From Quilts to Chenille Bedspreads to Carpets

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Peacock Alley or Bedspread Boulevard were popular names for the stretch of US 41 Highway between Chattanooga, Tenn. and Dalton, Ga. Along that highway were spreadlines displaying colorful chenille bedspreads, including the popular Peacock pattern. My family home was located on US 41 and as we would drive along the highway, I often saw those cheerful chenille bedspreads fluttering in the breeze. After the completion of Interstate 75, which resulted in the re-routing of tourist traffic, the spreadlines dwindled until they finally disappeared. As a child I had no idea that these bedspreads were inspired by a 15 year girl in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

Catherine Evans Whitener was born August 10, 1880 on a small farm in Whitfield County, Ga. Catherine was the second child of seven and her education ended at the fifth grade level, which was common for young girls in rural Georgia at the end of the nineteenth century. When she was 12 years old, Catherine saw an heirloom candlewick bedspread in a relative’s home and was impressed by its handcrafted beauty. The bedspread was stitched with a white on white design in small squares laid out like a quilt. She vowed to make a similar bedspread for herself some day. In 1895, at 15 years old, Catherine decided to begin making her own bedspread. Her mother did not think she could finish such a time consuming project, for a farm girl did not have much leisure time after the daily chores.

Candlewicking was originally a colonial craft designed by homemakers to disguise and beautify darns in tablecloths and sheets. Leftover bits of candlewick were used to make loop stitches, which were cut and the threads fluffed out after laundering. Candlewicking was nearly a lost art and there were no instructions or pattern books available. Curious and innovative, Catherine had to figure out how to duplicate the heirloom bedspread and invented her own tufting stitch technique. First she marked the pattern with pencil in squares of three inches, using quilting frames. She based her pattern on the Irish Chain quilt pattern. Catherine took white thread in skeins and used a spinning wheel to make 12 strands of yarn. Next, this resourceful teenager modified a bodkin by grinding the blunt end into a fine point and began stitching. A running stitch was sewn in the base sheeting and then cut between the stitches to create a soft pile surface. When she finally finished sewing, Catherine laundered the spread in boiling water, which tightened the sheeting at the base of the threads. Drying the spread outdoors on a line further increased the fluffing of the cut threads, creating a surface that reminded Catherine of grass and she called the process “turfing.” In her first project Catherine used the crafts of candlewicking, quilting, spinning, and embroidering—all traditional handicrafts of Appalachian women. After finishing this time consuming project, Catherine thought she would never attempt another bedspread.

A year later, she “had forgotten the trouble” and decided to make another one. This time, she said, “I got along fine with this one.” Catherine called the second pattern Spear and Circle. She made a third bedspread in a star pattern four years later as a wedding gift for her brother, Eugene and his bride. The bride’s sister, Mrs. John Lange, was very impressed with the gift and wanted to buy a similar bedspread. Catherine was hesitant at first and unsure what to charge. It cost her $1.25 in materials and she sold the new bedspread for $2.50. According to Catherine, “She wanted to pay more, but I did not want to charge too much. Then a man worked for a dollar a day. This was the first sale of a tufted spread.” The transaction took place in 1900.

When Mrs. Lange’s friends saw her bedspread, more orders came in for Catherine. Marking the pattern in pencil was very time consuming, so Catherine came up with a stamping method. She
laid a finished spread on the floor and then the unfinished sheeting on top. Taking a tin box lid which had been lightly covered with grease, she gently rubbed the tin lid over the pattern, making dots on the sheeting. These dots would wash out later. Catherine was an innovative and resourceful young woman. She modified a bodkin for her needs and then came up with the stamping method for the patterns.

Stamping the patterns enabled Catherine to share her work with others. She was getting so many orders that Catherine began sharing the techniques and patterns with other women. To keep up with her orders, Catherine would stamp the spreads and other ladies would take them home and stitch them. Then Catherine would boil them in a wash pot and dry them on lines in the sun. The network of women grew to include stamping, stitching, laundering, and selling the bedspreads. Locals called themselves “turfers.” The cottage industry was actually a front porch activity, where the whole family would gather to help with the stitching. These family businesses, called spread houses, began displaying their finished bedspreads on the spreadlines along US 41 Highway about 1910.

A local cotton mill began supplying Catherine with the white yarn, which saved time previously devoted to spinning the yarn. The original bedspreads were done in white on white, but people began requesting colored spreads. Catherine wrote to a dye company in Rhode Island and requested samples of their colors. She began sending the white yarn to be dyed and returned to her. Later a dye plant was opened in Chattanooga. The cotton mill and dye plant were early examples of how the local businesses were being affected by this cottage industry.

The bedspread designs were geometric or floral, and some were based on quilt patterns. Plates, saucers, and bowls were used to trace patterns. Catherine had several patterns she designed; among these were Square Circle, Star and Circle, Wild Rose, Bowknot Rose, Flower Basket, Acorn, Daisy, Interlacing Ring, Doughnut, Hexagon, and Wedding Ring. The influence of traditional quilt patterns can be seen in some of her design names. The raised designs from tufts of thick yarn came to be called chenille, from the French word for caterpillars. The immensely popular Peacock pattern outsold the other designs by twelve to one. Tourists loved this bright gaudy pattern and it was a local joke that only Yankees bought the Peacock bedspreads. A special spread in the traditional white on white pattern was ordered for Scarlett O’Hara’s bed in the Gone With the Wind film.

In 1917 Catherine and her brother formed the Evans Manufacturing Company and in 1922 Catherine married W. L. Whitener. By this time she was making bedspreads, mats, and kimonos. Several women had started their own spread businesses and were making a good income. “The men began to notice the ladies had something worthwhile and began to talk of machines to make spreads.” In the 1920s the chenille cottage industry snowballed as yarn and sheeting mills and dye plants were built to supply the raw materials and for stamping sheets. Machine shops were set up to create multi-needle machines. The Singer Sewing Machine Company in Chattanooga developed machines with 1,500 needles to make parallel rows of tufting. Laundries were constructed for finishing chenille products. Printing shops were needed for tags and labels. Box factories filled the need for cartons and packing the products. Transportation was provided by rail and motor freight for deliveries. Spreads were sold in Marshall Field’s of Chicago, Wanamaker’s of Philadelphia and Rich’s of Atlanta. By the late 1920s more than 10,000 people in the Dalton area were tufting at home. Catherine made a huge difference in women’s lives, providing a home based occupation that would give them economic freedom.
Originally a source of pin money for the women, by the Depression tufting became a way to survive. In 1933 the New Deal influenced the move from cottage industry to factories. The National Recovery Administration encouraged mechanization through wage and hour standards and the NRA Tufted Bedspread Code. The chenille industry insured the economic survival of many families in northwest Georgia during the Depression. With the machinery, thousands of spreads could be made for twelve to fourteen cents each. Some women with children did not want to leave home for the mills. However, the mechanization made it harder for the home workers to make enough money, because the manufacturers could not pay them as much as in the past. Soon they were only making $1.25-$1.75 per week down from $3.50-$4.00 per week. In August 1936, two thousand home “turfers” met at the Dalton courthouse to protest the low wages.

Small chenille rugs and bath mats were very popular in a period where most homes had three to four rugs in the bedroom and two in the bathroom. People wanted larger and larger rugs and machinery for making these larger rugs led to broadloom carpets. Traditional woven carpet was very expensive and only the wealthy could afford it in their homes. In the 1950s, the invention of machines to tuft nine and twelve foot sections of fabric produced tufted carpet more economically than woven carpet. Wall to wall carpet became an affordable option for many homeowners. Other innovations in backing materials and synthetic fibers also made carpet more durable and affordable. The roadside signs for chenille spreadlines on Highway 41 were gradually replaced by carpet outlet signs on Interstate 75.

Currently more than 90% of U.S. carpet manufactured is tufted. In 1950, only 10% of carpet was tufted. At one time, Dalton, Ga. had more millionaires than any other city in the United States. The mills in Dalton produce 80% of the carpet made in the United States. By 2006 the carpet industry had 45,000 workers in Georgia with $4 billion in payroll.

Catherine was known for her generosity. Her willingness to share patterns and techniques and occasionally lend money ensured the continued growth of the chenille industry and its future evolution into the carpet industry. She shared patterns and support with the Bandys when they first started out. B.J. and Dicksie Bandy owned some dry goods stores in the area. When the post-World War I recession hit and people could not pay their accounts, the Bandys ended up $20,000 in debt to their suppliers. Determined not to go bankrupt, they went into the chenille business. Catherine agreed to help and also gave them three or four patterns to get started. B.J. and Dicksie Bandy went on to become the first to make a million dollars from chenille.

Catherine changed the lives of so many women in northwest Georgia. Her sister-in-law, Mrs. Eugene Evans, was involved in forming the Evans Manufacturing Company. This was the same woman who received the wedding gift of the star pattern bedspread. Mrs. H. L. Jarvis, wife of dentist, became Catherine’s agent in selling her bedspreads. Mrs. Jessie Bates started the J.T. Bates Candlewick chenille business. Mrs. Fred Caldwell started out delivering materials and bedspreads and started her own chenille business. When a customer requested a chenille bathrobe, Mrs. Caldwell made a pattern and sold all she could make. By World War II, Mrs. Caldwell was able to retire. And the list goes on of women who were inspired to start their own businesses. Many of these small businesses provided the roots for the Dalton area carpet companies in the future.

Though she never became wealthy, Catherine and her husband lived very comfortably and she received many honors and recognitions. Catherine Evans Whitener was the guest of honor when the Tufted Textile Manufacturers Association opened their headquarters in Dalton in 1958. At her death in 1964, her obituary appeared in the New York Times newspaper. A declaration
from Congress that same year recognized Catherine Evans Whitener as founder of the carpet industry. Catherine was inducted to the Georgia Women of Achievement in 2001 and to the Junior Achievement Northwest Georgia Business Hall of Fame in 2006.

Catherine Evan Whitener’s influences are broad and deep. Through her ingenuity a local handcraft evolved into a national industry. The tufted carpet industry is the only large industry started by women. Chenille bedspreads are now collectible folk art. The industrialization of the former cottage industry promoted the population movement from farms to towns. Rural women gained financial independence for their families and some founded companies that survive today. Who knew a teenage girl’s ingenuity would influence the social, economic, and cultural structure of the entire region of northwest Georgia? In her own words, Catherine said, “When I was a girl I wished that I had been a boy. Because a boy could find work to make money, and there was nothing a girl could do to earn money. I feel now that God knew best, and I am glad that I was a girl.”

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