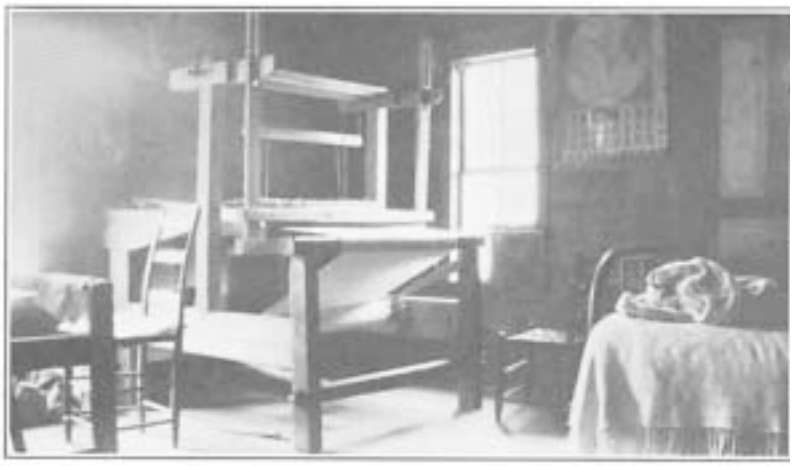
An Old Art Modernized

BY WINOGENE B. REDDING

THE revival of weaving in Gatlinburg is at an interesting stage in its development. In this mountain section of East Tennessee, where a large part of the population still lives according to age-old customs, the weaving strikes a modern note that is curiously different and a little out of keeping with the fast disappearing log cabin days. It seems as if we should expect the woman who still lives in a picturesque log cabin to be weaving coverlets made of her own homespun, indigo-dyed wool on an old heavy beamed sled loom; instead we find her weaving bright colored scarfs or modernistic towels of fine linen on a small, modern home-made loom whose only claim, as far as looks are concerned, with the old loom long relegated to the loft, is the string heddles.



An Old Loom with a Blanket Warp on It

About twenty-five years ago the home industry of weaving went out of style around here, so to the younger mothers it is a new and strange art. It is to their grandmothers we go for stories of weaving in the romantic age, for it seems like romance to those of us who can only gaze at the gloriously colored pieces of weaving that are brought out of an old trunk for us to admire.

It became much more simple to buy a few yards of dress material at the new store than to spend the many months of hard labor that it took to raise a small patch of cotton or flax, or to prepare wool from the time it was sheared from the sheep until it was finally woven into cloth for the family use.

A Modern Home-Made Loom

How strange we think the tales of these grandmothers. One tells me with pride that when she was young she used to weave seven yards of blankets or four to five yards of jean in a day; another how she would gather walnut roots to dye wool for suiting for her man, and how it would grow darker in color the longer it was worn; the next one, how her mother would raise a patch of flax and how much beating it took to separate the fibers, and then the tow was used to fill bed quilts; and another, how long it took to prepare a blue pot and how difficult it was to know when it was just at the right stage to dip the wool. One woman told me recently of seeing, years ago, her grandmother's and grandfather's church clothes that her grandmother had woven. The dress was made of very fine, dark brown homespun wool and fashioned with a series of ruffles, short and full, down the entire length of the skirt. The man's suit was much more gay, as the trousers were woven of colored striped

homespun and the woven cotton shirt was made with a ruffle around the vest-like front. They were beautifully sewed with tiny, wee stitches, the happy result of months of work. The weaving days must have been strenuous ones, too, for one woman told me how she used to dread to have her mother sit down at her loom, for then two of the children had to sit under the loom, one on each side, to catch the shuttle when it went flying to the floor. Thus was weaving when our country was young and the family clothing and bedding depended upon the ingenuity and art of the women folks. This is the way it was preserved in the homes until our day and for our appreciation in these remote mountain regions.

Now these grandmothers watch their daughters weave with an ease that they never imagined possible — even their weaving language is not the same. The "chain" of their time is now a warp. The "gears" are harnesses, "quills" are bobbins; sleys are no longer numbered from 400 to 700 sley-eyes to each one, according to the way the cane pieces were fastened in, but are steel affairs, uniformly made and numbered by the inch.

The reason for weaving has changed as completely as the times, for now it is done from choice and not from necessity. It is true that we use the same old patterns — none lovelier could be found — but our adaptations, color schemes and the uses to which they are put are so different that they hardly seem the same designs.

Typical Gatlinburg Scenery

Once more weaving is the thing to do in the homes; in fact one might call it the chief indoor sport of Gatlinburg and the surrounding country. There are at least seventy-five women steadily employed at their looms, and one can hardly pass a house for miles around without hearing the thump, thump of the beater. Economically it has distinct advantages, for the money earned is put to good use. Several women have helped to build and furnish new homes; children are being sent to school; three young girls are earning enough this summer to go to high school again in the fall. It helps to pay for the family car, and Victrolas and pianos are invested in, because the mountain people are lovers of music. Artistically it is equally important. Every woman takes pleasure in watching a fabric grow thread by thread. That is perhaps the greatest reason why weaving has such a human appeal. It is a joy to discover a woman who lives way up a creek develop a keen sense of color, and see her eyes shine when she is given a basket of different colored yarn and told to weave it up into things she thinks are pretty. In this way her love for color is satisfied the year round, for every mountain home is surrounded by flowers in the summer, and it is the women who care for them patiently and carefully, so the gayly colored skeins of yarn hanging against the dark weathered plank wall transform a dark winter day into one of brightness and cheer. Some women take special pride in making new designs out of old threadings, a thing which is encouraged. And so it goes, each woman giving her weaving an individual touch, for no matter how many are making the same kind of towels or runners each one is different from the other.

One of Our Best Basket Makers with His Family

When the weaving was first encouraged and taught by the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School, which selected Gatlinburg for its location seventeen years ago, the industrial department had a small and humble beginning. Now the department reaches nearly one hundred homes through the weaving, baskets and furniture making. The people are taught individually and entirely in the homes, with the exception of a

A Mountain Cabin and Farm

few girls each year who study weaving in the school. We reach some of the homes by automobile, when they are situated on the new state highway that goes by our very door, for we are fortunate to be located at the entrance to the proposed Smoky Mountain National Park. Other homes, in picturesque settings which we find up this creek or in that hollow, can only be reached by horseback or walking over steep, rocky roads that are still very rough, as good roads come slowly to us. Gift shops have been opened to sell our wares to the tourists who come to view the splendid scenery. One is sponsored by the school, others by energetic mountain women who learned weaving in the school in the early days.

The women are once more weaving dresses for themselves of bright colored yarns that were not possible to make in a home dye pot, and their own linens and curtains for the home, for the new houses have many windows in place of the one little window the old time cabin had. These young women are eager to learn, responsive to suggestions and give their whole-hearted coöperation. They know that without these things no project can be a success. They realize, too, that the articles they weave have to meet a different need in their homes as well as in the homes of others, and so it is necessary to give up the splendid but hard ways of their grandmothers and adopt new styles and methods that are in keeping with our modes of living in this generation.

Now we find ourselves plunged into the rapid revival of an old art which is done easier and quicker and is already taking on modern aspects that, unfortunately, cannot duplicate the quaint old-fashioned charm of the laborious products of our ancestors, but do have charm of their own.

Richter "Ancient Furniture"

A STUDY of the turnings in Roman chairs and couch legs and a comparison with their Greek prototypes is very instructive, for it brings out clearly the different approach of the two craftsmen. The Greek designer created a few forms and tried to perfect these until he arrived at a completely harmonious, dignified design, whereupon he used this with but slight variations until the period of decline, when fussier motives found favor. The Roman artist took over the later motives and still further elaborated them, constantly varying his combination, producing continually new forms, but none of them really successful compositions. As they approach nearer to or further from their originals they are either more or less pleasing. There is thus no question of tracing any development — only an occurrence of similar forms.

TABLES with the Greeks had much fewer uses than they have with us. Today almost every room contains a number of tables for the support and display of our multitudinous possessions. The Greeks had hardly any such possessions — very few books, no magazines or newspapers, little bric-a-brac not in actual use, and small lamps which stood on individual stands. And when a mirror, or drinking cup, or flute case was put away it was generally hung up on the wall, as countless representations on walls teach us. The chief use, therefore, of a table was during meals for the support of the dishes and the food; and as such a use was merely temporary, it was desirable that the tables should be light so that they could be removed without difficulty when not needed.

The tables we find represented on Greek monuments correspond to these conditions. Almost all the examples occur in banquet scenes by the side of the couches on which dinner guests are reclining. They are plain and light, and generally low enough to be pushed under the couch when not in use. Each person has his own individual table.