

MARY HAMBIDGE
WEAVER OF RABUN

by Philis ALVIC

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Artist/Weaver
Murray, KY
c 1989

Mary Crowatt Hambidge was born on December 20, 1885 and died on August 29, 1973. Mary's story involves weaving, a business employing mountain women, Jay Hambidge and his theory of dynamic symmetry, a love of Greek culture, a benefactor, and an experiment in the simple life exemplified by agriculture and handicrafts. Information about Mary Hambidge is both abundant and scarce, and separating the myth from the reality is a difficult task. Mary's real significance lies in her example as a "late bloomer". She didn't discover what her main interest would become until her mid-thirties. She developed a career at an age when most people would be winding down theirs. And, she continued promoting the ideas she believed in, until she died in her late 80's.

Other than her birthplace in Brunswick, Georgia, not much is known about the early life of Mary Crowatt. She left the south at an early age to be educated in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her father had money, but lost it. In her twenties Mary lived in New York City, and had aspirations as an actress. However, she actually supported herself as an artist's model and as a professional whistler in an act with "Jimmy," a mockingbird!

Inspiration and Support

Mary's story is tied by many threads to that of Jay Hambidge's. While living in New York City, Mary met Jay, who was an artist and illustrator. He had a profound interest in the mathematical laws of proportion that he viewed as the basis for great art. This theory he named "Dynamic Symmetry." In 1918 he wrote to Mary that an examination of a maple leaf had provided the link between art and nature. "All Greek art is summed up in a leaf, and anybody can see it when it is pointed out." (Apprentice in Creation, p. 325) As a result of Jay's lectures, many of the leading artists of the time sought to

apply dynamic symmetry in their work. In the design field, the artist Tiffany employed the proportions in jewelry, and the Chrysler Corporation used it in several models of cars. Yale University Press published a book by Jay that related the proportions of Greek vases to plant growth, and in 1920, the press sponsored a trip to Greece for him to corroborate "dynamic symmetry" by on-site measurements of the Parthenon.

Mary accompanied Jay to Greece. Nearly thirty years later, Mary described her activity there for broadcast by the Voice of America to Greece. (Athene, Vol XI #4, pg. 20)

"It was while my husband was deeply engaged in his work on the Parthenon that I had leisure to wander about Athens, and one day came upon the Weaving Establishment on Amelia Avenue, started by the women of Athens for Greek peasants. My years of study with Mr. Hambidge had prepared me for what now happened. The moment I saw the looms and the Greek women at them, something deep within me, something that seemed to have been asleep in my subconscious, awakened, came to life. I knew that I had found the important thing for me. I had to learn to weave!"

After Jay embarked on a lecture series to defend the theory of dynamic symmetry, Mary remained in Greece to perfect her skill in weaving. In 1924, within three years of their trip to Greece, Jay Hambidge died suddenly while delivering a lecture at age 57.

Another major player in the tale of Mary Hambidge is Eleanor Steel Reece. Eleanor and her husband Hall Clovis were opera singers when Mary met them in the twenties in New York. Mary was by that time in her early forties and was attempting to eke out a living as a weaver. One of her largest commissions from this period was the designing and weaving of forty-five costumes for "Phoebus and Pan," put on by the Little Theatre Opera Company of New York. Eleanor was associated with this

production. Costumes were also supplied for the revival of the Delphic festivals in Delphi, Greece, and the dance-drama "Prometheus Bound." These last were both the work of Ted Shawn, and employed his dance company.

To The Mountains

In telling Mary Hambidge's story, it is impossible to separate her from the mountains of northeast Georgia. She was not of the mountains, and even though born in Georgia, did not visit them until after she was forty years old. For two years from mid-1926 to mid-1928 Mary wove at a friend's summer home near Mountain City, Rabun County, Georgia. While there, she discovered an American tradition of handweaving. As Mary described the state of weaving among mountain women as.

"They had kept their craft knowledge and their native integrity, but their looms had been relegated to the attics, or the woodpile, their spinning wheels put away to be used only now and then to spin a little thread for their men's socks." (Athene, Vol XI #4, pg. 21)

Even though Mary Hambidge thought her efforts unique, weaving and the revival of weaving was very much a part of the mountains. The early part of this century, especially in the teens and twenties, saw the development of the settlement school movement in the Southern Appalachian Mountains. The cornerstone of many of the programs that included adult activities was the development of handicrafts. Weaving was promoted as an ideal craft for women, because it could be done in the home. Most of the centers also created sales outlets. While some of these involved local shops, most marketed their products through church and women's clubs in the north. Purchasers were impressed with the value of hand-crafted items, as well as with the need to help an impoverished area.

Mary was able to impress upon Eleanor Steel Reece

her vision of a place in the mountains where crafts and agriculture would be practiced within an expanded life view of dynamic symmetry. This belief saw a self-sufficient lifestyle as the outcome of the practice of balance and proportion. Backed by a considerable family fortune, Eleanor pledged her support to help Mary realize her dream.



BUTTERFLY BUSHES BESIDE THE ROCK HOUSE

After considerable negotiating, Mary Hambidge purchased, with Eleanor's \$6,000.00 nearly eight hundred acres along Betty's Creek in the Rabun Gap area of the mountains of northeast Georgia. This property had been purchased by a man named Lattimer, from a group of Atlanta men who had a hunting and fishing club. They had built a large house of creek boulders and a small cabin on the property. A foundation had been laid out and work begun on a much larger lodge when a combination of

World War I and their lake dam's breaking forced them to abandon their plans. During Mary's almost forty years tenure on the property, several more buildings were added supporting the activities of farming and weaving. The Hambidge Center today is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

The Weaving Business

At age fifty, Mary Hambidge had re-established herself in the mountains of Rabun County, Georgia, and had begun to recruit women to spin and weave and men to work the farm. After a couple of years of operation, the weaving production was at a level where a serious marketing venture could be attempted. In 1937, again with the continuing help of Eleanor Steel Reece, a shop called Rabun Studios was opened at 810 Madison Avenue in New York City. Because handweaving requires several lengthy complex processes, the final product is expensive. A sophisticated, wealthy clientele was needed that could appreciate the one-of-a-kind quality of the fabric, and this was provided by the largest city in the country. Hall Clovis, Eleanor's husband, became the shop manager. Rabun Studios continued in business for the next twenty years promoting Mary's handwoven designs and, also, those of other weaving establishments.

Faye Thompson wove the original sample books that allowed customers to select fabric to be woven in specified widths and lengths. Most of the yardage woven was used for household interiors -- draperies, upholstery and bedspreads -- but some was bought for construction into clothing. Faye had learned to weave from Mary Hambidge during the summer while still a high school student. At eighteen she came to work for Mary full-time and continued for the next twenty two years. She eventually became the weaving studio supervisor.

Most of the weavers came to work for Mary when they were very young, as Faye did. They served an

apprenticeship, first helping with related tasks before being allowed to weave. Most weavers lived in their own homes along Betty's Creek and its tributaries, but some of the young women did reside in the Rock House. During peak periods of operation there were eight weavers at looms. The spinners were mostly older women, whose craft skills predated Mary coming to the mountains. Spinning was done in individual households, and the yarn then was brought to the Weaving Shed.



WEAVING SHED WITH ADDED SALESROOM
AT THE SIDE

There are accurate records of most of the yardage woven over the years in the Weaving Shed on Betty's Creek, and these are the most substantial remaining documents of Mary's work. At the prodding of Hall, who was the contact with clients, a system was devised for keeping track of fabric woven for general sale in the shop and for commissions. Beginning with "one" in late 1938, notebook pages were numbered and extend through the

mid-twelve hundreds when they dwindled out in 1957. These pages contained basic information about the fabric and a swatch about 2 inches by 6 inches. There is a concurrent numbering sequence, labeled Betty's Creek, that begins in 1950. The Betty's Creek sales room was opened in 1948 in a small room built onto the Weaving Shed, which now serves as a gallery.

Almost all of the yardage from the late thirties was made of handspun wool yarns. The sample sheets convey that most fabric was about 32 inches wide and 7 yards in length. The structure of the weaving was the simple over-and-under of a plain weave. For most lengths of fabrics the threads were tied onto the previous warp and pulled through to be stored on the back beam. This was much faster than the tedious process of completely rethreading the loom.

Some of the wool was left in its natural colors, but most of it was dyed. Mary Hambidge mixed dyes and dyed yarn in an open-air pavilion adjacent to the Weaving Shed. She had an acute eye for color and was influenced by colors of the mountains: flowers, leaves and even the red soil. As an illustrator, Jay Hambidge had developed a system for mixing colors that he shared with Mary. As with most of the ideas coming from Jay, in these colors she saw the balance and proportion of dynamic symmetry.

Wool yardage was still the most popular by 1947 at a midpoint in the shop's history. However, the demand for handspun had outstripped production capacity and about half of the wool yarn was commercially spun. Plain weave still predominated in fabric structure, although there was about one-fifth of the production in twill (an over-two threads, under-two structure that produces a diagonal line) and herringbone. During 1947 there was a total of 744 yards woven in 113 separate lengths. Two-thirds of the pieces were wool, with silk making up almost the remaining third. Less than ten lengths of cloth were woven in either cotton or linen. The most common production size was a width of thirty-four inches and a length of six yards. Commissions, which comprised

slightly under half of the production, tended to be longer with the longest being twenty two and three-quarters yards. Wide material, from fifty to fifty-two inches, was only woven when there was a specific request for it. By the early fifties, demand had fallen considerably for the yardage, with most of the lengths again being of hand-spun.

The regular numbered yardage records do not tell the whole story, however. There is an additional notebook labelled "Special Materials" that had yardage lengths dated. Within the year 1947, sixty-five yards of linen were woven for Yale University Press for use as book covers. And, there is no indication of why another forty-two yards in five separate orders produced in 1947 were not included in the regular numbering system.

A separate notebook with Order for U.S. Navy written on the top of each page contains the specifications of material used in President Truman's yacht the "Williamsburg." Cotton and silk yarns were woven into lengths in yellow, blue, green, and blue-green that were used for drapery, upholstery, cushions and bedspreads.

Many other smaller items were woven for Rabun Studios, but unfortunately exact tabulations of these do not survive. From existing examples and personal recollections it is known that scarves, shawls and men's neckties were woven in silk and wool, and then were vat dyed in a great array of colors. The shawls woven in silk were the only part of the production line that was known to contain the intricate inlaid designs of Jay Hambidge. Wool was used for other shawls and for blankets in a variety of sizes.

One of the weavers, Dean Beasley, still resides not far from Betty's Creek. She specialized in scarves of rabbit's angora hair and silk, and, also, woolen shawls. Dean was the last of the Rabun Studio weavers, putting in a total of thirty-one years at the loom.

A promotional brochure from the Rabun Studios stated:

"We are not repeating the old fashioned weaving of the Mountaineers. Our work is modern and based upon nature. We are attempting to bring out the simple beauty and quality inherent in nature's raw materials."

And, as this piece continues, it embodies some of Mary's other perspectives and hints at why surviving weavers say that she was a good person to work for.

"Our work is created by human beings, not produced by machines. Our workers are never hurried. Our objects are -- to bring out the natural beauty of the raw materials by simple, honest, hand process -- to produce quality, not quantity -- to give a living wage and a creative outlet to the worker and work of individuality to the individual."

Even though there had been a decision to close the New York Shop after the lease was not successfully renegotiated in 1958, the weaving continued along Betty's Creek. The fifties was a time of several major museum shows. In 1958 the "Weavers of Rabun" appeared in the Rotunda of the Arts and Industries Building at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. There were over one hundred and fifty items that depicted the best of Mary Hambidge's art.

Mary was getting sought-after recognition at a time when the business itself was diminishing. With more employment opportunities available in the mountains, weavers were more difficult to recruit. Also, Mary was getting to an age where most people retire to a rocker on the front porch.

As late as 1963, a fashion designer, Laura Willis, with establishments in New York, London and Paris, employed Rabun fabrics in a line of clothing. The yardage used in the garments was mostly handspun wool. Of this yarn, most was left in natural sheep colors with some dyed the rust color of the Georgia soil. Some of the blouses or details were of heavy silk fabric.

Hambidge Center as a small boy with his father, landscape architect Brooks Wigginton. He corresponded with Mary throughout college, and at her encouragement returned to Rabun County to teach high school and help her at the Foundation. He finished building a cottage on the property and lived in it for six years. In an essay written shortly after her death, he said

"Foxfire was born on her kitchen table, issue after issue came out of the little studio of mine; and when The Foxfire Book was published, I called her in the acknowledgements the "most remarkable woman I have ever met." "I meant it."

Mary Creety Nikas, an interior designer and friend, took over the running of the Foundation in the last months of Mary Hambidge's life. No formal plan existed for the continuation of activities after the death of Mary Hambidge. Mary could never quite imagine that she would cease to exist, and neither could most of her friends. Mary Nikas formalized and put into practice many of the programs that Mary Hambidge had organized informally or only talked about. The management of artists' colonies was investigated and guidelines were established which spelled out how creative people could come and work for short periods of time. A variety of workshops were also offered in crafts, writing and nature study, and a program of lectures and concerts was attempted.

At the present time, the Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences, under the direction of Ray Pierotti exists as a colony for two-week to two-month residencies. A living and work space is provided where one can work seriously without interruptions. In the warm months of 1989 there were close to forty people with Fellowships. Since 1944, there have been over ninety writers, almost eighty visual artists, thirty five with music as their focus, and fifteen with other areas of scholarship in the Humanities and Sciences.

The story of Mary Hambidge is still unfolding. Many parts are known, such as she draped her tiny figure only in loosely belted, handwoven garments, or that she thought every woman should have a loom in her house, or that people who knew her credited her with great personal charm. However, many aspects of Mary and her world are yet to be discovered or fitted into the cloth of her life. Without Jay and his all-encompassing theory of "dynamic symmetry," and without Eleanor and her encouragement expressed in financial support, there would be no story of Mary and her weaving.

She was a woman whose goals and direction in life became clear after the age of forty. She accomplished much from her home in the mountains, and had dreams of much more that were not realized. The natural amphitheater where she had hoped Greek plays would be performed became the place where her ashes were scattered.

Whatever interpretation is brought to the events of Mary's life, her legacy will always be the weaving she loved. She once said that when weaving, one went right into the treads and became part of it -- and she did.

THE WEAVING TRADITION OF THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS

Compiled by Philis ALVIC
in conjunction with

Mary Hambidge: Weaver of Rabun

Handweaving is generally thought to have been a part of life in the Southern Highlands, but early exact documentation does not exist. In fact, there is considerable debate about whether or not there was a continuous tradition of weaving in the mountains. By the turn of the century, the passing of weaving skills within the family from one generation to the next had died out. Of course, in generalizing about social trends there are always individuals that disprove the case, and it should not be thought that there were no weavers left, or that there were no handwoven items to be found in Southern Highland homes. But, with better transportation making commercial fabrics available, weaving had lost its place among useful household skills to be transmitted to the young.

Many homes possessed a valued coverlet or two that had been woven by a grandmother, but other handwoven items were more likely to have experienced heavier wear, and then to have been discarded. Looms were dismantled and stored as stacks of lumber (recognizable only to the initiated few) or simply used as scrap wood.

In the United States, rapid industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century, and the growth of immigrant populations, resulted in squalid living conditions in large cities. Among the responses to this problem, there developed the social settlement school movement, which provided diverse programs to improve the quality of life for the urban poor.

In the early part of the twentieth century, groups of women developed centers in the south for the rural poor, using the social settlement school model. The scope of the settlement school movement in the mountains was much different from that in the cities, although it shared the mission to help alleviate the debilitating effects of poverty among the people. Public education had not reached into remote mountain areas, so schools were established to teach children basic literacy. Besides providing comprehensive programs for children, there were also projects for the rest of the family.

There was a pressing need to develop sources of income for mountain people which would supplement their subsistence farming. Production of hand crafted items became the major method to bring in money that did not require a radical change in lifestyle. This was termed "Fireside Industry," because it did not require the worker to relocate in order to practice it. From the settlement school movement the crafts of the mountains were revived.

Weaving was the major craft encouraged among women, and it was a part of most of the settlement school programs. In many locations, even though weaving was remembered, there were not skilled weavers to serve as teachers. Therefore, weaving teachers were usually imported. While the transmission of weaving from one generation to another was not continuous, it was discovered that many weaving patterns or drafts had been saved from earlier times.

Marketing of the crafts production from "Fireside Industries" was usually done through the organizations that sponsored the individual settlement schools. These, for the most part, were churches or women's groups that were usually located in the North.

The Weaving Tradition of The Southern Highlands, Page. 2.

When a woman paid the substantial price for a coverlet, she was also buying a link with her own ancestry and providing help to the less fortunate. Handicrafts were thought to be morally uplifting, and their support was encouraged on that ground. With the purchase of a handcrafted item, one bought an ideology, too.

Berea College in Kentucky, and Francis Goodrich at Allanstand, North Carolina, were among the first to organize and market weaving. Following shortly after them in the early part of the century were the Bitmore Industries in Asheville, North Carolina, Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky, and the Pi Beta Phi School at Gatlinburg, Tennessee. A little later Penland Weavers and Potters was started at Penland, North Carolina and the John C. Campbell Folk School began its varied operations. There were dozens of schools and marketing cooperatives scattered throughout the mountains in the early part of this century. In the late twenties and early thirties, several of these groups joined to organize the Southern Highlands Handicrafts Guild.

Although most of the organizations that promoted weaving have ceased operations, several managed to adapt and still survive today. Most notable are the crafts schools of Penland, Arrowmont and John C. Campbell.

Mary Hambidge did not believe there was weaving still being done in this country until she discovered it in the mountains in 1926. She never allied herself with other weaving ventures, because she viewed her produce as modern, while others were trying to recreate.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

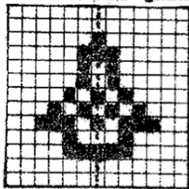
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Eaton, Allen. Handicrafts of The Southern Highlands. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973. (reprint of 1937 by the Russell Sage Foundation) This is an exhaustive compilation of crafts activities in the mountains in the first third of the century.

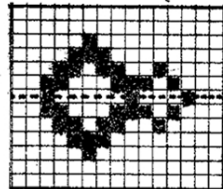
Goodrich, Francis Louisa. Mountain Homespun. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989. (reprint from 1931) This chronicles one of the earliest revivals of weaving in the mountains at Allanstand Cottage Industries, by its founder.

Whisnant, David E. All That Is Native and Fine. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983. The beginnings of both Hindman and Pine Mountain settlement schools and the John C. Campbell Folk School are chronicled in detail.

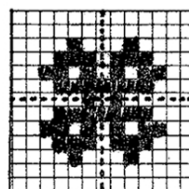
SYMMETRY: A figure can be said to be symmetrical when information on one half is repeated in a mirror image on the other. There is a pivotal line where the shapes are balanced out from the center. Figures can exhibit symmetry from side to side, top to bottom, or a combination of both, where all information is contained in one quadrant.



side to side

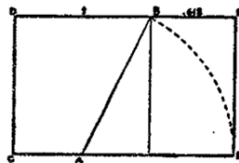


top to bottom

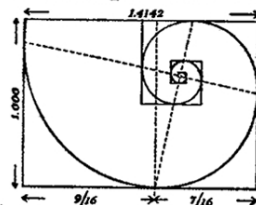
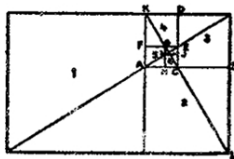


one quadrant

DYNAMIC SYMMETRY A figure can be said to possess "dynamic symmetry" when it conforms to certain standards of proportion that correspond to those found in growth patterns in nature. *Phyllotaxis* is the distribution of one part of a living organism to the whole. Common examples are the proportional placement of leaves along a stem, the spiral of seashell, or the distribution of seeds in the head of a sunflower. The Greeks had developed a system they called "The Golden Section," on the ratio 1.618 or "phi". This number, 1.618, is also the ratio of one number to the next in the Fibonacci Series. The "Fibonacci Series" is the series of numbers which are arrived at by adding two previous numbers to get the third, i.e., 118, 191, 309, 500, 809, 1309, 2118. Jay Hambidge used this ratio in the development of what he called the rectangle of the whirling square.



Starting with a square, the line AB is drawn from the corner to the mid-point. AE is drawn equal to AB and then the rectangle "CDEF" is completed.



When the added rectangle is divided into a square and the resultant rectangles are also divided into squares, the spiral drawn through the opposite angles is logarithmic, as are the spirals found in nature.

Jay Hambidge identified many relationships based on the square and its expansion into rectangles. By drawing systems of diagonals on different parts of the rectangle, he was able to develop a tool for analysis of objects. For example, his study of human skeletons verified that even though there were variations among individuals, the proportions of Dynamic Symmetry were present in the human form. Hambidge also applied these tools to Greek vases in the Boston Museum, and published a book on his findings through the Yale University Press. Later, with the support of the Yale University Press, he travelled to Greece to test his theory of Dynamic Symmetry by actual measurements of the Parthenon.

Since the system of Dynamic Symmetry is based on the comparison of one part to the whole, it can be applied to the analysis of objects of any size. Hambidge viewed this discovery as applicable not only to analysis, but also as a creative tool for use by the artist. In his view, "The actual process of studying and understanding the working of a natural design law, can open up a world of new ideas and frees the mind for real creation." (preface... The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry)

Many artists and designers in the time of Jay Hambidge were attracted to the theory of dynamic symmetry and wanted to learn more about its workings. Hambidge lectured and taught classes, and established a magazine "The Diagonal" which was published by Yale University Press.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

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