

Largest Homespun Industry In World Is 50 Years Old

By BILL SHARPE

ASHEVILLE. — A half-million customers can't be wrong, and that is why Biltmore Industries for nearly 50 years has turned a lackadaisical eye toward all the modern machinery used in weaving wool into cloth. The largest hand-weaving establishment in the world Biltmore still insists on making its fine woolen cloths one strand at a time, because the operators believe the more time put into the processing, the more time the cloth will wear on your back.

The half-million customers think so, too. Fred Seely, young war veteran who has recently taken over the business since the death of his father, says he has to be very careful not to startle those half-million customers with any brash manufacturing notions.

The Industries were founded in 1901 by Mrs. George Vanderbilt, who developed the large estate across the French Broad River here, and in 1917 they were taken over by Fred Seely, a chemist, born in Monmouth, N. J., who built and for 27 years operated famous Grove Park Inn. He also designed the Industries buildings—four sturdy stone structures on

the hills above Asheville. Originally, the Industries included also many other types of handicrafts, including woodwork, but gradually the fabrication of woolen cloths dominated the enterprise.

Young Seely, a Yale graduate who was a Lieutenant-Commander in the Navy until 1946, employs around 100 workers in the plant, some of whom work seasonally or part-time, principally on piece work and an incentive basis. An average weaver produces about 20 yards a day.

Forty-eight thousand persons a year visit the Industries and from these come most of the customers. In addition to purchases by these visitors (most of them tourists), there is a large volume of business done by mail, and Seely never figures one of his half-million customers is lost until he has seen his tombstone. A suit of homespun will wear a long time, he said, and sometimes an order will come in from a customer 10 or 15 years after he placed the last order.

Processing the wool and other material used at Biltmore is fairly conventional up to the weaving stage. However, every process is taken slowly and deliberately. Seely explains that the fibre is not subjected to stress of any kind—washing temperatures are kept low, the wool is dyed by hand, and then the weavers patiently fabricate the cloth. It is then washed for 24 hours in suds, and hung on tenterhooks—as is done in Scotland—on frames out in the sun, where it is slowly dried and sunned. After this final test, it is ironed and rolled for the display rooms.

Sprawling beneath the firs and balsams of the mountains, the Industries appear placid to visitors—both inside and out. There is little evidence of manufacture and little noise, except the clickity-clack of the weavers looms. All over the buildings are posted the virtuous admonitions of the elder Seely who strove to build a creative industry which would be pleasant as well as profitable. Young Seely hopes to carry on in the same way, but with considerable expansion.

However, he realizes he has to move cautiously in making innovations. When he came back from the war he undertook to design a new letterhead. Shortly thereafter he received a flood of letters from some of his half-million customers, protesting the change, demanding to know if this touch of modernism indicated a change in manufacturing methods.

Seely beat a hasty retreat on this. Even in going after new customers, he doesn't want to lose any of the first half-million.

Three hundred thousand more people were at work in October than in September, bringing total employment to 59.2 millions, 2.2 millions more than a year earlier.

State Officials' Hobbies Varied

Pet pastimes of Tar Heel officials range all the way from nursing pups to developing worn out land.

In a poll of state officials, released in the December issue of Better Health Magazine, it's revealed that Governor R. Gregg Cherry finds his keenest diversion in contemplating the antics of his cocker spaniel "Sandy."

W. Kerr Scott, Commissioner of Agriculture, likes rabbit hunting pretty well, but he gets more kick out of changing wasteland into productive fields.

Charles M. Johnson, State Treasurer, likes fox hunting. Ellen Winston, Commissioner of Welfare, goes in for concerts and plays. Dr. Carl V. Reynolds loves horse shows, especially the ones in which his steeds take the prize. "I love all the things which take one close to nature," explains Clyde A. Erwin, superintendent of Public Instruction, whose choice of play is horseback riding, boating, amateur farming. "Love of nature is fundamental in real living."

State Museum Offers Circulars On Care Of Birds

Several circulars on birds and their care are available free at the State Museum. Curator Harry Davis has announced.

The latest is Information Circular 47-11 which gives suggestions on winter feeding of birds. The bird committee of the Raleigh Garden Club has obtained several hundred copies of this sheet for distribution, and quantities of the circular may be obtained by similar groups.

Also available upon request are circulars entitled Some Common North Carolina Birds for November, Bird Feeding Stations, To Make a Bird Calendar, Bird Banding, and The Cardinal, Our State Bird. A list of native plants and shrubs that can be planted for bird food also may be obtained from the museum.

Stocks of fats and oils in factories and warehouses were moderately larger on October 1, 1947 than a year earlier when they were the smallest in 18 years.

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