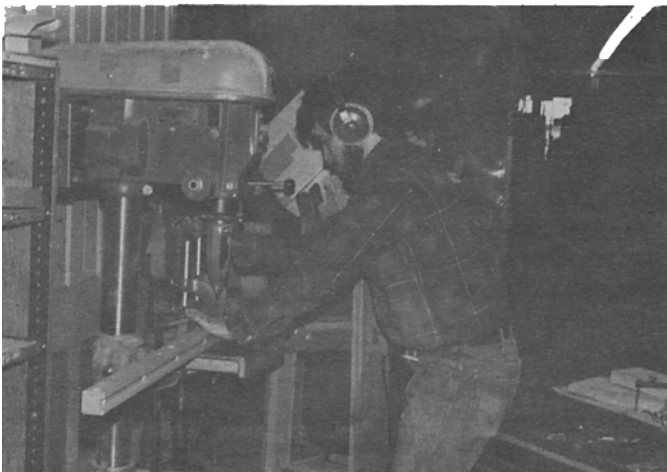


**TOBEKA ROAD OR: Local Loom Manufacturer Makes Good**

*by Karen Searle*

Did you know that there is a loom factory right here in the Twin Cities? BEKA Looms occupies one and a half floors of a downtown St. Paul warehouse building. The six year old firm is going full-tilt, producing BEKA rigid heddle looms and accessories for nationwide distribution, plus a specially designed model distributed through *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine.

"The BEKA boys" are very proud of their well equipped woodworking shop, which contains many intriguing machines for cutting, sanding and finishing the various parts, including some equipment specially designed by firm members. An industrious buzzing and a carpet of sawdust and wood shavings provide the atmosphere in the workshop area, while in quieter corners, heddles and beam dents are glued, rods inserted, and looms packed and shipped. Efficient planning and organization, plus fast, accurate machinery, make it possible to produce a maximum of looms with a minimum of staff. BEKA adheres to a policy of always maintaining an inventory and shipping from stock, to assure fast delivery on all orders.



Jim Ingebretsen manning the drill press.

James Sealy-Kreisman (Jamie) directs the sales and personnel side of the operation with production and product development supervised by Jim Ingebretsen. Richard Kreisman acts a foreman. Two other partners and the original founders of the firm, Nick Brubaker and Pete Kreisman now work elsewhere.

Nick and Peter, both physicians, started their firm, BEKA Research, in 1973 to manufacture electronics instruments. It was at this time that a need was being felt locally for a reliable competitor to the imported frame looms then



Workers gluing dents in warp beams

available. A shortage of electronics parts, combined with some urging from the Yarnery (of which Peter is a part owner), caused BEKA Research to change its name to BEKA Looms — a fortunate turn of events for the rigid heddle weavers in this country. Jim Ingebretsen, another physicist, joined Nick and Peter to develop the loom and equip the shop. Peter's younger brother Jamie joined them for a summer job after graduation from college in experimental psychology, and stayed on. The following year, their brother Richard took leave for a year from teaching English to help out — and stayed on. Jamie, Jim and Richard are assisted by Sue Stafki, chief bi and shipper, and two to four factory workers, depend on production schedules.

The first thirty BEKA looms were finished in the fall of 1973, and loaded into the family van for a sales trip to the West coast, which brought them their first ten customers. A similar trip eastward the following spring launched them firmly in business. They now supply looms to stores in 45 states (including Alaska and Hawaii), with the Yarnery still their biggest customer. (It is one of the biggest yarn stores in the country). Their list of customers is growing steadily.

Personal contact with customers, and service have always been the bywords of BEKA policy. Part of the firm's mission is to educate people about the capabilities of the rigid heddle loom. The Twin Cities area is rich in frame loom classes and weavers, but in other parts of the country, rigid heddle looms were regarded as little more than toys. BEKA set out to change that image by visiting stores, demonstrating their loom, finding material written for rigid heddle looms and generally responding to the shopowners needs in any way they could. Weaving accessories, larger looms and different sized heddles were developed. When David Xenakis developed his technique of using multiple rigid heddles for producing four harness weaves such as overshot, summer and winter, double weaves, etc., he was hired as a consultant. BEKA distributes David's book *The Xenakis Technique*. A rigid heddle loom with a double warp beam that David has developed may soon be available.

An extension of the policy of educating customers about rigid heddle weaving is the BEKA mobile, a travelling workshop van which brings instructors to the various shops around the country to give workshops to shop staff and students. Basics and warping and weaving, color and weave effects and texturing are most requested workshop subjects. In many states the only weaving classes offered through stores and this helps to spread quality weaving instruction.



Jamie Kreisman sanding shuttles

As another "first" in the area of customer education, this summer BEKA will sponsor Rigid Heddle Weaving Conference to be held in St. Paul June 27 - July 1. The Conference will provide the opportunity for store owners, managers and teachers around the country to meet, to learn rigid heddle techniques in workshops, and to attend seminars on marketing and retailing relating to yarn shops.

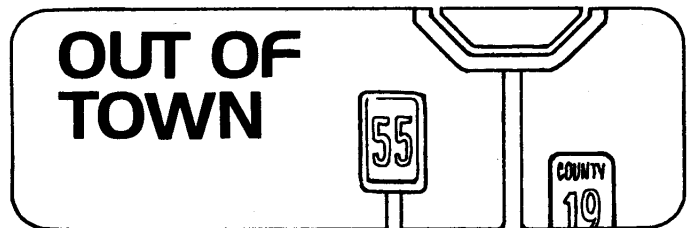
In 1977 the growth of BEKA was also given a boost from another direction at the peak of interest in weaving by the craft market (which Jamie is careful to emphasize, is a very different phenomenon from interest in weaving by serious potential weavers), BEKA was fortunate to become associated with *Better Homes and Gardens*, who were having problems over the poorly functioning frame loom they were then marketing. BEKA could offer them a good loom as well as expertise and yarn, and contracted to manufacture a mass produced loom with the best features of the regular BEKA loom, plus yarn and instruction packets for various beginner projects. This move assured that a good quality, low priced loom was available to the general public, and that newcomers to weaving would get off to a good start.

*Better Homes & Gardens* Magazine is planning a feature article on rigid heddle weaving, with projects and instructions by Twin Cities weavers to be published early next year.

In view of the steady growth of business, Jamie feels that the "fad" period of the popularity of weaving was deceptive — it was a marketing push by non-weavers, primarily craft magazine editors and a sudden plethora of frame loom manufacturers, who didn't understand the need for good equipment. "Weaving requires too much of a commitment of time and money to be a fad." He is sure that the real weaving market is still growing. "New stores and more genuinely interested people are appearing all the time. With costs as they are, people are increasingly inclined to make their own things, and they want good tools"

The future holds exciting possibilities for this dynamic and growing company. Now that the firm base of a rigid heddle market is established, the BEKA boys can devote some attention to another project that has been in the back of their minds for some time — the development of a BEKA floor loom. A prototype is expected to be ready for testing this fall, and they hope to begin manufacture on a small scale (local sales only at first) in 1980. A very exciting business . . . and to think that all this is happening right here in St. Paul!

PHOTOS BY KAREN SEARLE



**Continuing Education and Extension, Univ. of MN, Duluth  
WORKSHOPS IN HERITAGE WEAVING, SPINNING,  
NATURAL DYES  
August 6,7,8  
August 14,15,16  
August 21, 22, 23**

Beginning and intermediate weaving, spinning and natural dyes will be the subjects of three intensive three-day workshops taught by Janet Meany at the University of Minnesota, Duluth in August. The beginning class will concentrate on two harness techniques which can be used on antique rug looms. The intermediate will explore the loom controlled weaves for multi-harness looms. In the third workshop the basic principles of hand spinning and natural dye will be covered. For information and registration write or call Continuing Education and Extension, Duluth Center, 403 Administration Building, University of Minnesota, Duluth, Duluth MN 55812.