

A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF FOLK ARTS AND SKILLS IN CHAUTAUGUA COUNTY -----

by Joyce Ferris Swan August 2, 1975

It seems important to me that I bring you my thoughts on Chautauqua County Craft in a special light, which, for better or worse, reflects my own aptitudes. Historian I am not. Historical, perhaps, from the point of view of longevity and inclinations, but among this august body of record radicals I cannot be considered an historian.

I am crafty when necessary, but craftsman I am not. I have simply happened into a position, which is the way I undertake most projects, of observing the craft scene in this county. Now that doesn't make me much different than 10 or 11 M other people who are part of the craft scene, reconstructing, managing, buying, decorating or otherwise participating in this new folk phenomenon.

My remarks this afternoon will address the subject of Chautauqua County folk art and craft in a broader perspective of the <sup>new York and</sup> national pattern of development. They are drawn from my observations within the county from personal contacts, letters, diaries, visits to knowledgeable people, museums and libraries to assist in interpretation.

A good many of you have contributed more than you know, and I hope you won't be too bored at having your own stuff prattled back to you: Elizabeth Crocker and her YesterYears, Ann Fahnstock, Mary Johnson, Mrs. Louis Henry, Irene Nagel and their good knowledge of weaving, Elizabeth Maher and her first hand recollections of many early arts: craftspeople like Helen Shelters, Alice Chamberlain, Helen Gilbert, Dennis Dorogi, Karen Loel, and observers like Malcolm Nichols and Priscilla Nixon, historians, curators and librarians like Jim Wheeler, Pauline Fancher, Loretta Smith, Jake Ludes, Laura May Cronk, Dorothy Sienkiwicz, Elias Kurtz, Richard Wright and innumerable householders who have shared with me.

What it amounts to is a preliminary overview - superficial at best, but perhaps helpful in assessing our beginnings, our progress and our worth.

The aspects I will examine briefly are the influences, <sup>the Renaissance</sup> the discovery and appreciation - the quality and continuity.

When Chautauqua County was settling, launching its skills, in the first half of the 19th Century, the Homespun Age was just about over. Jared Van Wagener said in the Golden Age of Homespun that it was certain that by 1845 the household and rural handier crafts had already entered upon their long decline. Life was still exceedingly primitive - farm - home self centered and self contained - but industrial villages were springing up. Railroads were being projected and constructed - the canals were already channeling

goods back and forth and a new era was about to be ushered in.

"Passing of the Homespun Age" - *Jared Van Wagener.*

"Students of this period have asserted that the Age did not reach its finest flower until during the first quarter of the last century. I feel sure that ( in 1825 we had a largely self-supported and self-contained rural social organization, but a new era was ready to be ushered in. I think it would be possible to demonstrate with something like mathematical exactness that the fruitful decade 1840 - 1850 was the most revolutionary of any ten years in our long agricultural history. During that very short period we largely passed from the age of the hand tool to the use of animal power." The tale end of an era then was our threshold. We were already catching the overflow of craftsman as the settlement moved from New England west, the itinerant, the restless, the independent, the inovative, the enterpreneur. We were in line for the best, and a few of the worst, probably. What else did we catch?

Our major influences were from New England; but the arts and crafts had not exactly flowered there where Calvinistic simplicity pervaded every aspect of life. It was Calvin's followers who founded Massachusetts Bay colony. Calvin's theology was based on the belief that all men were born sinners and since Adam's fall, by the will of God, predestined from birth to hell and everlasting torment, unless happily one of the elect was so foreordained to be saved. In this belief the Puritans found life endurable because they considered themselves to be the elect and in cases of doubt the individual found comfortable assurance in the belief that although certain of his neighbors were going to hell, he was one of the elect.....there was austerity of religious life and great simplicity in dress and manners. Pomp and Ceremony in church ritual was ~~anathema~~ *an anathema* as were the usual adornments of the church edifice, the stained glass windows, the sculptured decorations, pictures on the wall. The same paucity of artistic adornment was characteristic of the Puritans in New England for a long time after the settlement. Exteriors and interiors were plain, and mural decorations and painted glass did not begin to appear until another century had passed.

Listen to the description of a New England parlor. " Little more than a generation ago the comfortably situated New England family sparingly decorated its parlor walls with floral wreaths made of human hair snipped from the heads of relative and friends. It was a form of domestic art. One or two engravings...In some room there would be a framed motto worked in cross - stitch "God Bless our Home", or a similar sentiment. The parlor furniture would be black walnut covered with black haircloth and on a marble-topped table might be seen the artistic yearnings of the family in the shape of a rosette group or possibly wax flowers under a glass bell. Hooked or braided or woven

mugs on the floors exemplified the thrift and handicraft of the women of the household." There are some well-used parlors like this in Westfield yet.

New York craft then, became a product of what was left of the Elizabethan excellence after it had been worked over in the New England experience up until 1800 - skill taught by apprenticing, color that had survived the Puritan emollument, a traditional severity, and perhaps a great need to be delivered from it. Chautauqua County, in New York's western frontier added its own <sup>physical</sup> restraints which were even more severe than <sup>the</sup> spiritual inhibitions.

I'd like to share with you a diary account which appeared in the Fredonia Centinel in 1921. Other writers have used it - I've used it several times. I like it so much - a classic record of the grim fabric of life in settlement days.

Fredonia, October 1, 1921

Mrs Mary Thull of Bergen, N. Y. send<sup>t</sup> us the following from an old scrapbook left by her Father, the late Dr. Sylvester A. Danforth, formerly of Laona. It had been written 1824 by a good woman of Stockton, Mrs. Isaac Miller, Mother of Phin. M. Miller, now of Buffalo.

Stockton, March 10, 1824

Isaac says he won't have to cut any more trees to browse the cattle. The oxen are looking well. Our two cows are rather thin. We could not spare the milk, or we should have dried off the cows in January.

March 25. My husband and Varnum went hunting today and brought home a deer. We have had no meat but venison and a few partridges since October last. A bear carried away our hog in November. and the foxes caught all the chicken - the hawks' left.

April 6. Sold three bushels of wheat today for three shilling and nine pence per bushel, the first money we have had since January when Isaac sold two fox skins, 11 mink and two quarter of venison for six dollars.

April 15. Heavy rain last night that put the fire out and wet the punk; had to go to Mr. Trow's to borrow fire.\*

\*(The "fire" was the burning of hardwood trees which was done to clear the land, the ashes from the burns were used in the production of pearl ash which was sold for cash)

May 20 - Commenced to card and spin today. Our sheep sheared 35 pounds of wool

May 26 - Had company. Used the last of the one-half pound of tea we got when Ira was born; he will be 2 in July.

June 9 - Had a very dry time: set the slashing on fire, it is now burning fiercely.

Aug 1 - Isaac has got ready for logging. We brewed root beer for logging.

Aug 6 - Had a logging bee today. There were eight yoke of oxen here; some of them came five miles, Royal Putnam and John Robinson took charge of the bee. Our root beer is first class; the men prefer it to whiskey.

Aug 20 - Gathered golden rod and sumac to color flannel for underwear.

Sept 2 - Set the logging on fire.

Sept 8 - Had a good burn. Commenced today to gather ashes. We are very choise of the ashes. Everything must be put aside till we get them to the ashery.

Oct 25 - Went to the store; took our black salts and 10 bushels of wheat. Sold the lot for \$75. - got \$50.00 in money, the balance in goods. Our land payment is due Jan 1, amount \$100. Don't know where the other \$50. is to come from. Got a side of cowhide and a half side of sole leather for our boots and shoes, half pound of tea, two pounds of loaf sugar and a fine tooth comb; it took the rest to pay on our account.

Dec 1 - Isaac went through this morning to Laona with cart and oxen to get the shoemaker, Mr. Seymour. Had the good luck to get him, bench, lasts and all. This is the fourth time we have been for him.

Dec 14 - Commenced spinning flax. Want to make 50 yard of linen for sheets, bags and towels.

Dec 25 - Started at daylight to spend Christmas with Mr & Mrs. Taylor in Portland. They came from the same town we did in Vermont. The crossways are well covered with snow. Our oxen are *good walkers*, sled new. Mr. Taylor has seven children which with our five made a roomful. Got home at 11 p.m.

Jan 1 - We sold our cow, a steer, and so e ox yokes Isaac had made for some new comers, and got together the \$100. to make our payment on the ladd

Another original-source letter written *less than* 20 years later indicates the lingering *h*aic - the advancing refinements.

To- Eliza Strunk - 1847

Dear Sister We received your letter, was glad to hear that you were all well. I have delaid writing because I have not had ambition nor hardly strengt enough since the party to write a letter. We did not attend the wedding for number of reasons we will not dress our selves up to go to a wedding as long as Brother John lies without grave stones. I did not have but one weeks notice ~~and not~~ and not get any help- cleaned the house from seller to garret, took out those grate windows alone, filled the under beds anew which was no small job- then began my cooking, I baked pound cake, sponge cake, and cookies, five loaves of each, twenty-five mince pies, ten custert, and ten pumkin. I had the verry best of luck with all my cooking, and well I mite for Samuel furnished every thing nessesary. He got five kindes of trimming for the outside of my cakes. I trimmed allthe windows with new curtains, got new copperplate for my chair cushions, and new dishes, tumblers and got the best of oil for the glass lamps, got SPERM candles. Elias and Sarah came in the morning. The company bega to come in the after noon and came scattering along until about 7 o'clock.. a selected portion of each company was invited and sent tickets, to each gentl- en and also in that, a ticket to the lady which he was to have as his partner which made each try to rival his fellow in carriage, horse, and dress; it resulted in giting a pretty smooth set of "lads" together 15 pair, and after "Mr. and Mrs. Quis" was introduced to the company and "Mrs. Quis" kissed by the gentlemen the spell began to brake and in my day, I never saw so happy a company...no set music but all was musical and very much added by a music master who plade the malodion and sung with it. Eliza did you ever see or hear one plaid; is it not just the nicest thing you ever saw; but I must halt some for my thoughts, you know are alwise in the advance of my pen. At 8 we passed the "loaves and fishes" in the following manner..nappkins all around and plate. half past 8 past plates and knives all around - next coffee in cups and spoons. next past lofe sugar and cream then came on the pyramid cake - next followed a waiter with pie and cake - when all was done the plates and fragments was taken off.

And I was just weak enough, as I was not accustomed to such doings, to wish that you and Henry were here. Samuel was away in the field when Mr. Lee was here or he would of sent you a ticket, Henry and the young folks, but I kept a secret hope that some of you would come - but the dutchman had his wedding when it was ~~not~~ <sup>wet</sup> to blow. Elias had made a good choice. she is a good girl and out of a respectable family a high headed good feeling girl. Elias is proud of her and she of him, have gone to keeping house at Mr. Foreseths 5 miles from Westfield. She is handsome and full of glee a grate weever and much the sharpest for a trader.

May the first I have been three weeks writing this letter Eliza and I will try to finish it this time. My health has been very poor for a number of weeks

my weak side has got verry lame this spring. I have to keep a grate plaster on it and get the children to pump all the water as it is my rite side. I must tell you a little about my work. I have got my carpit wove thirty yards. I have got a peace of plain wocloth ready for the loom twenty 5 yardes and have just got my flax home for my table linen. I am going to make twenty five yards and must set it done to begin my wool in season.,if my side will stand it. samuel is making fence and has been all the spring - the children will all but Franklin, begin to go to school in a few days I have rote to Martha and Elcy but get no anser don't no whether the poor girl is yet in the land of the living or not. I have lookt for Polly all winter and that is all the good it has done me - but the first time you see her tell her to come and stay one week at least or any the rest of the friends that can come and will; we should be glad to see them. The measles is in the neighbourhood and I and the three youngest children have not had them. The commissioner has been on the week pas to lay the road through from Barnhartes to Westfield. They have three routes i contemplation...one divides our farm and passes through my door yard...they ar now leveling and we expect to no this week whether they pass hear or not - - I don't think much that I can come down this summer as I have no one to leave my family with but the old lady and she don't like them nor they her, nor no w to go and come as we keep no horses yet.If you have (not?) herd any thing from Hannsh do write and lets hear from her I ansuch a poor hand to rite a lette or I would have patience to read this and the next shall be shorter.

*Keedit* Harriet W.

Letter in trunk in possession of Mrs. Rulifson Stow, N.Y.

It was in spite of the early rigors that home hand craft survived - even thrived, and became more refined.

While women plied their needles and shuttles, men turned out needed items of wood. For the Chautauqua pioneer wood was a sustenance ~~x~~ economy - like the buffalo was for the plains Indian. It provided almost everything needed. It even provided him with the water power for the first machines, for the dense forests held the streams to their beds where they accommodated the undulating terrain with frequent waterfalls and their power potential.

In 1800 the area was covered with woods, magnificent white pine and many hard woods such as sugar maple, beech, red maple, elm, red oak, white oak, hicklry cucumber, tulip, poplar, basswood, white ash, black cherry, butternut, black walnut. Within the first 50 years of settlement, wood was supplying the raw materialmaterial for unnumerable small industries producing pails, washtubs, keelers, maple veneer, lath, grain cradles, hay rakes, scythe snathes, half-bushel measures, doors, sash, blinds, baskets, chairs, clocks, coffins, guns, tools, pianos, dulcimers and even the cover of the first book, according to

r. Nichols of Jamestown.

he swiftness of this craft development tells us considerable about the Yankee-returned Yorker. He came, more restrained than inspired, adopted to a formidable environment, was turned on by a good source of raw materials and power, and was soon shaping that environment to supply an influx of people...46,000 by 1844.

want to take a little time to talk about the Folk Art and Skills Exhibit now showing at the Patterson Library which was sponsored by the Peacock Society. This effort, a first of its kind, was an exercise in craft consciousness. You may have noticed that I have used the terms folkart, craft and skills interchangeably. I was not able to separate them, and most of the sources I consulted used them just as loosely. A folk art item, something made by hand by an untrained person out of materials at hand, for pleasure or use--became a craft if it was made often, and an industry if it was made faster. And in this county these sequences were so rapid that it was impossible to set each apart at least in this initiative effort.

However, around the county, we found enough residuals in back rooms, attics and cedar chests that another time there could be collections of just the folk art item, the toy, the decoy, etc. when we have raised people's consciousness to just what they have, or a collection of quilts, or weaving, or wood artifacts, painting, other skills.

If we wish to examine where the area is in the development of its craft consciousness we might note a quotation from Richard Wright "as soon as a people attain that point of consciousness where they desire to preserve their features or the delectation of their descendants, they may be said to have passed the primitive stage."

This makes us barely past the primitive stage. Our early delectations exist, we are just beginning to think about preserving them for our descendants.

Our assembly for the exhibit was an adventure. A weaver would lead us to an old coverlet. - A coverlet would lead us to a diary - A senior weaver knew a junior weaver who was reported to have wall stencils in her house. One stencil house led us to another. Collecting for one item - a Boston rocker- led us to finding another, such as a box of chair stencils. (See page 7A) then cont.p.7

This spot check of Chautauqua County crafts could end right here if that was all that was happening, or the most important of what has happened. This area is still a volatile craft area because it has joined the national craft renaissance "Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876 - 1916" We note the following: The arts and Crafts movement was principally a British phenomenon. The land of the Industrial Revolution produced the first and most decisive reaction against

want to talk about the wall stencils for two reasons; one, they represent recent chapter in discovery and artistic significance, two- we thought we were going to have them displayed at the exhibit and did not manage this.

The first report of wall stencilling has come from a restoration of a Greek revival house on the Kennedy-Randolph road. Actually, Cattaraugus County. The young folks doing the restoration got their clue from neighbors who said there used to be weird swastikas painted all over the walls. Tearing off wall coverings they did find stencilling, in every room, even on the ceilings. When they could generate no local interest in their find they took pictures and sent them to Cooperstown and later visited there where one of the curators asked them where Cattaraugus County was. They were told that theirs was the most extensively stencilled house recorded in New York state. Cooperstown has since asked for a copy of their stencils. Since then, or perhaps almost simultaneously, an extensive restoration project on an unattractive looking house, previously a tavern, just <sup>west</sup> outside of Fredonia on Rt. 20 has revealed elaborate wall stencilling in many rooms. These have been identified as the patterns of Moses Eaton a New England stencil artist. I am now in the process of seeing if we can interest the New England stencil guild to authenticate them and perhaps give us a clue as to the artist, his itinerate students, and some dates.

Within the last two weeks I have learned of another house that had stencilled walls which were later covered with paint. This one south of Ripley, at Battlesburg Road a defunct settlement.

The discovery of wall stencilling in this county opens a new chapter in artistic consciousness which continues to reveal the extent of refinement of skills which burgeoned immediately upon our pioneer period. Consider the examples at the exhibit which was not selective, (we just took what people offered us) the candlewick bedspreads, the exquisite drawn work tablecloth, the fine quilting the original 'comet' quilt, the innovative design in the Tracy table, the number and quality of paintings, the craft sophistication of a clock with wooden works the delicacy of the gold leaf on the china. THIS ALL INDICATES A PROMOTION OF AND THE FINE ARTS IN THIS AREA.

its own inventions. But the philosophy of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, fortified by the tangible creations of William Morris, soon affected the Continent as well as the United States.

America followed England in the Revolution and then in the rejection. But the old land was slower to catch the spirit, since it was still drunk with its own sudden ability to produce so many of its needs. The first creative efforts were imitative and soulless, as Oscar Wilde observed when he came to this country on a lecture tour in 1882 to '83. He said, "I find what your people need is not so much high, imaginative art, but that which hallows the vessels of everyday life...the handicraftman is dependent on your pleasure and opinion...Your people love art, but do not sufficiently honor the handicraftsman". (Decorative Arts in America in Arts and Crafts).

During the 1890's, there were various American flirtations with the curvilinear aesthetic of Art Nouveau. Yet it was not until the turn of the new century that the Arts and Crafts movement in this country resembled anything like a national experience. Arts and Crafts societies were founded in large and small cities, with periodic exhibitions to encourage fine craftsmanship and good design. The appearance of the Craftsman magazine from 1901 to 1916 paralleled this mature phase of the American movement which was characterized by the severe furniture of the so-called Mission style and the finest work of the Prairie school.

~~Text~~ - This volume features the furniture and other decorative arts of Herter Brothers, John La Farge, Louis Tiffany, Will Bradley, Harvey Ellis, Elmslie, Gustave Stickley, the Roycrofters George Grant Elmslie, George Maher, Frank Lloyd Wright, Robert Jarvie, Green and Green and Dirk Van Erp. The Jamestown furniture era paralleled these design developments.

The renaissance started in England in 1876, reached America in force in 1916, the rural areas and Southern Highlands in 1940, and Chautauqua County about 1950. Chautauqua Institution began teaching crafts much earlier, in 1903.

The classes, says an account from the Chautaucuan Weekly newspaper of April 11, 1907, were in response to an increasing demand for "training" of the hand and eye of students of all ages. Lessons were given from the Kindergarten up, ran for six weeks. The object of the school was "To avoid the commonplace and beautify the common". The shops were grouped near the road gate and trolley station than the Assembly enclosure. The courses were Design taught by Mr. Frank G. Sanford, Instructor in Manual Arts, State Normal School, Oneonta, N.Y.

Constructive Wood Work was taught by Mr. Frank P. Lane, Public Schools, Springfield, Mass. Miss Jean V. Ingham, the Elmwood School. Subjects, Primary Hand Work. Miss Lillian Pliege, Public Schools Lawrium, Michigan...Leather Working by Clarinda Richards, Hillside Home School, Wisconsin taught bookbinding.

George Rogers of Chicago Art Institute taught drawing and painting, W.B. Steven Bureau of Univ. Travel of Boston, taught the history of art.

Chautauqua's efforts were introverted and self-serving. We can't tell how much they affected what went on outside its walls. However, we can't dismiss the fact that quality instruction was available there for anyone who wanted to take it.

The first organized efforts at craft <sup>instruction</sup> construction in this area as far as I can ascertain was when Cornell Extension <sup>course</sup> was given to encourage an interest in American arts in the rural areas. Taught by Florence Wright Associate Professor of the College of Home Economics in 1949, the course brought people together from several counties at a time, two reps from each county, to disseminate techniques of authentic design, and to encourage appreciation of its proper application.

From Chautauqua County Alice Chamberlain and Laura Walkerman of Jamestown took the 14 week course which was given in Randolph. Each person who took the course promised to teach two classes of ten people. That was the beginning of the teaching career of Alice Chamberlain and her subsequent career as a furniture decorator for Jamestown firms.

At about the same time Helen Shelters of Ashville became interested in Early American painting and through a friendship which led directly to the efforts then being made in New England to recoup the artistry of that diminishing folk art, she was able to learn within the Esther Stevens Brazer tradition, the first <sup>here</sup> and foremost authority in New England. Mrs. Shelters taught <sup>most of</sup> those who are teaching now.

The ladies of the weavers guild have helped me establish the recent chronology of that craft. It began with a few weavers getting together in 1951 in Mrs. Eagle's home at Panama. In 1952 the YWCA introduced weaving and in 1954 the guild organized. Later Chautauqua provided workshops. Mrs. Louis Henry, a senior weaver of Sherman, tells me that the discipline influences have been from those of the handicrafts of the Southern ~~H~~ighlands and from Canada.

I've gone to some detail on this phase because I think it represents a significant approach to the craft industry - and WE MAY BE LAUNCHING INTO A POCKETIZED CRAFT INDUSTRY IN THE COUNTY - Our efforts began with instruction - a qualitative approach which was to influence those who would become involved - the learner the teacher the hobbyist the commercial endeavor. Items were made at first to please the maker - a criterion most exacting of all. Many other craft adventures are starting with performers, and then looking for someone to teach. <sup>in the</sup> Work ~~has~~ mid west, eastern Pa. and California that I have seen is not of such consistent high quality as that here.

Several conclusions may be drawn from this first and very sketchy survey of the craft of the Chautauqua region. The region lay in the crossroads of the Yankee and Yorker movement West, attracting many emigrants to permanency. It lay at the northern extremity of expanding settlement of Pennsylvania. New England and Philadelphia were the two craft centers of the country. The Chautauqua region was a frontier of each center. It received from each by way of settlers. As the section settled, craftsman with their skills already in hand moved to the area. The good source of water power was almost immediately harnessed for major production of such things as flour, paper, lumber, and soon the power was put to use in the production of other items. The advantages of industrial advance was upon the country by 1845. Power, knowledge, initiative moved the region quickly out of its pioneer period into more sophisticated productivity. This rapid course of events up until 1900 deposited much production upon the area. I feel that it may be one of the last fertile repositories of Americana.

Relating the past to the contemporary craft effort, I must conclude that in an area only sesqui-centennial away from its Yankee migrations, and only briefly removed from its Industrial Revolution, it is heartening to report that the calibre of the current craft endeavor in the Chautauqua region is wholesome and genuine with an emphasis on authenticity, creativity, self-satisfaction and quality. Craft has a natural environment here, large abandoned buildings, good roads, instruction, unemployment, loneliness, honest festivals: a few <sup>senior</sup> ~~older~~ craftsmen and managers to keep us within that Yankee restraint.

There seems to be a determination to return to the earliest period - a palingenesis, perhaps, a returning to the ancestral features, as Mr. Oscar Wilde said, "a hallowing of the vessels of every day living".