

The ART Of COVERTLET WEAVING
The Old Northwest --Buley 1950-
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The art of coverlet weaving came to America in early colonial times and was practiced by New Englanders, Huguenots, Virginians, Carolinians, Dutch, and Germans; it came west with the settlers.¹ Coverlets were among the most prized household possessions. There were four main types of weaves distinguishable in the West: the overshot, double-cloth, "summer and winter," and the Jacquard. The overshot weave, which was one of the earliest in point of time, was geometric in design, and the wool instead of being interwoven with the lines or cotton was "floated or skipped over the background." In the double-cloth weave two fabric weaves were interwoven at the edges of the figures; both geometric and floral figures were used in this type. Weaves of dark blue wool and light-colored cotton or flax were usual combination; the pattern of dark blue showed against a light background on one side and in light against a dark background on the other side. The "summer and winter of double-face" weave, probably an American contribution, was more difficult and hence less commonly used. As in the overshot, a pattern of wool was underlaid and overlaid in a warp of flax or cotton, not by long skips, however, but by binding in the weft with every fourth skip, however, but by binding in the weft with every fourth skip, warp thread. The result was a closely woven durable fabric of a pleasing subdued effect, with the pattern, as in the doublecloth weave, showing light on one side and dark on the other.

Most of the homemade coverlets were of the overshot weave, woven in strips and sewn together; the double weave required a more elaborate loom and complicated threading draft, and, though sometimes made in the home, were usually the work of professional weavers. The drafts were written on scraps of paper, on old letters, bills, or notes, and passed around as were paper, favorite "receipts." Most of them were for patterns of geometric figures, but the combinations were varied and pleasing. There were "dainty, feminine patterns, patterns whose solid logic is clearly masculine, irrational patterns, stern and solemn patterns, prim patterns and exuberant patterns---each with its quaint name and its place in history. Curiously, they are like music. They are like little melodies of four notes, full of runs, trills and returns."²

With the soft-spun and home-dyed yarns in which indigo blue, madder reds, bronze-blacks and whites predominated, the weaver dressed the loom and set to work on "Puritan Maiden," "Tennessee Trouble," "Indian War," "Gentleman's Fancy," "Cat Trace," "Snail Trail," "Whig Rose," "Hoosier Beauty." or any of dozens of other patterns. The skillful or practiced weaver possessed a rhythm and touch which was individual. The resulting piece, if not as perfect as the mechanically loomed product, was just as durable and far more charming and satisfying in character; many of these homemade coverlets have remained true in color and intact in fabric, after three generations of use.

The Jacquard loom came to the United States in the Middle 1820's. Soon the professional weavers, largely Scots, Irish, or English, began to establish their shops in the West and to advertise their work. Many women, like their descendants a century later who suddenly found their old four-poster beds and heavy "bureaus" looking drab in comparison to the shiny brass beds and "chiffoniers" of the latest advertisements, became fascinated with the elegant combinations of flowers, eagles, scrolls, and mottoes in these Jacquard weaves. Besides it saved a lot of work: with numerous daughters each to be supplied with at least one coverlet, it was easier to furnish the materials, select a pattern, and pay the weaver \$5.00 or \$10. So "they took down their old

looms and stored them away in haylofts and garrets to lie forgotten for the next hundred years, and carried their beautifully dyed homespun yarns to the weave shop to be turned into and 'E Pluribus Unum' coverlet with name and date woven into the corner." ³ The weaver was often deluged under "backlogs" of orders which contracted for his time for year or more in advance.

1. Two important contemporary weaving books were J. and R. Bronson, THE DOMESTIC MANUFACTURERS ASSISTANT and FAMILY DIRECTRY in the ARTS of WEAVING and DYEING.....(Utica, N.Y. 1817), and Joseph France, The WEAVERS COMPLETE GUDE, or the WEB ANALYZED (1814). A general introduction to coverlets may be had from Elisa Calvert Hall, BOOK OF HANDWOVEN COVERLETS (Boston, 1912), or Mary Meigs Atwater, THE SHUTTLE-CRAFT BOOK of AMERICAN HAND WEAVING (New York, 1940). See also Rabb, INDIANA COVERLETS AND COVERLET WEAVERS, and Irma Filling Anderson, "Ohio Co Coverlets." in ANDIQUES, XLIX, 56-57 (Jan., 1946).
2. Atwater, SHUTTLE-CRAFT BOOK, 45.
3. Ibid., 13-14.

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