

A CIRCLE OF THREADS

by Daryl Lancaster

I attended college as an art major. I had some minor talent and it seemed like the thing to major in, in the 70's. I was really sent there to find a "husband" but an education "didn't hurt", especially if I "found myself widowed later on in life". I took my prerequisite 101 classes, Painting and Drawing 101, Photography 101, Color Studies, and Clay 101. Then I discovered the fiber studio. I was in love. They had looms, spinning wheels, dyepots, fiber, thread. I never left. I took every level fiber class they had and when I ran out, I made them up for independent studies.

Around my sophomore year I met a guy. A nice guy, named Kevin. Mom and dad were happy. We met at a campus party; he was already gainfully employed as an engineer (what is it about artists and engineers?) and would stop by a campus building to visit friends on his way home from work. I ran into him frequently and on one of my encounters I happened to have my arms loaded with wet newly dyed handspun yarn fresh from the dyepot in the fiber studio. Kevin saw me and commented that his mother did that. I thought he either had a very cool mother or was using the most creative pickup line ever. Either way I had to find out more. He went on to explain how he came home from work one day the previous week and the whole house stunk from boiled walnut hulls. I knew he was telling me the truth. I couldn't wait to meet his mother.

It took a number of months of dating before he actually took me to his apartment. I remember walking into his apartment for the first time and seeing a large pillow covering every surface big enough to hold one. I commented on them and his mother, Margaret Lancaster,



Margaret Lancaster
In Memoriam
1907-2006
Photo: from a Yankee Magazine
article about Margaret, Dec 1976

pulled off a covering to reveal the most exquisite lace I'd ever seen, thousands of pins and wooden bobbins everywhere. I had never seen anything like it, mind you I'm studying fibers and textiles in college. She told me it was bobbin lace. She also had a couple of spinning wheels. I was in love a second time. Unfortunately she was in the process of retiring and had decided to move to Vermont and spend the rest of her days spinning, gardening and making lace. I was so depressed. My boyfriend had asked me to bring my spinning along. I proudly showed her what I had learned and she said in a very kind voice, that if I wanted to really learn to spin, I should come visit her in Vermont.

I continued to date her son and we both drove her to Vermont not long after, for her new life. The relationship continued and having run out of fiber courses to take, and having been invited to Vermont for an extended stay with Margaret, I decided to do an independent study over the winter session and learn bobbin lace. I loved it from the beginning, incredibly meditative, beautiful to look at, even in progress, I took to it instantly. By now I had a good understanding of fiber structure and I could really "see" the stitches. The next Christmas my boyfriend gave me my first bobbin lace pillow. I was home for Christmas and my parents were watching me open my gift. I began to cry, so excited and pleased, and I remember my father saying, "A padded toilet seat cover, what kind of gift is that?"

I continued to make lace, and would attend a Bergen County lace group headed by Gunvor Jorgensen every time my mother-in-law came to NJ to visit. Kevin and I were married the year after I graduated in 1978, Margaret made yards of narrow bobbin lace for my wedding gown which my mom, who taught me everything I knew about sewing, had made. Margaret also made me a Bucks Point lace handkerchief to carry down the aisle with my bouquet.

My first job out of college was teaching crafts in a mall craft store chain. An interesting job for me because I learned there, how to

teach. If I didn't know the "craft" they sent me to school to learn it. Stained Glass, Calligraphy, needlework, decoupage, and yes that 70's fiber technique, Macramé! I taught more ladies (and a few gentlemen) how to make Macramé plant hangers (ceramic owl eyes were popular) and bathroom curtains. The hardest part I found in teaching was to get them to choose which color to buy. I learned how to take each component in a craft and break it apart into the tiniest pieces. Teaching in a horseshoe shaped center I learned how to teach upside down and backwards. No easy feat especially when teaching calligraphy. One really learns a technique when they begin to teach it. I even got a job teaching bobbin lacemaking at a local adult school.

I bought my first large floor loom with guidance from my mother-in-law and a small inheritance from my grandmother. Margaret, turns out, had studied weaving too, at Penland. She bought a small table loom while living in Vermont. As my weaving studio grew and I began to show my work at craft fairs, I found less and less time to make lace. For the next ten years I worked as a production handweaver selling my work all over the northeast, developing a modest reputation for well constructed handwoven garments.

I began to teach weaving and more specifically garment construction for weavers. There were a lot of weavers out there and most of them couldn't sew well enough to convert their handwoven fabric into a really wearable garment. I developed my production jackets into classes to teach crash courses in sewing to handweavers. I developed quite a reputation for my classes. They were intense and you went home flooded with information, ideas, and good, solid, technical skills. I've taught more weavers how to make bound buttonholes...

In 1990, my husband and I gave Margaret her first grandchild. And in 1992, my second child, her only granddaughter, was born. By now, into her 80's, she had given up the tough winters of Vermont and settled in Connecticut in a senior's complex. Her eyesight and stamina were not the same and she began

doing less and less spinning and lacemaking. She gave me her weaving equipment.

I was asked to plan a day of "colonial" crafts for my town's 75th Anniversary. It was primarily for school kids to attend. My son was in first grade and he would get to see mom weave in front of all his friends. It was very difficult to find craftsmen, and I really wanted a bobbin lacemaker. I had lost contact with that whole part of my life and spent countless hours following empty leads. I decided to see if my mother-in-law was up to it one last time, for her grandson. She agreed and I drove her down from CT with all her lace pillows and paraphernalia and I went up into the attic and dug out all mine. I looked at the patterns, a little dusty but still impressive after all these years and I added them to her presentation. The kids were all very impressed and my son was so proud of his grandma, now three months shy of 90. But I knew she would probably never make lace again. She could no longer "see". She stumbled and faltered and I found myself coming to her aid more than once. And I hadn't touched a pillow in 20 years. With tears in my eyes, I realized if I don't carry on this exquisite craft, it will die with her.

I stared at the pillows for weeks after that. I struggled to get the confidence to just plow right in. It had been too long. I played with the beginning patterns and then one night I took a magnifying loupe and dove in head first and refused to quit until I figured out a silk handkerchief edging that was 2/3rds finished twenty years ago. It was one of life's little personal triumphs when I actually made it through one repeat.

I had become a 4-H leader by that time and the County fair was soon upon me. I volunteered to teach kids how to weave on a floor loom in the demo tent and at the last minute I decided to throw in my lace pillows as a public service and to show the kids the possibilities. I wasn't sure there was anyone around who still did lace. The response was overwhelming. I had at least two hundred kids, all ages, and even a blind woman and her guide dog on the loom over the course of the weekend. And I talked about lace and my story of how I learned to do it until I knew that my fall



Margaret demonstrating bobbin lace at the New Hampshire League of Craftsmen, 1975

project was to really get back into lace making, even if I had to do it alone.

I had the Emperor's Crown handkerchief, with sixty some bobbins on my large lace pillow, the one my boyfriend gave me in 1976. I was determined to complete it. Some of the bobbins had broken off and I reconnected them. I found a mistake I had made twenty years ago and corrected it. And then I "saw" it, it all came flooding back, the sewing edge, the spiders, the cross, the twists, the grounds. Within a few nights I had remastered the Emperor's Crown, picking up where I'd left off twenty years ago.

While surfing the Internet I came across the web site for the International Old Lacers and down loaded the membership form. With my check in hand I sent it off, not sure what or who was still out there after all these years. Within a few weeks I was delighted to receive the IOL Bulletin with Gunvor's name mentioned on almost every page. She was still

going strong and teaching the joys of lacemaking to yet another generation of eager folks. Then the IOL directory arrived. My eyes popped out of my head. It was so thick! Lacemaking was as strong as ever. I looked up NJ and found a number of groups. After one phone call I heard about the "Lace Day" sponsored by the "Lost Art Lacers". I rearranged my son's 9th Birthday party to attend. I left my children, and drove west in a snow squall, not sure what to expect. I walked in the door of the village hall and I almost cried. I'd come full circle, back home; threads, books, friendly, helpful faces of all ages, all generations. And bobbins, thousands of bobbins, even ones made of glass. And spangles. My most favorite bobbins of all had spangles and I didn't own any. I had amassed quite a bead collection in the studio, so I bought four dozen simple turned wooden bobbins, and some wire. I spent the next few days immersed in a pile of beads and bobbins and needle nose pliers and with my daughter beside me helping me choose

combinations of beads, I fell in love all over again. I e-mailed Margaret and told her all about it. She was beside herself with pride. At 91 she became housebound so my husband, her son set her up on a computer and we communicated daily by e-mail. The computer had become her link to the world. She never stopped learning.

At 98, after a couple of bad falls, Margaret could no longer stay alone in her apartment. We were fortunate to be able to move her to a nursing home near us in New Jersey. I know she was never happy with that move, there were bright spots, whenever her grandchildren, now teenagers, would visit. Her face always broke into a smile when they came. I visited her every day I could. Margaret loved crossword puzzles, word games, Scrabble, she loved to read, mysteries, and Newsweek. At 99 she still knew exactly what was happening in the world. We brought a laptop in for her to use for her 99th birthday. But her

eyes were failing, and her hearing very poor. She was so unhappy to be still living in a body that couldn't do what she wanted it to do. By October of this year, she began a rapid decline. She didn't get out of bed very often, and began refusing food. While I was traveling in the Midwest, I got an email that Gunvor had passed away. How sad that she had even outlived her old lace teacher.

Margaret died on Halloween, October 31st 2006. Kevin and I were both with her. The hospice nurses came in shortly after, dressed like Bumble bees for Halloween. It was a surreal moment, one that made me smile. She had been so busy and productive for most of her 99 years. We mourn her loss, but celebrate her life and the way she lived it. I think it is fitting that Gunvor and Margaret died within a couple of weeks of each other. I see them together making lace, decorating Heaven with lovely white linen.



Margaret presenting Daryl with a Buck's Point lace handkerchief for her wedding.