

Look Up, Think Up, Lift Up:

A short biography of Nellie Sargent Johnson
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"We will remember Mrs. Johnson as a gracious lady who helped to fill the world with beauty and human achievement

She inspired others to create beautiful things and to find within themselves the ability to weave something noble into the fabric of the world about them.

She was indeed a teacher; a master weaver of textiles and of human lives."

-condensed from the Memorial Service conducted by the Rev. Tracy M Pullman.

Nellie Sargent was born in Massachusetts on September 21st 1887. In 1909 she received a Bachelor of Science degree in Social Work and Home Economics from Simmons College in Boston. During her lifetime she would also do coursework at the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, Ralph Parson's Studio (Gloucester, MA) and the Arts and Crafts Society in Detroit, MI.

Her early jobs were in the field of nutrition and diet. She worked in many places on the East Coast in this field, starting as the Assistant Superintendent of the New England Kitchen in Boston, and progressing through the positions of Dietician at Eastern Maine General Hospital, the New York Polyclinic Hospital, the Assistant dietician at Lakeland Hospital in Cleveland, among many more such positions.

The job that changed her life was one she was offered in 1920 at the Women's Hospital Annex in Dearborn, MI. She accepted it and was to spend the rest of her life in Detroit. In 1922, at the age of 34, Nellie married Charles S. Johnson, a Certified Public Accountant. Within a handful of years, their



first son, Thomas, was born. Tragically, in 1928, this young child died, and her second son, Albert, is born. Named after Nellie's father and perhaps taking after his mother, by 1951 he is on staff at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Philadelphia.

. In the meantime, in 1927, Nellie had started offering private weaving instruction in her home. By 1929 Nellie was writing articles for Handcrafter and Weaver, Knitting and Home Crafts Magazine, and had become the Weaving Editor for Design Magazine.

Already well known as a weaver, in 1933 she started producing the newsletter Handweaving News. She wrote and mailed two to four page newsletters, twelve months a year for the rest of her life; some 220 issues in all. The subscribers were located throughout the United States. These issues run the gamut from ancient Peruvian weavings to early manuscripts like those by J. & R. Bronson to the most modern of weaves from Scandinavia. Although she appreciated the old wovens, she often remarked that these are for learning from, and that modern weavers should use the techniques to create their own patterns not slavishly copy the old. "Let us try to design for use today, rather than "copy" what past periods have given to civilization. We are not living in Colonial America, or in the stage coach days, but in the present age of invention and speed... We can to be sure be inspired by all that has gone before us, but let us try to evolve textiles that belong to our own time, rather than past ages." When she offered an old pattern in her newsletter, she often described how to use modern yarns to update the look or give the resulting textile a life within the modern home, such as using a coverlet pattern to make towels using boucle yarns. Every January issue

discussed some aspect of designing handwovens. She also reviewed and sold hard to find books ordered from Sweden, as well as good buys she was able to find from mills. She alerted weavers to weaving related goings on in various cities, and shared her student's work as well as work sent in by subscribers.

In 1934 she demonstrated weaving at the Naval Armory Exhibition of Women's Work. Noticing a sample of Rumanian weaving in another stall, a very fine, silk scarf which is used as a head dress by the Rumanian women, Nellie returned to the floor loom she had warped and ready to go, and reproduced the piece: a woven lace based on gauze weave. In Nellie's words:

"I shall never forget the real excitement of the woman who owned the scarf when she saw my woven piece on the loom. She said, *"None of the women of my Country know how to do this now here in America, you are the only one in United States that can do it."* And I am sure that was true at that time. Her scarf was over 100 years old, and woven by her great grandmother."

In 1936 Nellie sought and received the position of special instructor of weaving and home economics at Wayne State University. She was a very good teacher. Quick yet methodical, she was patient in explaining techniques as most of her student had little or no previous weaving experience. *"A witty, gray-haired woman with an infectious interest in weaving."* Is how one former student remembers her, *"She was a very kind and patient person and an artist in her weaving and her handling of her students."*

The summer of 1939 finds Nellie in Lima Peru, where she discovers ancient and modern Peruvian weavings. During the month she is there, she collects over 300 samples of this weaving, 200 of which are ancient, many over 1000 years old, and about 100 of which are examples of modern weaving. She also collects a very rare small loom that was found in a burial (Pachacamec) and a spinning basket with its full complement of equipment: spindles, cotton on

ancient distaff and a tool made of a piece of bone which was used to beat down weft threads. Peruvian weaving became her passion, and for the rest of her life she returned again and again to these samples, working out how to weave them. One of her weaving students commented, *"It just makes our modern weaving look like nothing at all, doesn't it."* Some methods were shared through the newsletters and the articles she wrote for other magazines, others were kept in reserve for a book she was writing under contract with Prentice Hall Publishers in New York. Unfortunately, this book was never published.

Nellie spent the summer of 1940 teaching at the Penland School of Handcrafts in North Carolina. By this time, Wayne State was paying her \$1000 per year (7 months total, 2 sessions each of beginning and advanced weaving and one session of Home Economics at 10 weeks/semester and approximately 13 hours per week of instruction time.) This year also sees her at the World Fair, her work is shown at the National Exhibit of Contemporary Crafts held at the Philadelphia Art Alliance in Philadelphia, and she discusses handweaving as a business for the first time in her Handweaving News. Looking at the larger picture, she started working on a loom that is easy to use, portable, yet offered enough flexibility to be used in her classes. She developed a 12 inch rigid heddle loom. By 1942, Sears Roebuck and Co in Chicago had purchased the right to produce this loom, sell her manual for it, and her instruction book for advanced weaving as well, through their catalog. It made its appearance in the Spring 1943 General Merchandise Catalog at 27 inches weaving width; advertised as *"designed by Nellie Sargent Johnson (nationally known authority on home weaving) to meet the needs of both experts and beginners. Ready Warped.. Just start right in and weave. Experts or beginners can weave lovely fabrics. Can be stored in little space, does expert work"*. This loom was popular enough that by 1947 Sears was marketing a six shaft 36"/38" weaving width floor loom designed by Nellie as well.

In Nellie's words, *"November 15, 16, 17, 1946:*

We held our first sale at the Old World Market of the International Institute ... Our sales were good, but not as large as we had hoped... Weaving was contributed this year by our active membership groups here in Detroit and was very well received with much interest. We were able to show both the small table model Hearthside Loom and the new large folding 6 harness floor loom through the courtesy of Sears & Roebuck Co. They also loaned us one of their show cases and the services of their display experts to help arrange our exhibit."

Early in 1947, Nellie traveled to Chicago to demonstrate the use of the looms at a special event at the Sears Roebuck & Co. State Street store. There she had the opportunity to meet and discuss looms, threads, etc with many of her Handweaving News readers.

In the meantime, Nellie did not neglect her teaching assignments. In 1943, textiles woven in Nellie's class were chosen in a nationwide competition and were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Through Handweaving News she taught many techniques that were new to the average weaver. She also produced special technique pamphlets detailing the weaving, and offered special traveling exhibits for each of these special courses as well. In addition to those that went with the courses, she produced traveling exhibits on Rare and Ancient Peruvian Textiles, Modern Peruvian Textiles, Articles woven on Portable Hearthside Looms, and offered to make up a custom exhibit on whatever techniques one wanted to learn. One only had to write to her for details.

On the afternoon of May 2nd, she was scheduled to teach two classes at Wayne University. She finished her first class at 5:00 p.m. and walked across the campus on some errands. On the way back, her foot apparently caught in the sidewalk. She fell and severely fractured her left hip. She was taken to Grace Hospital, where her hip was nailed. She appeared to recover quickly and was soon up and around in a wheel chair.

Suddenly, on the morning of May 19th, her condition worsened. She died at 11:20 a.m. from a pulmonary embolism (blood clot). Services were held at the Church of Our Father at Cass and Forest in Detroit, and she was buried in Grand Lawn Cemetery.

"It just makes our modern weaving look like nothing at all, doesn't it."

The Sears Hearthside Loom

The name "Hearthside" among Sears products dates back to Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s Golden Jubilee in 1936, where the name can be found in the Fall/Winter general catalog on items such as quilting frames, hooked rug frames and patterns, linens for making scarves, etc.

As of 1940, a waffle weave rug loom was available for \$2.75 each which could make a throw rug 18" x 27" in size, using six balls of two ply yarn which ran 60 yards to the half pound ball.. This was a simple frame loom such as the potholder looms which are still available. This was the only loom available until the 1941 Spring general catalog, which saw the addition of the Adjustable "Hearthside" rug frame . At the same time, the catalog advertised "Join the Maysville Guild: Costs nothing! Entitles you to certificate, membership button, labels, subscription to the "Shuttle", magazine. Write away today!

The 1943 Spring general catalog saw the introduction of the "New Portable Hearthside Loom": a 27" wide rigid heddle loom which came prewarped with Maysville carpet warp.. It was "designed by Nellie Sargent Johnson (nationally known authority on home weaving) to meet the needs of both experts

and beginners” (1943 Spring general catalog, p. 515). This edition of the catalog also offers for sale Nellie Sargent Johnson’s instruction book for advanced weaving .

The loom we most often think of when someone mentions a Sears Hearthside loom is the type I have: a six shaft floor loom, foldable, with sectional warp beam. This loom was premiered to the public with the 1946 Fall General Sears, Roebuck & Co. It also included lease sticks, rug shuttle, reed hook and thread guide for sectional warping (raddle), 38” reed (12 dpi) for 36” weaving width (although I have gone the whole 38” without problems). Size open: 48” wide, 42” high, 45” front to back. 22” front to back when closed. Boat shuttles were available, and from the picture, are torpedo shaped, rather than the crescent like shape made by LeClerc at the time, and had a metal bobbin. This loom was sold mostly unchanged until the 1950 Fall General catalog. For the first time, it is sold as the “Hearthside Convertible Loom”; Basically, the same loom is sold with only four shafts in the same castle. The purchaser then has the option of adding the extra two shafts for an additional \$18.00 (basic 4s loom costs \$129.00 cash) The included reed has been enlarged to 39” as well. In the same catalog, the “Simplified Hearthside Loom” premiered; a two shaft loom, with a 39” wide reed for weaving up to 38” in width.

By the 1951 Fall general catalog, the 6 shaft Hearthside loom is no longer available. In its stead, there is a 4 shaft loom. The two shaft loom is still available. The 1953 Fall general catalog is the last year floor loom are offered, and both the 2 shaft and 4 shaft Hearthside are listed along with a LeClerc 45” loom.

Who Manufactured the Sears Hearthside Loom?

In an effort to put a myth to rest, I enquired as to who manufactured the Hearthside loom for Sears. The archives department does not keep records of the subcontractors who manufacture products under the Sears name, so was unable to find an answer there.

As more than one person mentioned that they thought LeClerc may have manufactured the loom, I e-mailed À Francois Brassard, current owner of LeClerc Looms who answered: “Sorry but I can not answer that question. I bought the Nilus Leclerc Company 3 years ago and I do not records from that time.”

The main clue may be the statement in the catalogs: “Shipped from Kankakee, Illinois. Order from nearest Sears mail order house.” Per the Kankakee County Historical Society records, the looms were manufactured by the Pope Machine Company. Henry Pope founded three companies: The Bear Brand company (hosiery manufacturer) was formed in 1893. The Paramount Knitting Company was formed in 1914. By March 1922 Pope opened the Pope Machine Company which manufactured the machines used in the creation of textile goods. They made machines under the names of several chain stores and drop shipped these machines from their facilities in Kankakee.

A version of this article about the Sears Hearthside Loom was printed in *The Weavers Friend*.