



Creating a tapestry blanket on a Rio Grande loom. —Photo: Bill Strathearn

The Joy of Navajo-style Weaving: Tradition and Craft

by Kathy Strathearn

I'm a weaver. What started this was about six years ago when my husband Bill and I stopped by a weaving studio in Los Ojos, New Mexico, called Tierra Wools. The front of the shop was filled with beautiful weavings—blankets, rugs, scarves, vests, etc. As we walked towards the back, they had cubbies of beautifully colored yarns, all hand dyed there. Beyond the yarns was a wonderful studio filled with eight very large floor looms. This is where the local weavers create their items for the shop. When I was told that they taught classes here, there was no turning back for me.

Bill and I took our first class together learning to weave Rio Grande style blankets and rugs on counter-balanced walking looms—"walking" meaning that you stand at the loom changing sheds by stepping side-to-side on the treadles. It was a great experience, and we came away with a beautiful rug made by Bill and a hideous blanket made by yours truly. I will keep this blanket always as a reminder of my humble beginnings.

My second class was a tapestry class, also at Tierra Wools. This is a more difficult technique to learn, including angles and vertical lines. Unknowingly, it was the perfect class for me for my Navajo weaving journey. But I toughed along and created a tapestry that I am much more proud of than my first piece.

As my weaving skills improved, I decided to enter a piece into the local county fair, where I won First Place in the fiber arts category and the People's Choice Award for the entire craft section of the show. While at this show, a man tending the fiber barn asked me if I was familiar with a fiber shop in Castle Rock (which no longer exists) that taught Navajo weaving. I've always been fascinated with

Navajo weaving since Bill and I have a few Navajo rugs from the 1920s that were bought by his parents on the Navajo Indian Reservation.

I found at my first Navajo weaving class that it was a very difficult technique to learn to warp a Navajo loom. But once I got that hang of that, I was on my way. I fell in love with Navajo weaving and the Navajo culture. To be a weaver is quite a spiritual journey. Each part of the loom has a spiritual meaning: the top beam representing Father Sky, the bottom beam is Mother Earth, etc.

Navajo weavers have songs that are sung while weaving. While weaving their rugs, they sing:

*I weave in harmony,
With the Earth I weave,
The strings are like rain,
The rain touches my fingers,
There is beauty in my rug,
There is beauty all around me,
The plants speak to me,
Mother Earth colors my rug,
I weave in harmony.*

When finishing the rug, they sing:

*With beauty before me, it is woven;
With beauty behind me, it is woven;
With beauty above me, it is woven;
With beauty below me, it is woven;
And in beauty, it is finished.*

There are rules while weaving, such as: Never leave your batten in your warp and walk away because "Something" might come by and unravel it when you're not there—the spirits of things are working against you. On the day that

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Kathy Strathearn demonstrates Navajo-style weaving. If you are interested in learning more about the Adopt-A-Native-Elder Program, check it out at www.anelder.org —Photo by Bill Strathearn



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All correspondence concerning the society or membership should be sent to Colorado Arts & Crafts Society, 900 Colorow Road, Golden, CO 80401 www.colorarts-crafts.org

Van Briggie Pottery Update

by Robert Rust



The sale of The Van Briggie Pottery / Midland Railroad Roundhouse building was completed in December 2008. The estimated sale price to the Griffs-Blessing Company was \$2.5 million. The Pottery had occupied the building for 55 years. The National Register stone building has been gutted for renovation into retail shops to open later this year. The historic exterior is being retained and is integral to the design of the new space.

Meanwhile, Van Briggie has found a new location at 1024 South Tejon Street, eight blocks south of the Pioneers Museum. They should be back into production soon.

Changes are also in store for the historic 1907 Van Briggie Memorial Pottery building on the campus of Colorado College. The Maintenance facilities and offices of the college are moving out of the old pottery building to another location. The memorial Pottery is to be renovated into the Day Care Center for the college's staff and faculty. The move is still in the planning stage according to George Eckhardt, Facilities Manager. He said they are to move across the street to the west of the present location, but that work with City Planning and construction will take a year or more. Funding for both of these projects is already in place.

The good news is that the historic Van Briggie Memorial Pottery is slated for triple honors in 2009. It is to be named as a Colorado Springs', the State of Colorado's, and the National Historic Register's Historic Property list. This placement will aid in the protection of the exterior of the building and have the State Historic Preservation Officer monitoring any changes that may be made.

The one hope for the future is that a College Visitor Center will also be located in a portion of the building. This would facilitate public access to the wonderful interiors designed by Nicholas van der Arend and Ann Gregory Van Briggie. Currently they are open to the public once a year. Presently, the Women's Educational Society of Colorado College, founded in the 1890's, gives annual fund raising tours of the interior each summer. If you wish to express your interest in the building and its public access you might write to the President of the College, Mr. Richard Celeste, a former governor of Ohio, Ambassador to India and head of the Peace Corps.

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Craftsman Farms: Then and Now

by Davey Willans

While visiting family in Denver this past October, my wife Nancy and I drove out to the Boettcher Mansion and had the privilege of being given a private tour by native New Jerseyan, Cynthia Shaw McLaughlin. While I have always known that there is a kindred spirit that resonates between individuals who are part of the American Arts and Crafts movement, it is amazing to me how much this is exemplified with the Boettcher Mansion and Craftsman Farms. They were built in the same time period, are both owned by a government agency (Craftsman Farms is owned by the Township of Parsippany), are National Historic Landmarks, and serve as two of the finest examples of their period architecture. Both sites were also fortunate to experience the zeal and professionalism of the late Nancy Strathearn.

In the October 1908 issue of the Craftsman Magazine, Gustav Stickley describes his newly acquired acreage in Parsippany as "planned by nature for just the use to which I intend to put it". His plan was to build a working farm and a school for boys, where they would experience the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement: simplicity, nature, and a creative unification of art, work, and life. The plan for the school never materialized, so, in 1911, Stickley modified the Log House and moved his family from Syracuse to Craftsman Farms. Unfortunately, in 1917, Stickley had to

declare bankruptcy and was forced to sell the entire 650-acre estate and all of its furnishings. Fortunately for us, it was purchased by the Farny family, who owned and protected all the original structures and 30 acres of land until 1989. At this time a group of Arts and Crafts enthusiasts and local residents were successful in convincing the Township of Parsippany to purchase the remaining 26-acre site and six original buildings, which saved it from possible demolition and/or development. The Craftsman Farms Foundation (CFF) was established and formed a partnership with the Township and was charged with the responsibility to "interpret, restore, and preserve Craftsman Farms, the artifacts and ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement associated with Gustav Stickley and to demonstrate their continuing relevance". Mayor Michael Luther has stated, "this partnership is a model of how private organizations and governmental agencies can work together to save and manage important historical sites".

On January 1, 2007, prior to negotiating the 25-year lease and operating agreement with the Township of Parsippany, the Foundation (1) was in debt; (2) had no Executive Director or professionally trained museum staff; (3) was operating with an outdated strategic plan; and (4) restoration of the master bedroom and kitchen had not been completed in the Log House and the only space we had for

The North Cottage after final restoration—Photo: Davey Willans



events was on the front porch. Today the Foundation (1) is debt free and even has a small endowment; (2) has an Executive Director (Heather Stivison), a highly respected museum professional who oversees a very dedicated staff; (3) in the process of completing a Historic Site Master Plan (HSMP) and updating our Strategic Plan; and (4) has opened three additional structures: an Education Center, Administrative Building with board room, and a guest cottage. In addition, the kitchen has been refurbished and full restoration of the master bedroom is near completion. Most of these structural improvements have been funded with grants approved by the Township Council and Administration, following guidelines established by members of the HSMP team.

The kitchen (currently our Museum shop) was in very



The repainted kitchen now houses the Museum Shop—Photo: Davey Willans



The kitchen undergoing repairs and repainting—Photo: Davey Willans

bad condition and not at all welcoming to our visitors. We needed to make some repairs, and insure that we did not damage or alter anything that is of historic significance, and that we interpreted this space as close as possible to its original look. We therefore asked the HSMP team to do an analysis of sample materials from the walls, ceiling, floors and wood doors. They were able to identify the original paint and stain colors used by Stickley on these surfaces. This allowed us to have this space now look like it did the day Gus moved in with his family. Lighting fixtures donated by Tom Richards of Old Californian have been installed, so the Museum Shop now really looks good.

We followed a similar process to identify paint colors and materials originally used by Stickley to finish the interior of the North Cottage. It is now structurally stabilized and, with beautiful Old California lighting in every room, makes a cozy little retreat to house visiting dignitaries.

For the Master bedroom restoration we are following very strict restoration guidelines that meet all historic restoration requirements established by the State and Federal Historic Commissions. The Annex is connected to the Log House, but since it is not one of the original Stickley-built structures it could be modified for adaptive use and makes an ideal reception room and orientation space for school children.

So, while we are proud of how much we have accomplished in less than two years, we realize we still have a long way to go to fulfill our

Mission and Vision. With cuts continuing to be made in federal, state, and local historic preservation funds, and rising energy costs, 2009 will present some significant challenges. Having said that, I can assure you that the Foundation's Board of Trustees and staff take their responsibilities as "stewards of all donated funds" very seriously. With continued support from our members and friends we will be able to complete a number of projects now under way and will make 2009 another great year in the history of the Foundation.

Please come visit us some time soon. Until then visit our web site (www.stickleymuseum.org) and learn about our upcoming events and ways that you can help support the Craftsman Farms Foundation.

—Davey Willans is current president of the CFF Board.



you finish your rug, you are not to start another one, but within four days you are supposed to string up the warp for the next one. They insert a spirit line in their weaving to allow their spirit to escape so they are able to weave another rug. If there is no spirit line, they think they may weave themselves into the rug and not get out and then be unable to weave a new design.

Soon I was anxious to head for the Navajo Reservations to take a class from a Navajo Master Weaver. It is an experience I will always cherish. In May, 2007, my first Master Weaver instructor was named Sarah Natini. Her homeland is just south of Shiprock, New Mexico, beneath Table Mesa. Here they raise their own *churro* sheep, whose fleece



Rio Grande tapestry blanket 4' x 6'



Navajo-style Storm Pattern rug 17' x 20'

is used for all of their weaving. Every student had to supply their own shelter on Sarah's home land. Some brought tents, others slept in their vehicles, but I brought the "land yacht." I was living in style while all the others were using a 3-sided outhouse and taking sun showers in a makeshift stall. I tried not to feel too guilty, but then wondered if I was missing some of the true Navajo experience.

We were welcomed into Sarah's hogan to start the class. Sarah introduced us to all her weaving tools and showed us projects she was working on. The center of her hogan was definitely dedicated to weaving, as her weavings supplied a majority of the family income. We were also presented with a talking stick. While each one held the stick, we were to tell our story and what we wanted from this class. Navajos are very good listeners, and this encouraged us not to interrupt while others were speaking. So class was underway and the experienced students helped the beginning students with warping the Navajo loom. Once our looms were warped and the weaving process was ready to begin, we were kicked out of the hogan and did the rest of our weaving under the shade of a carport outside—sitting on the ground like a real Navajo weaver.

Along with weaving, we took many field trips on the

Reservation. We explored trading posts, gathered plants for dyeing our yarn, and even ate Chinese food at a local joint. By the end of this amazing week, I was not ready to leave the relaxed living style that the Navajo enjoy. Of course, there are many hardships that go along with the way they live.

My second Navajo Indian Reservation weaving class was held in Window Rock, Arizona, in the very same motel where Tony Hillerman based many scenes in his novels. This was a completely different atmosphere from the first class. We enjoyed lovely motel accommodations and had our weaving sessions in a conference room just off of the lobby restaurant—in full view of all who happened by.

Our Master Weaver was Jennie Slick from Sanders, Arizona. She was delightful and willing to share her knowledge with us. As the week progressed, we had visits from other Navajo artists, including silversmiths, basket makers and other weavers. When a couple of elders chided Jennie for teaching non-Navajo people their weaving techniques, Jennie's response was, "Well, if the Navajo weren't so lazy, I'd be happy to teach them. At least these students want to learn."

We took numerous field trips during this week on the Reservation. We visited two rug auctions at

Crownpoint and Hubbel Trading Post. We toured Canyon de Chelley. We took a dyeing workshop where we first collected all the plant materials used for dyeing and then dyed our yarn with these plant materials over wood fires—just the way the Navajo do it. We took a trip to Earls in Gallup, New Mexico, where Navajo vendors walk from table to table while you enjoy your meal and present their goods for sale. My favorite was a trip to Burnham Trading post in Sanders, Arizona. Bruce Burnham, a direct descendent of one of the original traders on the Reservation, continues to encourage quality products from his weavers and pays them a very fair price. This encourages the weavers to continue their trade rather than leaving the Reservation to take up alternative occupations.

After our very full week of weaving and field trips, it was again time to return to real life and the hustle bustle of the city. After I returned home, I told Bill of an organization where a person can adopt a native elder. And that is just what I did. All that is required is to send a small amount of money twice a year. This money then is transformed into food boxes. These food boxes supplement the elders pantries since they are no longer able to support themselves, depending on their families for help. But Bill and I decided

The Joy of Weaving

to take it one step further. We decided to volunteer our time to go on one of the semi-annual food runs with Adopt-A-Native-Elder Program. We spent four days completely engulfed in the Navajo way of life. Twice a year, there are nine areas on the Reservation where food is brought to the Elders. During the days that we participated, we encountered 150 elders in need.

Each day consisted of the Elders arriving—all decked out in their finest attire and best jewelry. They came in pickups, cars, wagons, on horseback and on foot, with canes, with walkers, in wheelchairs. There were smiles on all their faces. I was amazed with the love and appreciation I received while greeting these wonderful people. We were given hand shakes, we received hugs, but my favorite was those beautiful smiles.

After the greetings, the Elders are served a meal prepared by us—the volunteers. So much food is piled onto their plates that there is plenty to bring home for another meal. Once the meal is over, many Elders present Linda (the lady who started this organization) with gifts of jewelry, rugs and other crafts. Much of the jewelry is then given the next morning at our breakfast meeting to the volunteers. I am the proud owner of three beautiful necklaces and a wonderful picture frame. The rugs are put into the organization's inventory for future sale. One hundred percent of the proceeds from these rugs goes back into the organization to support the Elders. In return for a rug, Linda gives the Elder a bundle of yarn and warp to encourage them to continue weaving. At the end of all the

festivities, pickups and cars are lined up around the rainbow circle, and the Elders are loaded up and taken on their way home with the boxes of food and supplies they received from their sponsors. After all the Navajo people—and other tribes—have been through, I feel we are helping to close the gap between our cultures with the gifts we bring to them twice a year through this organization.

We had so many memorable experiences during our four days with the food run! It certainly made us realize how complicated our lives are. The Navajo live such an honest life, and it is a lifestyle that is sadly disappearing.

If you have read this far, you're probably asking what does this have to do with the Arts and Crafts movement? First, it exemplifies one of the basic tenets of the movement: a return to a simpler way of life as exhibited by Stickley in his development of Craftsman Farms. Secondly, the basic rectilinear designs developed in earthen colors compliment the Arts and Crafts designs in homes and furnishings. Finally, the Fred Harvey connection. As you may recall, Fred Harvey operated the dining and hotel accommodations for the Santa Fe Railroad. Many of his hotels were furnished in the Mission style. In an interview with a former employee, he specially references "the massive" furnishings. The Harvey Houses all included souvenir shops. The shops emphasized Navajo pottery and weaving for the tourists. Rug designs which were thought to be favored by tourists were even given to the Navajo to be duplicated. An Arts and Crafts home in Colorado which includes Navajo pottery and rugs adds a Western touch to the décor.

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