

AN INDUSTRIAL EXPERIMENT

BY HELEN R. ALBEE

MRS. ALBEE, author of the following extract from *ABNÁKEE RUGS*, devoted several years of energy and sincere effort to the building up of the organization described, and very kindly permits THE NEEDLE AND BOBBIN CLUB to reprint this interesting article.



THE industrial experiment known as the Abnákee Rug Industry is the result of a chance interview held in a New York studio. The subject under discussion was the relation of the individual to society at large, and particularly the duty a trained craftsman owes to a rural community, if he has made one his home. This is a question which eventually must find more and more place in thoughtful minds.

In the ebb and flow of humanity, prosperous people from the cities are seeking homes in the country in greater numbers than ever before, at the same time that energetic men and women bred in the country are seeking their fortunes in the cities. It is needless to enter upon the problems resulting from this drift to the cities. One does not need to be much versed in economics to know that it means overcrowded population, great numbers of unemployed, increasing difficulties for the individual to get even a foothold, save in the most menial employments, and all the attendant evils of close quarters, bad ventilation, disease, increasing pauperism and crime. When the prosperous meet this population in cities, they seldom get beyond questionable forms of charity and philanthropy, which, statistics go to prove, have served rather to increase the pauper spirit, while they have not reduced disease and poverty.

It is to consider the other side of the question that this pamphlet is written. How shall educated and trained men and women who go into the country use their influence to keep the country-bred youth at home? It is obvious that the most important thing is to give them congenial and remunerative employment, as it is to seek

employment that they have left their homes. A recent investigation made by a New England governor results in the significant statement that New England cannot compete in agricultural products with the great Western states; that she must depend upon her commercial and industrial enterprises, not only in the large cities, but also that they must be developed throughout the rural communities if New England is to retain her population and wealth.

It was a consideration of these conditions that pressed home the question of my own personal responsibility to a little community where I had made first a summer home, later deciding to remain throughout the year. Previously to going into the country, I had studied the principles and application of design to various textiles, and had been successful in disposing of them to manufacturers. I had for years worked in various ways with oil, water, fresco and china colors, and had given a course of talks on the principles underlying line, form and pattern. Such was my equipment when I faced the problem of finding some profitable employment which the women in the farmhouses about me, who had many leisure hours at their disposal, could do in their own homes. That this employment should be of an artistic nature was to my mind the first requisite; for, if there is any one thing which the average American mind needs, it is an awakening of the artistic sense. Beauty of form and color are not a daily necessity with us. As a people we are ingenious, fertile in resources and imitative; we are rapid in execution and quick-witted to devise new conveniences and to meet new conditions; but for some mysterious reason, the artistic feeling which is so evident in Oriental, in some European, and in nearly all savage races is a thing unknown to us as a nation. In proof of this, compare any dish or bit of earthenware made by the Japanese, costing but a few cents, with a dish of like cost made by an American. The comparison is mortifying. The Japanese has given a beauty, a finish, to everything he touches, no matter how insignificant its value, while our cheap American productions in earthenware, glassware, our cheap textiles and furniture, our moderate-priced wall-papers and carpets—in short, every sort of commodity produced by the com-

mon, average public is tawdry to the last degree. These objects are overloaded with meaningless ornament, they are for the most part crude in color, and utterly commonplace in conception.

It is hard to understand this lack of taste, which is well-nigh universal, not only among the working classes, but among many who have had superior opportunities, when a fine instinct for form and color is discernible in many savage tribes. Ruskin, in speaking of the fact that semi-civilized nations colored better than the English, that an Indian shawl and a Chinese vase are inimitable, says: "It is their glorious ignorance of all rules that does it; the pure and true instincts have play and do their work. The moment we begin to teach a people any rules about color and make them do this or that, we crush the instinct, generally forever." I doubt if art education has had anything to do with America's lack. Rather has it been the preponderance of our inventive genius, which is the natural result of an intelligent people meeting the stern requirements of pioneer life as it has had to be met in every state in the Union, that has almost dried up the sources of music and poetry as well as art, while trying to minister to pressing material needs. In our desire to express utility with economy we have overlaid any aesthetic tendencies that survived Puritanism. Whatever the real cause may be, certain it is that the North American Indian, those of Central and South America, and the South Sea Islanders show finer perceptions in their use of simple ornament in textiles, pottery, carvings, and weapons than do the greater portion of America's native population. Nearly all the best designers in this country are imported, and our leading mills frankly and openly copy foreign designs. It is only here and there that an American has an original talent for design, and with all our producing (I believe it is our present boast that we lead the markets of the world), we do not reach that beauty in design which is found in the cheapest cotton fabrics from India and Japan, in the silks of China and Japan, in the brasses of Benares, in the shawls, carpets, and rugs from India, Turkey, Persia and Arabia, in the thousand and one articles of merchandise upon which these older countries impress their instinctive interpretation of art

principles. Nor are these things produced by artists in the East, but by the humble native population, working at a few cents a day.

It is difficult to see how the artistic sense is to be awakened to such an extent in us that it will find a spontaneous, national expression; but with all our lack, we have, as a nation, a quick imitative spirit, a genuine desire for self-cultivation, an eagerness to appropriate that which appeals to us as best, and these qualities may, in time, help us to assimilate the art of older countries and give it a new and fresh utterance. I believe many influences are working to this end among us: foreign travel, international expositions, an increase of art galleries and art schools, an increase of wealth and leisure, which enable people to cultivate and enjoy the aesthetic side of life. And not a little is being done through the Arts and Crafts societies that are springing up on every side of life. These are reaching out to encourage and foster all kinds of handicrafts, to educate the public taste as well as to emphasize the intrinsic value which most persons have quite forgotten, so universal are the machine-made things in our market. The exhibitions of these societies are discovering to the public many modest, earnest efforts that have been going on for several years in out-of-the-way places to establish industrial enterprises that are called, variously, village industries, farmhouse industries, fireside industries. But they are all one in purpose, which is to use the unemployed time and labor of rural communities to create some artistic product. Some of these industries produce embroideries, some wrought iron and illuminated books, some hand-woven textiles; some are at work on pottery, carved chests, leather and bead work, basketry and lace. All sorts of commodities are represented, and the work generally is excellent in design and workmanship. These exhibitions have revealed the fact that though these enterprises were previously unknown to each other, they were prompted by the same impulse and are unified by a common aim. They are quite apart from the usual commercial ventures, and each has been much influenced by the peculiar conditions of the place where it was started.

I would here suggest to any one who may desire to join in this

industrial movement and find occupation for people in a certain locality, not to imitate any one industry that has proved successful but rather to make a careful survey of the field before choosing a handicraft to be developed; for a community may have natural skill in one certain direction and show no aptitude in any other. In studying individuals one may soon discern in what direction the industrious ones find expression through some kind of hand-work to which they are peculiarly adapted. The work they have voluntarily engaged in gives an excellent clue to their natural capacities. In such instances it will be wiser to foster the native craft and infuse it with artistic principles than to begin work on wholly unfamiliar lines.

There is, however, another matter of importance to consider, and that is the question of securing raw materials suitable for manufacture at a reasonable price. For example, a prairie country is not so well adapted to the manufacture of ornamental wood work, such as carved chests, panels, pyrography, etc., as one where native woods can be procured in the immediate vicinity. Raw wool can be secured more easily in a grazing country than where forests abound. Pottery or terra-cotta work is better where the native soil yields the suitable clays. While these commodities can be carried to certain places which do not produce them, yet it involves an industry in an unnecessary item of express or freight charges, which soon grow to be of formidable size in the cost of manufacture.

The first step in our own industry was to procure materials. Nothing seemed simpler than to buy all-wool goods at moderate price; yet to find the right thing was a problem that took many months to solve. The price at retail was too great to be considered, and the mills to which I wrote paid no attention to my letters; nor was the quality of any goods I examined suitable for my purpose. I wanted a cheap, soft all-wool flannel of firm but open texture. I found such a flannel was the most difficult commodity in the market to obtain, as it has been almost superseded by cotton outing cloth and part-cotton flannel; and the knitted underwear now so universally worn had still further displaced the use of cheap flannels. So for months I

pursued a weary search for an honest material that I could afford to buy. Having no precedent for the establishment of such an enterprise as I had in mind, I worked it all out theoretically. I determined to buy a quantity of cloth at wholesale and distribute it to the women at cost price, for which they should pay me when I had disposed of their work. I expected to give gratuitously a year or more of time to furnishing them with designs, in advising with them about colors to be used, in directing the work generally; at the same time letting the individual have free scope for her own original ideas. As I could not afford to advance materials and buy the product too, I planned to take their work when finished, pledging myself to find a market for it among my friends, and in that happy event I should pay them for their work, and get the money back for the flannel I had advanced. Then I should reinvest in more flannel and we should all start again; and after I had worked them along until they had confidence in themselves, I should drop out and let them carry it alone. It was a delightful scheme as I pictured it, an ardent enthusiast on the one hand, and a small population with much leisure and no opportunity to get employment on the other; nothing seemed easier than to fuse them into a successful whole.

As I had almost no money to embark in the scheme, little else than my years of artistic training and a great desire to serve others, and as I expected no personal profit from the enterprise, I fancied those whom I wished to benefit would be willing to meet me halfway; but it was soon evident that I had entirely mistaken the situation. Without exception the native inhabitants listened with apparent interest as I unfolded my plans to them, but they would commit themselves to nothing. I did not understand their indifference, and grew more zealous in my efforts. By this time I had found a flannel such as I wanted, and began to make several rugs after my own designs, thinking this would prove the sincerity of my purpose, as well as show them the character of the work as I planned to have it done. I was still met with an impenetrable reserve that could not be aroused into enthusiasm. It was several months before I chanced to learn the dismal truth.

My simple conventional designs had not met with approval. I did not use bright colors; I wove no vines, no flowers, into my rugs; no cats nor puppy dogs reposed on party-colored foliage—in other words, I had not reached the standard of the native taste. Further, they had never been able to sell their rugs, and it was not likely that mine, which were to their eyes less beautiful than their own, could be sold, and they had grave doubts if they should ever get the money for the work if it were advanced. In short, I had been weighed in the public balance and had been found wholly wanting. I confess this news was very depressing, and several days of melancholy reflection were devoted to it. Then it occurred to me to submit the question to a bold test by presenting it to the buying public in an exhibition in the village hall. If I could once prove to the native mind that the summer colonists appreciated the work enough to buy it, I might hope to win the former to reluctant confidence in my plan.

I worked industriously and made about half a dozen rugs of various patterns in dull shades of terra-cotta, old rose, yellow, olive rich dark blue, and cream color, to which I added as many more made by a young girl, my only convert. This simple statement gives no hint of the labors those first rugs cost me. The native people were justified in their skepticism of me; for at the time I began an effort to win them over to my views, I had never seen a rug hooked nor a yard of goods dyed; nor did I know anything of either until I began to make my own experiments. It was because I knew nothing of the usual methods of rug-hooking that my own were so different in texture and finish from others. It was a great advantage to work free from traditional influences, for I was thus enabled to set a new standard. But the weary days spent on my experiments in dyeing! It is not profitable to dwell upon the many failures, nor the quantities of flannel that came out every color save the one I strove for, nor the days of discouragement when I was at the point of throwing the whole scheme over, particularly when I realized that those whom I wished to aid did not care for my help. Nothing but pride saved me from complete fiasco. I could not and would not

confess, after spending more than a year of time, during which I had used my utmost knowledge, that I had failed miserably. So I struggled on, studying probable causes for evident results, gradually learning the necessity of keeping an exact record of every procedure and of all proportions of dye used, accompanied by a sample of the color each formula produced. Often I came to a snarl that refused to be unravelled, and all I could do was to wait—just wait until kind fortune should send me some adviser who usually cut the Gordian knot in simple, direct fashion. I must here acknowledge my great indebtedness to many friends, who by advice or influence assisted me to information—to books, to the proper market where materials could be bought, to many things which I should have never found unaided.

It is to save others from going through all the trials and difficulties that attend pioneer work that I have decided to give this complete summary of my labors and methods to the public. To my mind it is a sheer waste of human energy for each person to struggle single-handed with the problems that necessarily arise in any industrial experiment, and the more valuable the new craft is, the more ready should the early workers be to smooth the way for the later ones. It is not necessary for each one in turn to learn the same painful lessons; each should place his experience and knowledge as a stepping stone for others. Then only can we expect real progress; for no time should be wasted in beating down the same old useless barriers, when the fresh energies may be better spent upon directing the work intelligently upon new lines.

Clear as the steps now look in the light of experience, at that time everything was uncertain and the way dark. I secured the use of the village hall, and to make up for the small number of my exhibits I made lavish use of vines, flowers and evergreens as decorations. It was with much trepidation that I thus challenged the double uncertainty of pleasing the taste of a capricious public and of overcoming the native prejudices.

The little hall was crowded; city and country folk came alike, and the success of the enterprise was assured from that hour. Every rug

that was for sale was sold, and many orders for duplicates were received. Much as I had dreamed and hoped of the work, I was not prepared for the instant recognition accorded to the rugs. Those I had made for my own use, which I had not offered for sale, proved to be of the greatest value to me. By keeping strict account of the material I had used, I discovered how much cloth it took to cover a square foot of rug, also what proportions of the various colors were required for each pattern. I also had them at hand to explain to workers, who now offered themselves in great numbers, the texture I wished to have them secure, how high the loops were to be drawn, and how much they were to be clipped. In some cases I loaned them, where I wished an exact duplicate to be made. They were of still greater service in helping me to estimate how many hours of skilled labor went into the execution of each pattern, thus enabling me to fix a price to pay the worker, and also the selling price. I found these two points very difficult to estimate, as there was no precedent for either. I wished to pay the worker as high a price as was compatible with the permanent interests of the industry, and to sell the product as reasonably as possible. Patterns were deceptive, some simple effects were quite as tedious as some of the more elaborate ones; but by keeping careful account of hours required to complete each new pattern I was able to establish a scale of prices that seemed just. So valuable were these experimental rugs, that I have made it a custom to finish for my own personal use an example of each new design that I have since added to the industry. From these I have secured orders, and have them at hand to send to exhibitions at short notice. As years go by they prove, too, how the colors and texture stand wear and tear. It is with pleasure I note that these examples are growing more beautiful with age, acquiring more of a sheen.

From the day of my first exhibition I saw the necessity of reorganizing all my former plans. The first thing I relinquished was the hope of individuals working independently. I had expected to find fertility of resources and imagination among them, and it was with the utmost reluctance that I abandoned the community idea, with

the freedom and independence that it means to the worker. So far from having any original ideas of their own, I found it difficult to get a number of workers to carry out mine successfully, and I saw daily the growing necessity of one person assuming full control. I saw, where I had intended to play with the management for a year and then withdraw, leaving workers equipped to carry out their own conceptions, and to fill orders that might come, that I had become hopelessly involved with the fortunes of the budding industry, and that a retreat on my part would be fatal to its interests. Who could fill orders for duplicates save the one who had planned the originals? Who could guarantee a uniform product unless one person stood ready to train workers and maintain the standard? I was appalled by the responsibilities I had quite unwittingly made for myself, yet was unwilling to retreat and declare the plan a failure. From that day I assumed the charge of every detail; I furnished all materials, designed patterns, cut stencils, stamped burlaps, dyed goods, arranged color schemes, trained workers, secured a market, addressed correspondents, arranged exhibitions, furnished accounts of the work to numerous inquirers, ranging from members of women's clubs to contributors of various periodicals, and lastly, though it was the first thing required, I furnished the capital and met all expenses as they arose. I do not seem to have a very clear idea just how the finances were managed, for though I had no capital to start with I always paid cash; I did not borrow; I was always hoping to get something ahead to meet the increasing demands for more outlay. To save money I had to buy in wholesale quantities, but as fast as I added to my little hoard of money, it melted into dyes, burlaps, tags, pressboard, wrapping paper, mordants, flannel and—more flannel. I was chronically out of flannel until I quite involved my bank account by pledging myself to take forty bolts in order to secure a certain quality, which otherwise would have been dyed scarlet and blue and lost entirely to my purposes. It was a long time before I got squarely on my feet, with a little surplus ahead to comfort me when some unusual drain was made upon my purse.

From the day of my exhibition I hired the worker outright, and

paid for the work when it was delivered to me. I prepared all materials myself, which the worker took home, spending what time she could each day upon her rug. The price paid was so much per square foot, according to the intricacy of the pattern, and in consequence the workers varied much in what they earned, as some busy housewives could spare fewer hours than others less employed with household duties. Prices were gauged upon the basis of a skilled worker receiving \$1.50 a day, if she were able to put in a full day. Though no one gave undivided time to the work, several were able to make \$1.00 a day and do the housework of a family besides. Some were more dexterous than others, and earned accordingly. Whether the worker was rapid or slow, whether she was lavish and had to be checked from squandering the cloth, or was parsimonious and used it too sparingly, was merely a matter of temperament. When you combine temperament with inexperience, it takes much patience and ceaseless supervision to bring a number of workers into line and secure uniform results. But it can be done, and no one is prouder than the individual worker herself to see that her work compares favorably with the best. In every way I have sought to stimulate a personal pride and sense of responsibility and a desire to reach as high a degree of perfection as possible. I have striven to impress the fact, as each rug goes out with our label on it, that it carries with it and stakes the reputation of the industry. To bring this home as a personal matter to each worker, she is asked to work her initials on the under edge of her rug, thus placing the responsibility where it belongs—upon the individual.

In order that they might be identified in the market, I have adopted an Indian name for the rugs, Abnákee, an arbitrary spelling of the name of the Abnaqui Indians, who constituted a great tribe including the lesser tribes of Maine and New Hampshire, among whom were the Pequaket Indians. Thus in a way the name is identified with the place where the industry was established, Pequaket, New Hampshire.

“The Abnákee Rug,” appears upon a woven silk label which is sewn upon every rug as a guarantee of the genuineness of its manu-

facture. It includes as a trademark the totem or cipher of one of the Indian chiefs, Kirebenuit, who signed a treaty between the English and Abnaqui Indians. I think it is a decided advantage for each industry to adopt some characteristic name and mark by which the public may know its work.

Regarding the industry as it now stands, more than six years after I began my first groping efforts, I can say it has grown beyond the experimental period. The work has extended from floor rugs to wall rugs, including jeweled effects and coats of arms. It also includes chair covers, cushion and couch covers. There are also various practical ways in which this method can be carried into portieres. No one who knows anything about the old hooked rugs needs to be told that they are durable. I have seen some over thirty years old—and still good. Made from the best materials procurable, instead of old rags, the Abnákee should, with proper care, outlast even these.

I have a great desire that others should develop a similar industry elsewhere, and in such an event one suggestion may be of value. Two conditions are necessary for the success of an industry: workers who can afford to work at a moderate wage (for hand-work is slow and cannot compete in price with commodities ground out by machinery), and a public who can afford to buy at fair prices the work produced. These two conditions are best found in some of the small but popular summer resorts among our mountains or lakes, or by the sea-coast. Through annual exhibitions the work can be brought to public notice and readily disposed of; the summer visitor in returning to his home carries back not only news of the enterprise but an example of the work. If the product has artistic merit and integrity, it will only be a question of time until a regular market is established.

There is one other way that an industry may be started, and it matters not what article is chosen for manufacture, it will probably be the same in its methods. Suppose a rich man or woman wishes to make a memorial gift to the native village from which he sprang. Instead of bestowing a library, a museum, a hospital, or a statue,

which doubtless ministers to the public good with the least possible responsibility to the donor after he has once made the gift, let us presume he makes a study of the industrial conditions of that village, and after deciding what the young men and women are best qualified to do, he employs a trained artist in that particular branch and places him in charge of the new industry which he wishes to be fostered. This manager would train the workers and devise fresh, original ways in which the new handicraft could be developed. The patron should provide the instructor, also the materials, and give the work full equipment. He should keep an eye to the financial side so that the industry should be self-supporting, and not add to the many philanthropies that are little less than demoralizing alms-giving. As a man of means and influence he could command a market for the product, and place the enterprise upon a permanent basis. With small capital involved he could reach a multitude of young, ambitious people, giving them congenial employment, and as far as his small village was concerned, stem the exodus to cities.

Should he wish to enlarge the scope of work, he could advance individuals as fast as they proved worthy, allowing them to purchase shares in the business, and thus make it cooperative; or he might, when he found one especially efficient, give him a special artistic training that would qualify him to take charge of a like industry elsewhere. Should the opportunity to direct such industrial enterprises be offered to students in schools of design, many would fit themselves in special lines of work and stand ready to take positions as they presented themselves. Such work would offer especial attractions to original minds, for they would have great freedom in carrying out their own ideas and at the same time make a dignified place for themselves in the industrial world. In such careers many students could make a far nobler name for themselves than if they were added to the long roll of ineffectual artists who never achieve distinction in pictorial art.



HOOKED RUG, DESIGNED AND WORKED BY A CLUB MEMBER
E. J. FORREST GREENFIELD