

CRAFTING BETTER LIVES

by Judith Burger-Gossart

Judith is author of the book *Sadie's Winter Dream: Fishermen's Wives & Maine Sea Coast Mission Hooked Rugs, 1923-1938*



Editor's Note: Rug hooking in North America dates to the early 1800s. It emerged most likely in Maine or the Canadian Maritimes as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, when the increased availability of affordable textiles made fabric remnants and rags commonplace. Both art and craft, rug hooking flourished from the mid-nineteenth century into the twentieth century, and its popularity continues today. Historically, most hooked rugs were made for personal use. A secondary market developed in the early twentieth century when antiques collectors began purchasing them.

The 1920s often call to mind Jazz Age high living during the post-World War I boom, but that wasn't the case for fishermen and their families on Maine's



PAGE 24 Mary Ann Bunker crafted *Jolly Little Sloop with the Hills of Bar Harbor* in 1933. It is now in a private collection. The maker of *House with Squirrel*, c. 1926 is unknown. This rug is in the Maine Seacoast Mission collection. **LEFT** The Mission also has in its collection *The House at West Quoddy Head*, created in 1926 by Mr. and Mrs. Darrell Mann. Photos by Judith Burger-Gossart

coast. They lived on islands (some were ten to twenty miles out to sea) or in isolated coastal communities. Life was precarious, full of hardship, poverty, isolation, and unreliable medical care. Education often ended in eighth grade or earlier. Fishermen were tough and expected their families to be equally stalwart and hardworking.

With just a few staff members and a donated summer yacht, the Maine Seacoast Mission was founded in 1905 by brothers Alexander and Angus MacDonald—both of them pastors—to alleviate these harsh conditions. The parish covered the entire Maine coast: roughly 3,000 miles. It was an audacious endeavor, but these were courageous people, not to be deterred. Alice Peasley was one of the early Mission pioneers. In 1923, six years after joining the Mission, she established its Hooked Rug Program. The goal was to supplement the fishermen's families' meager incomes. Born into humble circumstances in Rockland, Maine, Peasley readily understood the plight of the women in these families. Though she had no formal training in rug hooking, Peasley cherished her childhood memories of making hooked rugs with her grandmother.

In the isolated village of South Gouldsboro, located on the eastern shore of Frenchman Bay and the western shore of Gouldsboro Peninsula, Peasley found that the "only assets were courage and a willingness to work." She showed the local women how to make those assets tangible, teaching them how to hook rugs and to sell their creations, putting much needed money into their pockets; in the process, she did much more than that. Peasley helped these women realize the intangible benefits of their activity. She understood that creativity could wash away life's sorrows and tragedies. She encouraged the women to see the

beauty of nature that was around them; then she pushed them to become creative. With rags and burlap they created rugs of extraordinary beauty and sophistication. As one woman noted, "I never thought I would live to see the day when I could do something somebody else would really

want and value."

After the first year, other women along Maine's coast asked to be a part of this program. Peasley's reports include a roll call for Maine's island communities, among them Frenchboro, Matinicus, Muscongus, Islesford, McKinley, Loudville, Little Deer Isle, Southwest Harbor, and Two Bush Island. Her notes indicate that there were approximately thirty women who hooked rugs at any one time. Women came and went because of circumstance and, possibly, interest. An estimated 650 to 700 rugs were made between 1923 and 1938, when the program ended. Twenty-six existing rugs have been identified and there are more than eighty images of Mission rugs.

The women soon began to translate what they saw into hooked rugs. Peasley wrote, "The output from this department will always be small, because of the nature of the work. Quantity has never been an end. Each rug receives the care needed to make it an individual and precious thing." There is no one "look" to a Maine Seacoast Mission rug; rather there are the looks of individual artists: Mary Ann Bunker, Henriette Ames, Sadie Lunt, Sabra Rice, and many women who anonymously made seascapes, primitive house rugs, and animal rugs. The rug images reveal the talents of the fishermen's wives, along with their interests, dreams, and desires. For example, their primitive house rugs have unrealistically large windows, indicating the maker's yearning for light during a long, cold winter. Wild and domestic animals are larger than life; animals were engaging, nonthreatening, and endearingly friendly. Boats provided a connection to the outside world and were frequently illustrated. Bunker's *Forest Scene* is an impressionist painting hooked in wool. *Henriette's Home* by Ames (see image in Table of Contents) is a masterpiece depicting her much-prized domestic tranquility. *The House at West Quoddy Head*,



Forest Scene is another rug that Mary Ann Bunker hooked in 1930. This one has been likened to an impressionist painting.
Photo by Judith Burger-Gossart

hooked by Mr. and Mrs. Darrell Mann, expresses the isolation that was the fishermen's badge.

Peasley had the uncanny ability to nurture creativity on seemingly barren soil. To one woman she suggested that it would be very interesting if instead of the unvarying green she had been using she should reproduce her own back yard. "There's a deep shadow under the pine tree and the path from your door is really a soft greenish tan," Peasley told her. The woman looked in silence for a long time and then replied, "Well, I reckon this is the first time I ever saw my own back yard. A body can't hook what she doesn't see." Peasley sought to empower and improve the lives of Maine's fishermen's wives; she would be both surprised and pleased to know that the rugs she inspired are still treasured and valued today, even more than ever before.

Depending on the fashion of the day, rug hooking waxed and waned in importance and various schools developed with many ardent followers. Currently rug

hooking is very much in vogue—one national organization has chapters in many states and there are rug hooking groups in every state, as well as in many countries. A number of magazines are devoted to the art of hooking rugs. In the antiques world, the folk art genre is vibrant and thriving. Hooked rugs, part of that genre, are often highly valued and can bring record prices.

The Mission continues to serve many Maine communities and sponsors a small rug hooking group in Washington County. Periodically the Mission has hooked rug displays and loans rugs for exhibitions. 🐾

Historic New England has a substantial collection of hooked rugs, none appears to have been made by women of the Maine Seacoast Mission. Rugs from our collection can be viewed at Hamilton House in South Berwick, Maine; Cogswell's Grant in Essex, Massachusetts; and Beauport, the Sleeper-McCann House in Gloucester, Massachusetts.