

A Weaving Life is a Good Life

In 1962, I happened to walk into the annual show and sale of the North Shore Weavers Guild in Evanston, Illinois. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the textiles for sale and the fine craftsmanship evident in each one.

I purchased a Christmas table runner and learned that the pattern was “Star of Bethlehem” and the technique was “overshot.” Although the pattern looked unbelievably complex, they all told me that I, too, could weave such patterns.

So, I signed up for a weaving class at the local Junior High School. There, on a two-shaft table loom I wove my first “heirloom”: a stiff, woolen, itchy, two-color scarf, which I proudly presented to my husband.

Next, of course, I wanted to weave that “overshot.” I borrowed a huge loom and pored over Mary Black’s *New Key to Weaving*, Marguerite Davison’s *A Handweaver’s Pattern Book*, and every other book and magazine on weaving I could find.

Mail-order catalogs carried yarns and all sorts of equipment that had never been mentioned in my scarf class. Even spools with white cotton coverlet warp that could be threaded directly on your

warp beam were recommended for overshot. None of the equipment I saw mentioned in connection to overshot looked anything like the little loom I learned to weave on, and nothing I read really told me how to use my borrowed loom. I was desperate.

At the time, I was also a part-time potter and heard about summer workshops at The Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. Their 1963 catalog showed they were holding a weaving workshop during the same session as a pottery workshop. “Why not take both?” I thought, not realizing how completely insane that was! The leader of the weaving workshop was Jack Lenor Larsen and the theme was: Weaving narrow fabrics.

My only weaving experience had been the “scarf.” Although it was a “narrow” fabric, it in no way prepared me for his class. I had to learn fast. I got a lot of help and worked hard—day and night. With the constant encouragement of Jack Lenor Larsen,

I returned home, now in love with color, texture, and pattern. And the pottery class? My career as a potter was over.

After the workshop, I purchased the loom I had become familiar with during the session: a twelve-shaft, two-beam, thirty-two-inch-wide Macomber. It has been my companion now for forty-four years, and I still weave on it almost daily.

What has always motivated me to weave is *pattern*, its interpretation with yarn, its complexity, and the limitations a loom provides. Creating pattern and controlling it while confined to


the shafts available continues to hold my fascination.

And it all started with the Star of Bethlehem overshot pattern in my table runner! The years that followed have been halcyon years for me—and for handweavers.

I loved pattern drafting from the start. I could always spend hours filling in squares on graph paper to design patterns and to figure out how different weave structures work. In drafting, a weft thread is either under or over a warp thread and vice versa, either a black square or a white square on graph paper. It’s a binary

system, the same system computers use. As soon as personal computers became generally available, the transition to using them for weaving happened quickly, increasing our interest in structure and design.

An amazing number of articles and books on drafting and weave structures appeared in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These were also the years of the emergence of fiber artists—weavers (and others) looking for artistic expression through fiber.

The two movements: the desire to master weave structures and the emergence of weaving as an art form each benefited from the other. These were the best weaving years of my life. 



Star of Bethlehem table runner woven by Ruth Wollet in cotton with a green metallic tabby weft in the pattern sections, purchased in 1962 by Clotilde Barrett.

CLOTILDE BARRETT of Torrey, Utah, is a weaver, teacher, quilter, and avid naturalist. She was founder and editor of *The Weaver’s Journal*. She has written several monographs and books, highly prized for their ground breaking analysis of weave structures (*Summer and Winter and Beyond*, *Double Two-Tie Unit Weaves* (with Eunice Smith), *Boundweave*, and *Shadow Weave and Corkscrew Weave*).