

DORIS MACOMBER

Before there was ever a Guild President, there was “the Queen Bee,” as Ann Meerkerk dubbed her. All her contemporary weavers point to Doris Macomber as the energizer and organizing force of the future Whidbey Weavers Guild. Doris acknowledges the title with a chuckle, and wants today’s members to know “how proud” she is “of what ‘my’ guild has become!” Though she has lived in Lacey, at Panorama City, since 1992, she “reads the newsletter from cover to cover.”

The future guild first met in Doris’ living room in early December of 1969. She was firmly at the helm for the group’s first five years. Then the Macomers started to spend their winters in Yuma, Arizona, and since Doris felt the group needed a year round leader, Ann Meerkerk succeeded her. In Yuma, Doris found a lively guild composed mostly of fellow snowbirds, so she feels fortunate in having warm relationships with two separate groups of weavers.

Many of the Guild’s characteristic activities took root in those early days. At all meetings, Doris insisted on having an educational component (“not just tea and crumpets”). Still our favorite program segment, Show and Tell also dates back to those times. In Doris’ day, however, members were required to tell in detail what they did with what materials, and why, and what problems were solved, what alternative solutions were considered, etc. Our booth at the County Fair has its origins in the educational displays the weavers’ group put on at the Coupeville Arts Festival—quite ambitious demonstrations of weaving, spinning, and dyeing, and all without the incentive of ribbons and awards.

She herself came to weaving rather late, after her two daughters were married and her son had gone to college. Before that she was too busy parenting and housekeeping and hostessing. She married F. Glenn Macomber, a Washingtonian, in 1930 at the height of the Depression. Glenn, who passed away in 1998, had a very successful career, rising from classroom teacher to school superintendent, then from college instructor to Associate Provost of Miami University in Oxford, OH. The family moved every three or four years, following the career path. During WW II, when Glenn was in the army, they lived in five states in seven months. As an educational administrator, he believed that entertaining was part of his job, so Doris had little time to devote herself to a demanding “hobby.” She did, however, do a lot of knitting, embroidery and other crafts works. After retiring to Whidbey in 1961, Glenn continued to work as Superintendent of Coupeville schools for six years, and as a Director of the Oak Harbor branch of Skagit Valley College. However, Doris declared that while he might have retired, she was ‘just plain tired!’ and their entertaining schedule was reduced. By then she had weaving on her mind.

In 1960, a friend who had just taken a beginning weaving course offered to show her what she knew. There were only a few weavers in Oxford, OH then. She sat Doris in front of a loom that had warp wound on for a man’s scarf, and showed her how to thread, sley and tie on. That Doris did and then discovered that she herself was going to weave it. She did, and she was hooked. “It was such a fascinating hobby, I couldn’t leave it alone.” She subsequently took many workshops, but never any formal lessons. Doris has a rare ability to focus very clearly and to keep her goal in sight until the work is done, including the documentation. She has detailed written and illustrated records of most every

project she has ever done. The records of her first learning projects read like a manual on beginning weaving.

What kinds of things has Doris enjoyed weaving? Almost anything. She especially loves pattern weaving and playing with color. The application seems less important to her than the enjoyment of the structure and the colors. Several years ago she figured that she had woven over 600 placemats, usually with all-over pattern, and many stoles both of which were in demand at craft sales in the 60's and 70's. She loves working with fine threads, and has woven earrings of sewing silk (though she had the customer assemble them herself!) and still has a necklace she wove. She has done wall hangings, yardage, towels and upholstery fabric – some of everything. She did them all well: "I can't stand sloppy weaving!"

She claims to have done only one truly ambitious project: a colonial coverlet. That was the goal that started her weaving, and after 13 years and many other projects to build her skills – and nerve, she says – she fulfilled it. Woven on a ground of 20/2 natural cotton with a navy wool pattern thread, it was a test of weaving skill, stamina and exactitude. She wove it in three strips in Whig rose (or Methodist Wheel). The navy yarn presented some problems: it had to come from two dye lots, and moreover it ran out five patterns from the end! She used yarn from the two dye lots in alternate patterns, so it would be part of the design if it were noticeable, and had some white yarn dyed (by an excellent dyemaster) to finish the project. Each pattern was measured with calipers to ensure that it was square, and when the strips were joined, the care paid off: the diagonals formed by the pattern squares are perfect! She was proud to weave into the hem: D.C.M. 1973.

In contrast, Doris has resorted to some quite untraditional materials, including selvedge trimmings from a drapery maker, which she turned into a cottage stair carpet and small rugs, and many placemats. And then there were the placemats with the unusual glitz effect, which comes from strips of dry-cleaner's bags! (They wear and wash quite well.)

At the outset, Doris didn't want to learn to spin, "because it would take too much time away from weaving." But eventually Mildred Sherwood started her spinning on a drop spindle, then a supported spindle, and that led to a spinning wheel of the box variety, in which the wheel revolved inside a square frame. Again she was fascinated by the process. She wound up spinning four-ply, seduced by her love of fine yarns. She also did enough work with natural dyes to make her husband suspicious of anything that came out of her kitchen in a pot: "Is that dye, or is it dinner?"

In Doris' family there were no weavers or spinners, even though her father was a sheep man in Eastern Oregon. Her mother, who was a teacher as well as wife and mother to four children, found time to knit but not much else. However, Doris has passed along some of her skills to one of her daughters, who will inherit her 8-shaft Gilmore loom and also the small, 4-shaft Purrington loom that folds ingeniously. She keeps a warp on the two looms, though she admits that she "can't get steamed up" to do much with them these days. Her daughter points out that that probably has something to do with being 91 years old. However, her sense of humor is lively: "If you lose your sense of humor you're out of luck!" In that spirit, she sends Guild members the following thoughts from her refrigerator door:

Five Good Reasons for Buying Yarn

- I It keeps without refrigeration, you don't have to cook it to enjoy it, you never have to feed it, change it or walk it.
- II It is less expensive and more fun than Psychiatric care.
- III It insulates the closet where it is kept.
- IV It provides extra weight in the trunk of the car for traction on icy roads.
- V It is our patriotic duty to support cotton farmers, textile mills and fabric stores.

---- Shirley Owens - 2001