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Some Noted Weavers of the Southern Highlands

The story of the crafts revival was most interestingly told in personal terms, so writers like Eaton and photographers such as Doris Ulmann emphasized individual makers. Among the Allandale weavers who drew such attention were three sisters of Scottish descent who lived just across the state line in Tennessee. They had made their living weaving coverlets and plain cloth for their neighbors. But “store goods” had eaten into their business before Goodrich found them. One of them, **Elmeda McHargue Walker**, “set the standard for our industries,” Goodrich would say. In 1913, President Woodrow Wilson’s wife, Ellen, decided to decorate a “Mountain Room” in the White House, and Mrs. Walker was chosen to weave the upholstery fabric in the “Sun, Moon and Stars” coverlet pattern. The achievement and brought national publicity to Allandale and other mountain craft centers.

Josephine (Mrs. Finley) Mast lived in Valle Crucis, North Carolina. She carded, spun and wove coverlets, rugs and other textiles. Mast (1861-1936) had married in 1880 and moved to what became a 13-bedroom house for tourists and relatives, including two sisters who later lived with her.¹ With a sister, she set up her looms in a log cabin on the Mast homestead that had been built in 1812, and worked on two looms even older than the cabin.¹ In her early years of weaving, she grew her own flax and spun the fiber into linen thread. The farm sheep yielded wool. Bales of cotton were shipped to the valley by train and wagon, then spun into thread at the farm. She dyed her own fibers until commercially spun and dyed thread became more available and affordable.

A modern textile scholar has analyzed one of her overshot coverlets, in the Blooming Leaf or Bow Knot pattern, and counted 40 ends (cotton warp) and 70 picks (wool weft) per inch. Each repetition of the pattern measures 28 by 28 inches, so Mrs. Mast threw the shuttle approximately 1,960 times for each pattern-block repeat. The center seams match exactly, the product of nearly perfect weaving tension and treadling.

Mrs. Wilson commissioned two rugs for a White House bedroom. The large rug, approximately 17 feet square with a border on all sides, was woven in six long strips, 35 inches wide. The Sun, Moon and Stars pattern matched at the seams, of course. A second, small rug was woven in the same pattern, color and style to use in front of a desk.

Starting in 1909, Mast was the weaving teacher for the Episcopal school in Valle Crucis. In 1910 she demonstrated weaving at the Knoxville Exposition, and in 1913 her work was displayed in a Washington, D.C. exhibition. Years later, in 1930, she traveled with two other mountain women on a six-week tour to give weaving demonstrations in major department stores.

Another early program was the weaving department of **Crossnore School** in Crossnore, N.C. (1913-present). It used mail-order brochures that gave its aims along with prices: “To keep alive an almost forgotten art; to cherish in the young people of the mountains a reverence for this art; to provide a means of livelihood and pleasure for women and girls; to furnish homes with beautiful and lasting materials.” It ended with: “So will you buy?”¹

In 1922 Mrs. and Mrs. George A. Cathey established the **Blue Ridge Weavers** at Tryon, North Carolina. The mountain-born Mrs. Cathey got the idea while a student at Hull-House. That same year, D. Carroll and Eleanor Churchill established **Churchill Weavers** in Berea, Kentucky; she designed the fabrics and throws, he built the looms and ran the business.¹ The **Pi Beta Phi Settlement School** in Gatlinburg, Tennessee noted the success of Allanstand and decided to add a weaving program. Winogene Redding, a Canadian educated in Boston, ran it from 1925 to '29. She started with seven teenage girls but persuaded nearby women to weave in their homes. The school

had no electricity, phone or radio in the beginning and Redding had to do her rounds on foot, then by mule, and finally in 1928 by car. The Arrow Craft Shop sales outlet, begun in 1926, continues today.