



MARY E. BLACK 1895-1988

Mary E. Black, an occupational therapist, teacher, master-weaver and writer, created almost single-handedly a renaissance in crafts in Nova Scotia in the 1940's and 1950's.

Mary's interest in crafts, specifically weaving, can be traced back to when she was aged eight in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, after she saw a picture of a Native loom. Left on her own one day, she built a small loom. By evening, she had woven a grass doormat and the family wiped muddy boots on it for years

The Key to Weaving, her best-known book, was published in 1945. Its clarity is without parallel. It remains even today one of the most lucid books on loom-controlled weaving and a handweaver's prime source of information.

Cover graphic: Overshot name draft, derived from Mary E. Black's name. Designed by Alicia Marr and woven by Fran Nowakowski

CONTENT AND ACCESS TO THE COLLECTION

The collection consists of approximately 13500 textile samples and yarn samples. They range in size from 2.5 cm square to 104 X 49.7 cm and include examples of loom and finger weaves, tapestry, knitting, lace, hooking, batik and embroidery. Mary E. Black, Joyce Chown and others, either known or unknown produced the samples. The collection also includes support materials to the textiles, plus photographs, correspondence, publications, clippings, audiotape material and her manuscripts.

A portion of the collection is now available online at:
<http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/black/>

To view the collection in person please visit:
Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management
6016 University Avenue
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
(902) 424-6060

1995 - 2009 Atlantic Spinners and Handweavers
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MARY E. BLACK

KEY TO WEAVING COLLECTION

Presented by
Nova Scotia Archives and Records
Management (NSARM) &
Atlantic Spinners and Handweavers (ASH)



MARY'S CAREER

In 1919, at age 23, she was trained as a ward occupational aide at McGill University in Montreal. Her first two jobs were in Nova Scotia - at a tuberculosis sanatorium and then at a mental hospital, where she taught crafts to men returning from the World War I trenches.

She once wrote that there was much more to be achieved through occupational therapy than had been realized. In 1922 Mary moved to the U.S.A. and over the next 20 years, she helped to develop new ways of treating physical and mental ailments and set up new occupational therapy programs in hospitals in Michigan and Wisconsin.

In 1943, Mary was asked to return to Nova Scotia to develop a provincial handcraft program. She became director of the Handcrafts Division in the Nova Scotia Department of Trades and Industry, and organized centres to teach and promote weaving, ceramics, needlework and other crafts.

Realizing a need for instructional texts, Mary Black extended her teaching of weaving through writing.



From 1944-55 she wrote and edited *The Handcrafts Bulletin* for the Nova Scotia government.

Other well-known publications include: *Weaving for Beginners* (1953), *The Sett and Weaving of Tartans* (1954), and *Handweaver's Reference* (1954). With Joyce Chown, she was co-owner and publisher of the bimonthly *Shuttlecraft Bulletin* (1957-60), during which time they also co-wrote *Thread Guide for Handweavers* (1959), and *Colour Guide for Handweavers* (1960). Later she teamed with Bessie Murray to produce *You Can Weave* (1974).

Although Mary retired in 1955, her 12 years' work in Nova Scotia had a lasting impact. Crafts people found pride and profit in their work; cottage industries arose which continue to thrive and still provide finely crafted goods.

Mary Black also helped to establish professional organizations: the Guild of Canadian Weavers, the Nova Scotia Craftsmen's Guild, and the Halifax Weavers' Guild, now named the Atlantic Spinners and Handweavers. In 1971, she was appointed Honorary President for Life of ASH.

When she died on February 11, 1988, at age 92, her estate bequeathed to the ASH, a hand-made chest containing, in orderly sequence, the collection of superbly woven textile samples along with research notes and correspondence relating to weaving courses and her published works.

CONSERVING MARY'S LEGACY

The bequest of her textile collection was not only a gift of the past, but a responsibility for the future as well. To keep this unique collection secure and available for study, the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management made an exception to their policy and agreed to receive them as archival material.

The collection of 1,350 textile items required careful conservation, which ASH agreed to provide. Costume and textile specialists, Clary and Sharon Croft of Halifax, recommended a basic conservation plan costing around \$5700. This was well beyond the resources of a small volunteer society.

ASH donated \$500 to defray preliminary expenses, raised \$1700 through a raffle and applied for and received a grant of \$2000 from the Jean A. Chalmers Fund of the Canada Council. Additional funds were solicited from the weaving community. Many weavers' and spinners' guilds across the continent, as well as individuals who had been influenced by Mary E. Black's work, sent contributions both large and small.

Conservation work began in December 1993. Over the next year, under careful supervision of the Crofts, ASH volunteers and friends removed the destructive adhesives, staples and acidic materials; then cleaned and labelled the textiles using current archival standards. The volunteer time for conservation work amounted to 658 hours. The project was completed in February 1995.

CONTINUING MARY'S LEGACY

In 2007, the Year of the Craft, ASH took on another project - to promote and expose the Mary E. Black Collection to the public. The project consisted of three phases. Firstly, a visual display of textiles, photographs, and correspondence from the collection, titled *Mary E. Black: A Legacy* was exhibited in the NSARM lobby. Secondly, a program was presented to the textile community with guest speaker, Wendy Landry. Her presentation was titled *Mary E. Black - Visionary of Canadian Crafts*. A viewing of a small portion of the collection followed the lecture. Thirdly, in partnership with NSARM, a web site was established featuring a selection of digitized textile samples, along with a very small portion of photographs and correspondence.

In order to execute this project, ASH applied for and received a grant for \$2569 from the Strategic Development Initiative through the Heritage Division of the N.S. Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage. ASH provided more than 600 volunteer hours to execute the many aspects of this important undertaking, as well as funds of \$856 to cover additional costs. Volunteers explored thoroughly the Mary E. Black Collection to identify and set aside those textile samples that best suited the visual display, program and web site.