

My history of braided rugs.

My paternal grandmother was born in the late 1800's. I often think how very lucky I was to be a young child growing up sitting next to her on the couch and having her teach me sewing skills. Of course, she did have a treadle Singer sewing machine, which my cousin still uses to this day. However, most sewing and mending was done by hand. I was a very inquisitive youngster and once asked her why my mother did not teach me to sew. She promptly let me know that my mother was cooking, cleaning, and tending seven children and didn't have the time for it.

"Waste not, want not"; "A stitch in time saves nine"; and "Idle hands are the devil's workshop" were some of my grandmother's favorite sayings. In order to stay busy and be productive, she did the mending for all of her children's families. These families were large because they operated busy dairy farms. It was something that she could do to help them out. As you can imagine, there were many chances for me to practice and perfect my hand sewing skills. Even when I sew now, she is still right beside me in spirit.

In that day and time, farm homes were not insulated and did not have central heat. These houses sat atop stacked stone foundations with dirt floors. These were called root cellars because it was the perfect environment, cool and damp, for storing your root vegetables crops thru the winter.

This type of construction made the floors cold. A solution to this was braided rugs. The great depression in the 1940's made any goods or money hard to find or afford. Traditional braided rugs were never made with new fabric. New fabric was used to make clothes, which were worn until you couldn't mend them anymore. Then, the fabric from these clothes were turned into quilts and braided or rag rugs. These items not only decorated the home, but they helped to make the floors and beds warmer.

Even while these rugs and quilts were made of scraps, they were made with care and pride to last. My grandmother instilled this in me. If I did not sew something properly, she would instruct me to take it apart and start over. Care was taken to choose colors that complimented each other. Quilts were embellished with embroidery and fancy stitches. Basic stitches were firmly placed and knotted frequently so if one did break, the whole row would not unravel. The braids and lacing of the rugs were done firmly so the rug would last and not stretch apart.

I take care to upcycle as much fabric as possible. One source of fabric is yard sales: think of nice wool scarfs, blankets, men's and women's dress suits from the days of formal office wear – even some of my own from the corporate days! I do purchase new fabric to accommodate a customer request for a particular color combination. Now, my grandmother would not be too happy to know that I use new material for my rugs and quilts!

Then, I began experimenting with our blue jean and Carhartt pants. We wear out a lot on our organic farm. I must admit that my husband wears out a lot more than I do! Once I began turning the legs of the old jeans into braided rugs, I realized that I was left with all of the pockets. Well, I could not let them go to waste and just had to make something out of those. There came the idea of the pocket quilt. My first one was constructed of exactly twenty-four pockets, and I thought it would make a fun advent calendar for a youngster. Of course, all of the pockets are functional. They are also customizable. I can make them for a special spot in your home. For example, one customer ordered a pocket quilt to hang on the wall by her desk to hold all of her various paperwork and supplies. These quilts can hang on a wall or can be used to warm a bed.

Arlene Wren