

# Frontiersman

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EOWYN LeMAY IVEY/Frontiersman

Weaver Karen Gardner sorts through her stack of hand-woven coverlet squares.

## Weavers patch woven heirlooms

By EOWYN LeMAY IVEY

Frontiersman reporter

Excited voices called out pattern names over stacks of hand-woven squares. Solid-color patterns stood out sharply detailed against an off-white background — some were a warm pink, others a deep blue or turquoise. And soon, these squares will be bound together like the lives of the artists who created them.

"It's just so exciting," said weaver Suzanne Dotson. "It feels like Christmas."

Dotson, along with fellow-artist Barbara Cordy, initiated the extensive coverlet project more than a year ago. They involved 14 other members of the Valley Fiber Artist Guild. And a few weeks ago, the group met to celebrate its success.

A coverlet is a hand-woven bedcover with a loom-controlled pattern. The local project began when the 16 weavers each chose a single square pattern — wheel of fortune, Christmas

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# WEAVERS: Job done

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rose, star & diamond or bowknot, among countless other possibilities. The group then chose the type of yarn that would be used. While different colors could be chosen, they all had to be the same type and weight of yarn.

"Otherwise it wouldn't come out right," Cordy explained.

Next, the weavers all chose a color for their own coverlet. Each person would weave their pattern in the 16 different colors. In the end, each person would have a complete coverlet in a solid color and white with 16 different patterns.

They set March of 1996 as their deadline. During the next year, the weavers spent their spare time working with the minute details of their woven patterns.

"We've really progressed," Dotson said. The Fiber Arts Guild has had similar events, but they usually exchanged woven place mats. The year-long coverlet project proved to be much more demanding. But the months of hard work have produced memories and keepsakes that will be treasured by all of them for many more years.

Weaver Nancy Williams was continuing a tradition begun decades ago by her grandmother. Williams wove her squares on a loom that has been in her family since the Civil War.

But coverlets entered American history even earlier. In 1810, spinning mills were producing cotton

yarns to be purchased by individual and professional weavers, according to Carol Strickler's book, "American Woven Coverlets." The yarns were inexpensive and readily available, allowing coverlet weaving to reach a climax in history.

And despite the vast technological advances since the 1800s,

handweaving has changed very little.

Each of the looms have to be threaded with 400 individual strands. If a single thread is misplaced, the pattern will be blemished. Dotson said many of them would have left these minor mistakes untouched to save time if it were their own projects.

"Since we were doing it for other people, we did it over again," Dotson said. She said the project encouraged the weavers to put even more time and commitment into their art than normal.

"It was a part of everyone's life at home," Dotson said. She said her children became accustomed to falling asleep to the sound of her loom. When her sons visited with other weavers, they would proclaim proudly how many squares their mother had completed.

"I got a little tired towards the end," Williams admitted. She said by the time she finished the 12th square, she had the pattern memorized.

"I had planned on having it done by October," Williams said. "And I just finished it." The weavers estimated that the squares took between two and four hours each to complete, depending on the artist. Not only

was the project time consuming, but many unexpected difficulties arose along the way.

"There were a few panicky moments," Dotson admitted. Two weavers had to

drop out of the project part way through. The rest of the group had to find two weavers to take their places.

Another weaver experienced difficulties of a feline nature. Her cat decided to use a square as a scratching post while it was still on the loom.

Others encountered problems with their looms. The wood of one woman's loom cracked and had to be repaired.



EOWYN LeMAY IVEY/Frontier

**Weavers Suzanne Dotson (left) and Barbara Cordy, both of the Valley Fiber Art Guild, exchange coverlet squares after a year of working on their looms. Sixteen weavers were involved in the project.**

Dotson said there were times when the women felt overwhelmed with the work still to be done. But they helped each other through the hard times with advice and encouragement. As this spring drew closer, the weavers struggled to finish their pieces.

But when March came, the stacks of brilliant patterned squares were ready.

During a recent potluck at Cottonwood Creek Mall, the 16 weavers exchanged squares. In the end, they each had a stack of detailed patterns, all in one color.

While all the squares are finished, the project is not quite done. The squares must now be bound together to form the coverlets. Some are thinking of quilting or crocheting them together. Others are going to weave them together. Williams said she is going to do a little trading to get her coverlet finished. She said she is going to weave a rug for a friend who will then crochet Williams' coverlet together.

The group of weavers are thinking of having another celebration once the coverlets are completely finished.

"It will definitely be an heirloom to pass on to our kids,"

