



The Murray Bay Handicrafts

By ANTONIA J. STEMPLE

DID you ever consider the interesting and rather remarkable fact that all womankind, 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 oftentimes so typical that localities and people become immortalized in stitchery? The Mexican woman is famed for her intricate drawnwork, the Indian squaws produce 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, Sweden, Norway, Spain, Mid-Europe, Japan, India, Java, and so on, all do work which is quaintly, 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 tufted rugs. Into these they put their love of color and design and produce very meritorious and, not infrequently, really artistic work.

But it is in Murray Bay, and thereabout, 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 rarely 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 thereabout, 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 charms 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 gait" 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 straggling along the river front is called, you would not dream that a little farther back are hotels and resi-

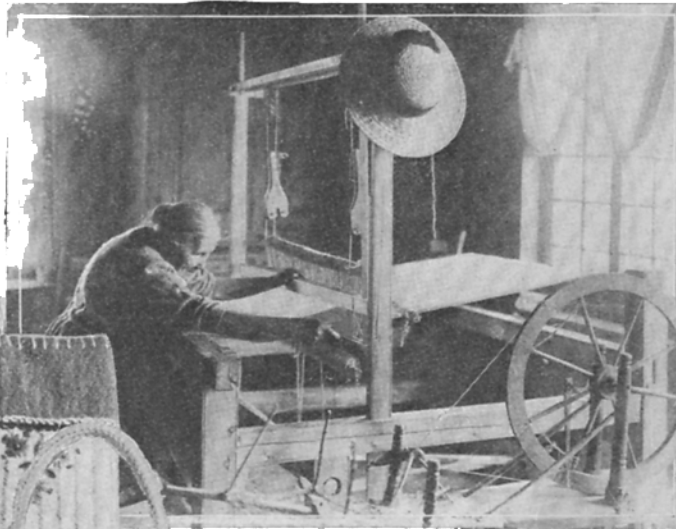
dences which vie in elegance with those of Newport. You will lose your heart to Pointe-a-Pic! It is in the simple homes that stretch along the three miles to the old, French, Murray Bay village proper, on Murray Bay river, and in the scattered homes throughout this section of the county that the famous Murray Bay handicrafts have been developed by individual workers.

As you saunter along, you will find at intervals masses of linen draped along the fences or lying on the grass to be bleached, you will see occasionally a spread or a table-

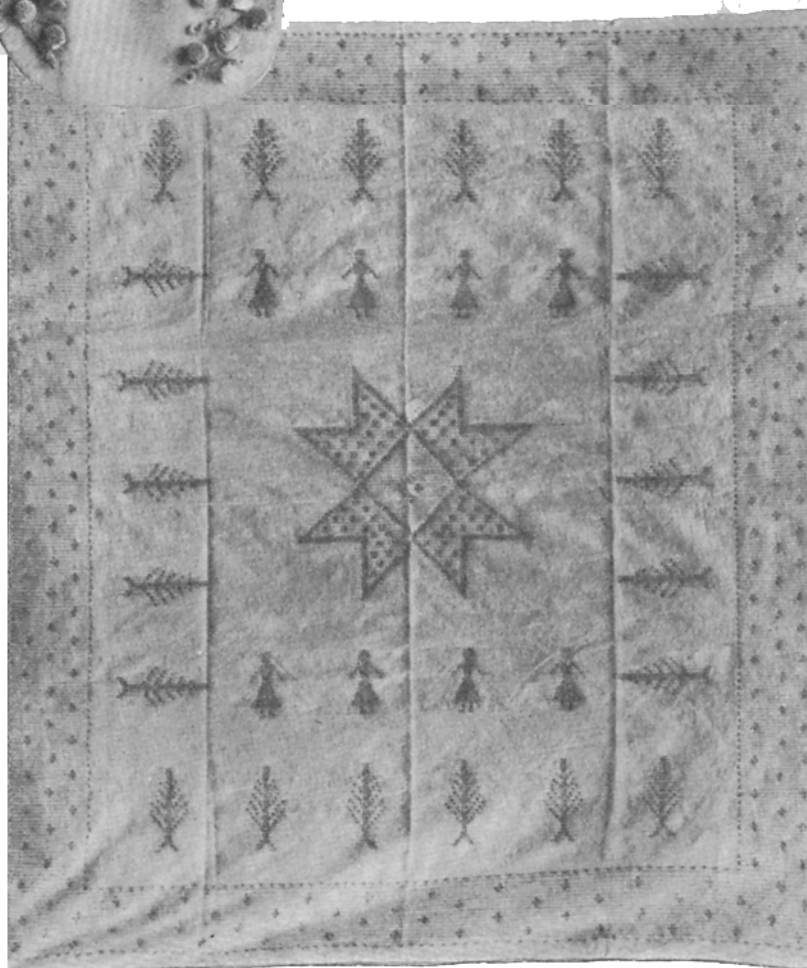
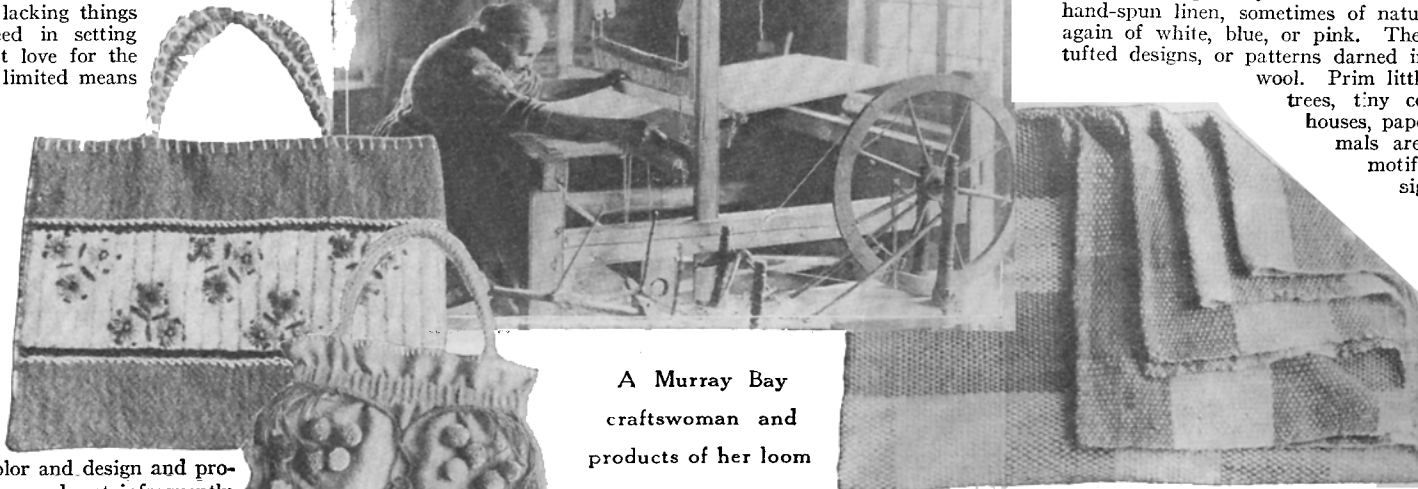
cover hung up, and the owners of the little, unpretentious, cluttered-up shops, which look so unpromising, will cheerfully trot out for your inspection their homespuns, bedspreads, and blankets.

Have you ever seen any 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. They wear and wear, and stand all kinds of abuse 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 hand-spun linen, sometimes of natural color, then again of white, blue, or pink. These have either tufted designs, or patterns darned in with colored wool. Prim little pine and fir trees, tiny conventionalized houses, papooses, and animals are the principal motifs in the designs and often a spread will tell a story



A Murray Bay
craftswoman and
products of her loom



to the discerning. Sometimes the centre of the coverlet is plain and the pattern appears as a heavy border around the edge, sometimes the whole spread is worked. Those with the quaint pine trees and the queer little papooses like the one illustrated are especially attractive. The tufted spreads represent a great deal of patient labor.

These wonderful hand-made things are fashioned by the Murray Bay habitants and Indians during the long winter days and evenings of snowy winter isolation from the rest of the world. They find a ready market for their wares among tourists and in the Canadian cities, but their merchandise is little known in this country, except by those who have had the good fortune to discover the charms of Murray Bay and the little towns along the St. Lawrence. As labor is cheaper in the province of Quebec than in the United States a specimen of Murray Bay handicraft 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 to the fascinated shopper. The proprietor has a pure Scotch name, though he is very French, and the nice 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 moccasins is enhanced by knowing the kindly, patient, devout souls who make them, and a visit among the unpretentious cottagers, who have all the good qualities of those who live close to nature, is an inspiration.

