FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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Subject Matter: The Craft of Making Rag Rugs

Respondent: Eva Mutkala

Comments:

I: This is an interview with Eva Mutkala and she's one of Pelkie's rug-makers and we're in her weaving room now, she has a special place where she weaves and she's weaving a rug right now. When did you come to this area?

R: 1938.

I: And when did you get interested, or how did you get interested in making rugs?

R: Well, it’s just something that I thought I would like to try and I started and continued from then on, it's about seven, eight years ago that I started.

I: But did you see somebody making rugs?

R: No.

I: How did you know there were looms available and that sort of thing?

R: Oh, well, it was just advertised in the paper and I answered the ad that the lady had in L'Anse and I bought it second-hand from her.

I: Was she a rug-maker?

R: She had been for a few years but she was an old lady and she had quit working and she wanted to get rid of her loom so I was fortunate to find it.

I: And then how did you learn how to work the loom?

R: Well, the lady next door had a loom and she showed me a few minutes one morning and then I just practiced on hers until I got the fundamentals and then from then on I just learned it myself, on my own.

I: Did she show you how to warp it up?

R: No. I had a book that showed me that came with the looms, it showed me how to do it 'cause mine warps up differently from hers.

I: And when you started were you interested in making rugs for yourself or did you think of it as a business venture?

R: The first rugs I made was for another neighbor lady...yes, I didn't make any for myself really on my own looms in the beginning...and I started out...the new rugs I had was what I had practiced on the neighbor lady's loom.

I: Is that who you made the rugs for?
R: No...Mrs. Sylvia (Norman) Ruuspakka.

I: And then did you start taking orders? How did people know that you were making rugs then?

R: Well, it just goes around the country, I guess, 'cause I never advertised or anything and pretty soon people'd call me and...

I: They heard you were making...

R: One person tell another, I guess, that's the only way I can figure it out because I didn't do any advertising or anything, it just...pretty soon I had more work than I could take care of, yeah.

I: Do people generally supply their own rags for the carpets?

R: Most of the time, most of the time they do

I: And you like to cut the rags yourself?

R: Yes.

I: Why is that?

R: Because there's no two people cuts them alike and I like a nice, smooth carpet, that's the only way I get it is to make them myself.

I: Then you know how thick they should be cut and that sort of thing.

R: That's right...and all different kinds of material are different and you have to pick them and choose them, which goes together in one rug...like you put all cottons in one, all wools in another and...

I: Why is that?

R: Because the cotton lasts longer than the wools do and the wools do not have to be washed as frequently as the cottons do...blends now will work in with wools or they will work in with cottons, certain blends...and they work together, any kind of a blend works together in the fabrics...like polyesters you can put with cottons easily...and the double knits and things like that you can put in with your wools and they all wear equally well, at least I have had no complaints, that they seem to wear equally well.

I: How do you choose your colors? Do the people tell you how they want them or do you put them together yourself?

R: One person told me how she wanted, only...and this didn't prove too good, either because I made the carpets, she divided them here on my floor with a pile here, there and the other place, you know, she sorted them all out and I made the carpets exactly as she sorted them and she seemed to be pleased with them, and then she brought some more material and she didn't have time to sort them that time, and I made the carpets my way and she told me afterwards that
she liked them better my way than her way... so that's the one and only time that anyone has ever sorted them all out and picked them exactly, they will tell me sometimes if they have certain things, like if they have, oh, some browns if they would like to have a brown carpet, oh, they'll tell me that, you know, but they never sort them; they just let me go ahead and I can pick and choose most of the time the contrasting colors for the trim and things like that, they never say anything and I've had very few complaints, at least they don't tell me.

I: About how long would it take you to cut up the rags and weave them together and including the warping and that to make, say, a yard, or have you ever figured it out per yard?

R: Yes, it's a long time ago... price-wise I figured it out but I can't remember how many hours it took... it's in somewhere in the neighborhood of close to four hours from the rags to the carpet, per yard.

I: And which takes the most time, well, first let's go through the operations. When you get the rags what do you do?

R: You sort them into colors and textures that go together... and then if they're not real fresh I sometime wash them... and then I cut them up and then I sew them and roll them into balls and each ball represents a rug... and then I weave them.

I: And which of those operations takes the longest?

R: Cutting and sewing, definitely.

I: Really.

R: I would say, well, more than half... just the cutting and sewing is much more than half.

I: Which is the most fun?

R: Fun? Finishing them, right down to the end... tying the knots... no, one is equally as tiresome as any of the others... the weaving is hard work and the sewing is monotonous when you have to sit for hours and sew, and same goes for the cutting of the fabrics... the tying, like I say, that takes about a half hour for one rug, 25 or 30 minutes, something like that, for one rug.

I: That's right, you didn't mention that before. When you finish weaving, then how often do you take, you roll all your...

R: I try to put a good-size roll on here because it takes time to cut and tie all the knots and attach the next roll of carpets, so I try to put, oh, ten rugs on there sometimes and that's...

I: On your roll.

R: Yes, that's a very full roll and because they're most of the time 1½ yards.
that's a lot of yardage on there...and it's too heavy for me to handle, for one thing when you get them off it's very heavy.

I: Then don't you lose a certain amount of your warp each time you cut the roll off?

R: No, I learned how to use with a thing that they call an apron and you don't lose any warp...see, when I get to the end of this one I start the next rug which will be on the next roll and then I cut them in half here, I put the stretcher on, I don't use the stretcher ordinarily to, but that keeps the rug as wide as it should be, the stretcher...then I cut them in half like I cut ordinarily just dividing the rugs apart and...

I: That is, you cut one.

R: Cutting the warp in half between the two dividers, you know, I put two cardboard dividers and I cut between the dividers and then I tie the knots in the piece that's beginning the new roll and I take the other rugs off that's on the roll and I roll them up as I take them off and they're sewed onto this apron thing which is a piece of canvas...and when I get this one off I sew this canvas piece through the beginning of this next roll and there's no rug warp loss at all...I used to lose at least a yard on every piece of warp that went through the machine...but this doesn't lose an inch.

I: You sew the apron on by hand?

R: Yeah, I just take it with a big needle and sew, just attach it with some of the warp, a double strand of warp, and with a darning needle and just sew through that and through the beginning where the knots are tied on the new roll of carpets.

I: After you cut off the last rug on the roll then you tie

R: Tie the fringes on the new one.

I: ...the fringes on the.

R: I knot the fringes on the new one...to finish the end.

I: On the new what?

R: The new rug that's beginning on the new roll.

I: But you haven't started the rug yet.

R: Yes, I started the rug, I have about six or eight inches of it...here now, maybe I can show you, here, right here, see, this would be the end of the roll that's here.

I: It's already on there.

R: It's already on, it's all done, then I cut it through between here...
I: You cut it between...

R: Between the dividers, I call those dividers...

I: ...dividers.

R: And I have the stretcher on here to keep this wide apart, see...you know with the stretchers...

I: On your new rug.

R: On the new rug, the one that's beginning...and then I tie the knots right here, these strands, in two knots.

I: You tie the knots at the end?

R: At the end of the new rug, the new roll, the one that's up here...and then I sew it onto the apron that's rolled in here, when I unroll these off, well, then I sew that to this apron that goes on here, it's just a piece of canvas

I: Right...oh, that's a really good...

R: And you don't waste any warp, otherwise you lose, oh, many feet of your warp, a lot of it because it's at least two feet on every string that's here that goes, and sometimes more.

I: That's a good idea, did you figure that out yourself?

R: Mrs. Pylykonen told me that, or Mrs.郝.

I: A rug-maker.

R: Yeah...and she had just a piece of old cotton sheeting about four thicknesses but I noticed in the book there that I get there has repair parts, they have these aprons for sale, but I just took a little piece of canvas...I had some canvas so I just took the canvas and made it myself.

I: Well, an apron can be made out of any kind of cloth.

R: Yeah, anything that's strong...denim would be good because it's strong, you can sew through it many times before it'll tear...at one time I had a piece of blanket on there, you know, sort of rather new edge from a blanket that was strong...anything that you can sew through and with, you know, not too hard.

I: And you sew that apron on...

R: You just sew it over and over like that, right across, no, right in here where the knots are, yeah, if we get through this I can show you how it's done, I can take that roll off and show you.

I: Now this rug, you're getting toward the end of the rags for them.
R: The main body.
I: And I see that you have the same color in the main color as you have on the very end past your border. How do you know how much to keep out?

R: Count the rows.
I: So you make two separate small balls
R: No, I put the first one on off of this, this spindle or this bobbin
I: When you start the rug.
R: Yes, and I make so many, sometimes there are 24, sometimes 26 and sometimes on a real long rug I'll put 30 on the end, that's called "the approach".
I: You mean rows?
R: Yes...back and forth across...and right then I take and make this other ball of the exact number of stripes, times, across so that they will be even.
I: And then you've got it for the end.
R: And I've got up for the end and I can use up all the other in the middle of the rug...that saves a lot of thinking...in the contrast trim I do the same thing with, if I have a small ball I'll divide it in half and I'll save one for the other end and one for the beginning end...and that way you don't run out without anything, you know, you don't forget.
I: Your borders are even and your ends are even and everything...the time that you run into problems is in the body of the rug if you decide to put one color stripe across every 12 or 14 rows...when you come down to the other end of it sometimes you only have 10 rows...your material just doesn't last out so I usually put the 10 rows in or else I'll put 12 rows and then steal two from this one and put into the last if it's going to be too narrow...and that doesn't show at all...nobody's going to go down and count if there's 10 or 12 or 14...
I: Rows per stripe.
R: Because it never shows.
I: Is that why you don't make a lot of striped rugs?
R: No, the reason I don't make a lot of striped rugs is because if they wear on the end you have to unravel off and retie your warp...and after a while you don't have a stripe on one end and you do on the other, sometimes they'll wear out more from one end than the other...and people mend them by ripping off until...
I: Ripping the rags out.
R: Ripping the rags out until the broken area is gone, then they retie the warp and they have very short border on one end and a full one on the other.

I: That's right, you've told me that many times.

R: Yeah, that's why...and then, too, if they have a group of materials that they want for a certain room, you put your color contrast in there not knowing where they're going to use it, you might have a contrast of conflicts with their room...and unless people specify they want colored ends I don't put them...and I don't put them on my own...rarely that I put them on my own.

I: You mean colored warp ends?

R: No, no, colored...these borders right here...yeah, you pick contrast colors to go in...and I rarely put them in my own...not that I mend so many rugs but it's that...I like them plain...and like I say people, you don't know where they're going to use them in their home, maybe you put green and maybe that green don't fit in the room that they're going to use that in...so what I would think would be pretty in there and it might look real nice wouldn't work where they plan to use the rug......it'll crack the warp many times, it'll break warp in a couple of washes you've got a loose place and it's breaking...you're supposed to hang your rugs by the side but not all people do that...and a lot of people will shake their rugs, they'll shake them by the end...men, especially, they like to hear it snap and you'll see the warp flying...it's true.

I: How would you recommend, I don't think I've ever asked you that, how would you recommend shaking a rug?

R: From the side, holding it by the side and shaking it...and reversing it, laying it down, taking the other side and shaking it on the other way...and that's the way I always do it and I think that's the easiest on the rug and you hang them on the line, you hang them by the side with many pins...don't bend it over, use pinch-type closepin and just, oh, three or four inches apart, lots of pins on it.

I: And how about cleaning the rugs in the springtime on the crust? Weren't you telling me about that?

R: Oh, the woolen rugs...you just put them, I just take them out and put them on the smooth place on the path or someplace and put snow on them and sweep it off, all the lint goes away, goes with the snow...it sticks to the snow and the rug doesn't get wet or anything, it doesn't even get damp, and they're nice and bright and fresh looking, course they don't take the dust out of them but it takes accumulated lint that gathers from ...brightens up a great deal.

I: Yeah, I've heard other people talking about cleaning their rugs, people around here wait for the crust, women do, wait for the crust on the snow.

R: Yeah, they just take them out and pound them...and then the lint and dust things and what not stick onto the snow and your rugs are quite fresh, not like washing, of course, but they are...
I: But you get nice little dirty spot there, that you know some dirt has...

R: Oh, yes, you know that there's been lot dust in there because you can see it in the snow.