The Murray Bay Handicrafts

By ANTONIA J. STEMPLE

Did you ever consider the interesting and rather remarkable fact that all mankind, no matter in what part of the world they live, nor how far removed from contact with others, have some needlework or handicraft which they produce, usually thoroughly distinctive and sometimes so typical that localities and people become immortalized in stitchery? The Mexican woman is famed for her intricate drawwork, the Indian squaw produces wonders in basketry and beadwork, our own Colonial ancestors wrought exquisite samplers, complicated patchwork, and covered fine linens with masses of exquisitely fine needlework, the women of France, Italy, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Spain, Algeria, Japan, India, Java, and so on, all do work which is quickly, beautifully, and interestingly their own. Every human soul demands some means of self-expression, and finds it usually in producing beautiful things from materials at hand. It is interesting and illuminating to view the work of primitive peoples, especially of the women whose lives are narrow or restricted, or who, lacking things to do with, succeed in setting forth their inherent love for the beautiful with the limited means at their command.

In the province of Quebec in Canada, where life in the smaller villages is for the most part very primitive and simple, and where poverty is pronounced, the women make marvelous patchwork quilts and hooked, braided, and tubed rugs. Into these they put their love of color and design and produce very curious and, not infrequently, really artistic work.

But it is in Murray Bay, and throughout, among the French habitants and the Indians — and the two frequently intermarry — that one finds one of the most unique and distinctive handicrafts in this country. It has not only marked individuality, but great beauty as well. Murray Bay itself is such a rare beautiful place that people who have been there once never fail to come again. To breathe the clear, pure, bracing, pine and fir-scented air, to enjoy the natural loveliness, and to mingle with the interesting and kindly habitant folk is a privilege.

Many Americans never knew there was a Murray Bay on the map until they heard that ex-President Taft had a summer home there.

Far from the madding crowd is Murray Bay, a jewel set on the lovely St. Lawrence river. In the winter, along with the other little villages therewith, it is practically isolated from the world and is inhabited almost exclusively by French-Canadians and Indians, who testify by their every-day lives that "man needs but little here below" to be happy and contented. But in summer Canadians and Americans from the four corners of the country come to this world-famous spot to revel in the charmed with which nature has so lavishly provided these little villages along the St. Lawrence river. Yet Murray Bay proper is in no sense a "popular" resort, and the simple natives "go their own way" and live their quiet, uneventful lives quite oblivious to the doings of the rich and great. Some of the most magnificent summer residences on the continent are to be found among the heavily wooded mountains overlooking the broad St. Lawrence, but when the steamer docks at the long wharf and you have your first glimpse of Pointe-a-Pic, as the old French-Canadian settlement struggling along the river front is called, you would not dream that a little farther back are hotels and resi-
dences which vie in elegance with those of Newport, with the owners of the little, unpretentious, cluttered-up shops, which look so unpromisingly, cheerfully trot out for your inspection their homespun, bedspreads, and blankets.

Have you ever seen one of the famous Murray Bay blankets, linens, or spreads? If so, you know what it is to break the tenth commandment, for it is impossible for any one who loves sturdy, useful, beautiful native handicraft to see these things without coveting them. The wool for these blankets is spun and woven by the women at hand wheels and looms, dyed with their own vegetable dyes, and there is never an eye on the clock.

The blankets are very light, but of pure wool, hence, very warm in the winter and cool in the summer. They are all kinds of designs without showing the strain of hard service. The colors and patterns are a delight. Geometric and conventional designs are used for the most part, and it is seldom that you find two exactly alike. The bedspreads and coverlets are equally distinctive and possibly more beautiful. They are of the softest and finest flannel, and are frequently the cherished possession of a long family.

In the fall these women sit up late into the night, spinning thread for a long, hard winter's work. Whole families are engaged in it, and late on the eve of Christmas the last flannel is spun. These wonderful hand-made things are fashioned by the Murray Bay habitants and Indians during the long winter days and evenings of wintry winter isolation from the rest of the world.

You will not be the only one to be charmed by these things. Weary tourists and dealers discover them to their cost. They, too, cannot resist the hand-woven, hand-spun flannel. This splendid specimen of Murray Bay handicrafts may be bought for an amazingly small sum, as reckoned in this country, though of course the cost is greater now than before the war. In the little shop in Pointe-a-Pic there is a wealth of native treasures piled away on the shelves, each piece seemingly more beautiful than the other. The proprietor has a pure Scotch name, though he is very French, and the little habitant girl, who will show you the blankets and spreads, will probably shyly confess, "I have much trouble with my English."

The Murray Bay habitants and Indians are very quiet and reserved, and remarkably free from the commercialism so often found in any tourist's mecca. The pleasure of owning a Murray Bay blanket, or spread, or mooslin is enhanced by knowing the kindly, patient, devoted souls who make them, and a visit among the unpretentious cottages, who have all the good qualities of those who live close to nature, is an inspiration.