

A History of Hand-Woven and Machine-Made American Rugs

October 10, 2015

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Rationale for Topic

I was interested in educating myself on the evolution of the rug industry in America. Most emphasis is placed on rugs from the Middle East and other countries since there's more history and intrigue to these rugs. There's not much comparison between American hand-made rugs to the hand-made rugs from Persia because the Persians have had centuries to master their art. But the American rug industry did come closer to the Persians with machine-made rugs. I wanted to find out how all of this happened in a short time frame in this country.

Even though America has a short history as a country, it has gone from a land of immigrants to a world leader in economic growth and industrialization. Through this growth new manufacturing processes and consumer demands has help dictate the design, material and cost of rugs in the marketplace. We evolved from making rugs from scrap material such as old clothes to natural fibers such as corn husk to synthetic materials, plastics, latex and even metals. It will be interesting to see what the next generation of new rug designs and materials will be in demand by the American public. Unfortunately they probably will not be of the quality and durability of the past generations of rugs, but dependent on passing fashion and made with inferior materials.

The early settlers had very limited resources so household rugs were made of materials that were easily attainable to them. Sometimes rug making would depend on what part of the country you settled in that dictated what materials were available. Rugs could be made of old clothing or other cloth material which were called **rag rugs**. These rugs were durable and practical. Rag rugs were reversible and also washable when it could not easily be swept clean. These rugs were woven in homes and in some mills throughout the 19th century. The E. C. Beetem & Sons CO. produced the rugs in Carlisle, Pennsylvania from 1876 until 1951 when it closed its doors. Rag rugs are still produced today but most are woven on power looms with a small percentage woven on old hand looms.

Braided rugs are a type of rag rug. The strips of cloth were carefully folded and braided to produce smooth even braids that were laced together in an oval, square or rectangle. Like the rag rugs these are still usually made by power looms with synthetic materials.

Hand-hooked rugs were developed in the first quarter of the 1800's from left-over fabric to make a useful floor covering. They were made on a jute/burlap foundation with wool or cotton fabric. The patterns on these rugs were left to the maker's imagination and skill. Flowers, animals, geometric designs and oriental rug motifs were the most popular designs. The rugs were developed along the upper east coast of the U. S. and Canadian provinces. Eventually these rugs came in kits at the turn of the 20th century and the craft became vogue in the 1920's and 1930's. As with most other products machines were made to produce the rugs quickly to be sold in stores and mail order. The craft waned until the 1960's when it had a revival but has waned since diminished again.

Rugs were also being made from corn husk, hemp coir, jute and wiregrass.

Wiregrass is a perennial bunchgrass which leaves are long, thin and needle-like. Wiregrass will grow to heights up to three feet. The corn husks and coir (coconut husk) were often braided into door mats because of the tough rough surface texture. The Coir mats were still used frequently into the 1970's because of their durability. Jute was primarily used for carpeting and later as the stuffer and backing on some hand made and machine made carpets. Wiregrass carpets were made in the prairie areas of the U.S. and were manufactured by a few companies such as the White Grass Carpet Company. The American Grass Twine Company marketed wiregrass rugs under the Crex trade name. The Crex "fiber rugs" were constructed from yarns, made from paper spun around twine. These rugs usually had patterns printed on them and after the pattern wore off the carpet could be flipped over to the plain weave side. The carpets of this era even though very basic, were a better alternative to poor quality and unattractive

wood floors. Eventually these types of rugs were mass produced and sold through companies such as Montgomery Wards and Sears Roebuck.





Modern Hemp and Jute Rug

Rugs were woven out of prairie grass called Long Grass. They were made in homes and were also mass produced. After these rugs were no longer fresh they could be placed under other carpets to give more padding.

Japanese, Chinese and East Indian mattings were also a popular import. Some were made in America after the material was shipped from these other countries but most arrived pre-made. The Japanese mattings came in a wide variety of patterns than the Chinese mattings which made them more popular. Mattings were fairly inexpensive but they presented problems such as quick wear and were easily soiled. A thin layer of varnish was later applied to the mattings to make them more durable and to stay looking fresher longer.

Navajo textiles became popular because of their usability and designs. The Navajo women learned how to weave floor coverings and blankets from the men of the Pueblo tribes. Navajo weavings were sought after because they could be used as floor covering, protective clothing and blankets. After Navajo attacks on neighboring Pueblo and Spanish villages, they were subdued by Capt. Kit Carson in 1863. They were imprisoned at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, until finally being returned to their lands to farm and resume weaving.

The weaving process would become much faster due to the availability of machine-spun wools and commercial dyes. Machine-spun aniline dyed German town wools in previously unknown shades were brought to the southwest by the rail road in the 1880's. These brightly colored wool yarns were very tightly spun and were manufactured at the Germantown, Pennsylvania textile mills. Cotton twine and packaged dyes were soon to be used for their weavings. With trading posts opening along the railroad, Navajo weaving became a popular tourist commodity. Some traders began taking popular oriental rug designs to the Navajo weavers for inspiration reflecting the eastern rage for things "oriental". Through commercialization the Navajo designs and format changed from blankets to rugs. At the turn of the 20th century, the Fred Harvey Company encouraged a return to the traditional methods of hand spinning, dyeing and weaving. Today, Navajo weavings can be collectable with the nineteenth century "Chiefs Blankets" being highly prized and commanding top dollar.



Navajo Rug



Navajo Rug



Navajo Rug



Example of Reversible
Flat Weave Rug

There were many other kinds of carpets manufactured in America such as Smyrna by the Bigalow-Sanford Carpet Company. This was a variation of **Chenille** and was a tufted fabric that was heavy and reversible. Smyrna carpets had a pile surface on both sides. This was accomplished by a double loom process. A pile on both sides of the rug required the chenille wefts to be twisted. These rugs were very popular up until the 1920's when the cost and slow manufacturing process caused it to all but disappear. A popular reversible flat weave referred to in America as **Ingrain carpet**. These were popular from the mid 1800's to the 1920's. These carpets are woven so that there's pattern on both sides but the colors are opposite. This is done by interchanging two sets of weft material. These carpets are known by other names overseas, such as Scotch or Kidderminster and are still made today.

A unique religious group known as the Shakers made rugs by hand that were revered by people outside their isolated communities. Their wares were first intended for the needs of the community and later the "outside world." They sold **Shaker rugs** in their stores and catalogs from 1800 through the early 1900's. The Shakers made many different types of rugs such as button-shirred, ravel-knit, braided, rag and fluffy rugs. The small Shaker community is still in existence today but make and sell mainly furniture and culinary items.

Machine-Made Rugs

In 1824, Congress doubled import tariffs and four years later doubled them again to encourage more economic independence for the American marketplace. As a result of the new legislation hundreds of carpet manufacturers sprang up along the east coast. Some came and went and others revolutionized the industry through innovation and/or beautiful products. The following are some of the top companies to produce exquisite and quality products.

Bigalow Carpet Company

The Bigalow-Sanford Company remained the oldest carpet weaving company in America until closing it's doors in 1979. In 1837 a young man named Alexander Wright attempted to make a power loom that worked consistently to make rugs that had previously been made on hand-loom. Alexander Wright was a production manager for the Lowell Manufacturing Company (which Wright actually started but sold and remained employed there). Bigalow developed a loom that worked so well that it doubled carpet production the first year. Bigalow revolutionized the carpet industry with the power loom and added an additional 35 patents between 1839 to 1876. The most innovative loom was designed for Brussels carpet production. This loom was a wider version of the much narrower coach lace loom which he also invented. The carpet industry thought the Brussels carpet was too expensive to make but Bigalow saw the potential for Brussels carpets for the growing middle class. Bigalow and his brother Horatio opened their own mill in Clinton, Massachusetts in 1848. The Bigalow's mill was one of the most prestigious companies in America by the 1890's. In 1899 it merged with the Lowell Manufacturing Company. Then in 1914 it merged with the Hartford Company and became Bigalow-Hartford. In the 1920's wall-to-wall carpet really caught on but the company didn't have wide enough looms to produce it. So, Bigalow-Hartford purchased Stephen Sanford & Sons who had developed the wide loom some thirty years earlier and Bigalow-Hartford became Bigalow-Sanford.

During World War II, the company turned most of its production to mainly the war effort. After the war, the company directed its efforts to product development and by 1950 they had acquired nineteen major patents. Bigalow thrived in the post war years with innovative designs, new fibers and new technologies and acquiring a carpet tufting company, The George Rug Mill. The company thrived with its focus on innovation, quality, reliability and affordability. Today it's part of the Mohawk Group of companies.

A & M Karagheusian Inc. Rugs

A & M Karagheusian Inc. was founded by two Armenian brothers, Arshag and Mihran Karagheusian who immigrated to America by way of England in 1898 to escape the Turkish massacres of the Armenians. Since their family had been in the rug business for many years, it was only logical to start their own rug business, only it wasn't hand-made rugs they were interested in but machine-made rugs. In 1904, they purchased an old clothing factory in Freehold, New Jersey. They hired T.J. Breslin of the Bigalow-Hartford Company to purchase and set up Brussels & Wilton power looms and bring to America experienced weavers from England to train new workers. The first carpets came off the loom in 1905 and the company grew quickly.

Karagheusian opened a spinning plant in Tientsin, China that eventually employed four thousand workers. By 1927 the company had fifteen broadlooms and one hundred ninety-six narrow looms in operation. They also began producing and exporting hand-knotted rugs from Persia and China. Karagheusian introduced a Persian design rug in 1928 that had a silk-like sheen called the 'Gulistan.' The Gulistan became extremely popular and by the 1930's the mill employed seventeen-hundred workers which made it the largest firm in Freehold.

The company flourished until tensions between management and labor that led to oriental carpet and machine-made rug production being discontinued in 1953. Production was switched to produce wall-to-wall tufted carpeting which had a growing demand. In 1964, the mill was closed after being bought by J.P. Stevens & Co. The J.P. Stevens & Co. went through many name changes over the years but it was renamed Gulistan Carpet Inc. in 1995 after being bought by in-house mill executives. Today it is known as the Gulistan Carpet Co. in North Carolina.

Karastan Rugs

The first Karastan rug came off the loom on April 8, 1928. Using a Karastan Axminster Spool Loom allowed them to recreate the beauty and craftsmanship of handmade rugs. They were called "Mystery Rugs" and the "Wonder Rugs of America" because of their durability, resilience, stain resistance and are non-allergic properties. Karastan rugs are some of the most popular machine-made rugs produced because of their designs and durability. The company made history when it placed a multi-panel Kerman design rug at the entrance at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. More than five million visitors walked across the rug. After the fair, the rug was taken back to the Karastan Mill and only one half was cleaned. The unclean side of the rug remained nearly unrecognizable while the clean side regained most of its original beauty. The Kara-Loc method of weaving was developed in 1948 for broadloom carpet and some area rugs. Up until 1973, Karastan rug fringe was made from the warp ends but was changed to ready-made fringe sewn onto the rug. Today, Karastan rugs are mostly made from quality New

Zealand wool. Currently Karastan is owned by the Mohawk Group.

The Gulbenkian Seamless Rug Co.

The Gulbenkian Seamless Rug Co. was founded by Badrig & Harutune Gulbenkian. The company produced traditional Wilton rugs that didn't have to be sewn together like other traditional Wilton rugs. They produced collections like the 'Sahara: Sheen Type' and "Ormia". Gulbenkian were very popular from the 1920's to the 1950's. The company changed names and partnerships several times before dissolving in the late 1950's.

Whittall Mill

Whittall Mill was opened in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1874 by Matthew Whittall who had been a supervisor at the Crompton Rug Co. By World War I, he had built the company into fifteen hundred workers operating three hundred fifty looms in a 500,000square foot factory. The company produced Brussels and Wilton carpets. Many of the company's products were used in government buildings and was selected by President William McKinley for use in the White House. Whittall is well known for its Anglo-Persian Wilton oriental rug design. The company closed its doors in 1957.

Hardwick & Magee

The Hardwick & Magee Co. mill began operation in Philadelphia in 1898. They made standard Bundhar Wilton rugs mainly for use in hotels because of its "durable as iron" characteristics. The company is known for the manufacturing Wilton rugs under the trade name "French Wilton." They incorporated their own dye house, yarn weavers and rug weavers under one factory roof. The locals would talk about how hot the air would be coming out of the windows of the factory.



Bigalow-Sanford
Chenille Double-Pile
Rug



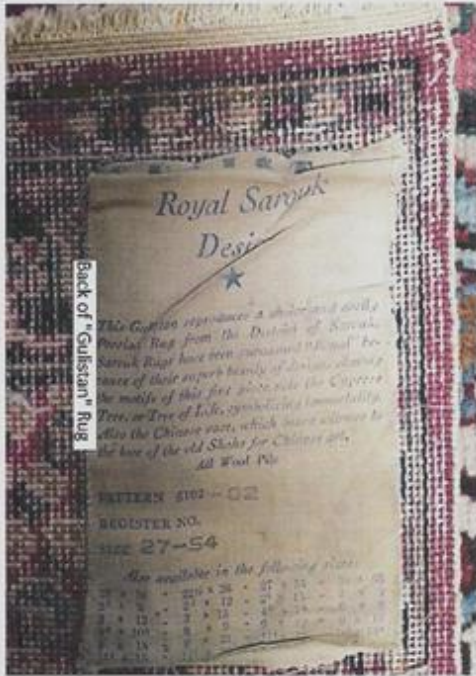
Bigalow-Sanford
Oriental Design Rug



Back of Bigalow-
Sanford Oriental
Design Rug



Old Bigalow-Sanford
Rug



Back of "Gulistan" Rug



Old "Gulistan" Karaghousian Rug



Back of "Gulistan" Rug



Old "Gulistan" Karaghousian Rug

Conclusion

Out of necessities come solutions. Early Americans made rugs from whatever was readily available. Making rugs from items such as old clothing to Wiregrass from the prairie lands seem very primitive but satisfied a need. Of course as Americans do they found a way to mass produce rugs from these materials to be sold in catalogs and stores.

The Navajos brought a new dimension to the feel and beauty of American textiles. They have kept with tradition and the fashion taste of America. This makes their textiles collectable and fashionable.

There America really found its niche was the machine-made carpet and rug business. When Congress doubled the tariffs on imported textiles this opened the door for American enterprises. Very good quality carpets were being made overseas but it was Americans like Erastus Bigalow that came up with innovations that changed carpet making around the world. American companies produced some of the most exquisite and quality machine-made carpets in the world. Most of these companies are no longer in existence but their influences still remain.

Although America can't compete with all the hand-made rugs from overseas, it still produces some very good quality machine-made carpets. It's hard to predict if America will make any ground breaking innovations in quality carpets or keep making the move towards disposable textiles.

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My mission is to help make The Oriental Rug Cleaning Company the best textile cleaning facility in the United States. I believe through ongoing training, I can further educate myself and fellow employees to be the best overall textile cleaners possible. I always look forward to learning something new and getting other people's ideas on a subject. I'm responsible and driven to confront and solve situations associated with identifying and cleaning many types of textiles. I take pride in the work I do and assist others to become better which in turn builds a more successful company.

Programs and Influences that have made impact to my success:

- Master Rug Cleaner Program; Top of class
- Work under two of the top professionals in the industry
- Advanced Rug Identification Program