon and lecture on June 1, 2008.