

Tribute to Mary M. Atwater, by Her Daughter Betty Atwater Biehl
Presented at the Opening of the Mary M. Atwater Weaver's Guild Exhibit
Utah Museum of Natural History, March 31, 1973

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you to help you open the first all-member exhibit of the work of the Mary M. Atwater Weaver's Guild of Utah, an event which must be a source of great pride to all of you. This is the only Guild that carries my mother's name, and is the one that was founded under her sponsorship. Your Guild was founded in February of 1955 by weaving friends and students of my mother. Since then it has grown and flourished, and the members have done a great deal of volunteer work in hospitals, schools, art centers, libraries, and fairs, carrying out my mother's feeling that such volunteer work is one of the most rewarding and important aspects of any handicraft. My mother and her family owe the Guild a special debt of gratitude for the republication of the *Mary Meigs Atwater Recipe Book of Patterns for Handweaving*, which was revised a short time before her death. This book had been out of print since 1946, when Harriet Tidball took over the Shuttle-Craft Guild and its publications, and though Mother thought it was one of the most useful of her publications, no regular publisher was interested in it. The original edition was printed on looseleaf pages and assembled in a ring-binder, a process Mother was physically unable to accomplish with the new edition. At this point your Guild, especially Jane Jennings, offered help, and the *Recipe Book* appeared in 1957, a year after her death. It was published as a memorial, and nothing could have been more fitting.

Mrs. Zlutnick has told me that to many of you my mother is more or less of a legend, and she has asked me to say something that will make the name of your Guild of more immediate significance to you. This winter we had a young woman staying with us. She came to work on the ranch. We didn't know she was a weaver. To her Biehl had no connection with Atwater. When she saw the loom she radiated delighted surprise and when she got it sorted out she said, "Is your mother really Mary M. Atwater?" I could suddenly see through her eyes my mother ten feet high, holding a shuttle like a scepter. It was a great pleasure to make Mary M. Atwater a person for her instead of a totem. Perhaps I can do something of the sort for you. It is difficult to know where to start, and how, once started, to stop.

Mother's connection with weaving seems, in retrospect, to be a matter of the right person at the right time. Before she ever saw a loom she was a trained artist and designer, skilled in drafting and interested in all sorts of mathematical puzzles. From her childhood she was also interested in writing, and had written technical articles for my mining-engineer father as well as a good many short stories. She was skilled in many handicrafts—embroidery, knitting, sewing, and braiding—and knew a good deal about the various types of fabric materials and their uses. She had lived in Paris as an art student, in Bolivia and Mexico with my father, and was acquainted with the art and textile museums in Boston, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Add to this an enthusiastically enquiring mind, and a willingness to undertake tedious research.

The weaving started in 1917, in Basin, Montana, where my father was operating a mine. My brother was 12 years old, and I was a baby. The world was suffering its first World War, and the women of the little mining town, whose men were working double shifts, needed something to occupy their time and provide additional income. Mother had read about Berea, in Kentucky, and she decided that a cottage industry was the answer, and weaving, then considered a lost art in the United States except for the mountain women of Appalachia, should be the industry. She brought to Basin a teacher from the West Coast, a man who knew only simple four-harness overshot, but it was enough and the Shuttle-Craft Guild was born.

In 1918 the U.S. Government issued a call for people skilled in crafts to work in the army hospitals with wounded veterans. It was the beginning of the practice of Occupational Therapy in the United States, and mother answered the call. She became one of the first Occupational Therapists in this country, and worked at Fort Lewis and at the Presidio in San Francisco. To bed patients she taught macrame, card-weaving, braiding, and other non-loom crafts. To ambulatory patients she taught hand weaving on looms made to government order—all two- or four-harness counterbalanced floor looms named the Weaver's Friend and manufactured by Reed Co. of Springfield.

At this time she formed her ideas of what a loom should be and do—ideas that later resulted in the wonderful versatility and selection now available to the modern weaver. At this time also she published her first pamphlet on weaving—the *Shuttle-Craft Instructions for Egyptian Card Weaving*—for use in the hospitals.

My father died in the flu epidemic of 1919, and mother was discharged from the army. She found herself with two children to support and educate, and very little financial security. She had no degree from any school vouching for her ability to do anything. Her army experience gained her a job working as an Occupational Therapist with the patients of several psychiatrists in Seattle, and she spent her spare time in weaving research, writing several articles that were published in national magazines. At that time, perhaps as a reaction to World War I, there was an intense interest in handicraft, much like the one we are seeing today, and these articles aroused a lot of interest and response. Soon she was spending more and more time answering letters from aspiring weavers. At this point she gave up the practice of Occupational Therapy, and in 1920 she started out as a teacher of weaving by correspondence. She issued a course of instruction, and began to publish the *Shuttle-Craft Bulletin* as a monthly newsletter for her students.

In 1923 we moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where my brother was going to college, and where museums and libraries were available for research. During the five years we were in Cambridge, she researched and published the John Landes *Book of Patterns*; wrote and published the *Shuttle-Craft Book of American Hand Weaving* as a text for her correspondence course, which she then revised; taught many private students; wrote pamphlets and articles for loom and yarn companies as well as for national magazines; wrote, published, and mailed the *Bulletin* every month; lectured occasionally; and spent two summers setting up weaving shops for the Occupational Therapy departments of the New York State Hospitals for the Insane. She also started compiling the *Recipe Book of Patterns for Hand Weavers*.

In 1928 my brother was out of college and supporting himself, I was finished with grade school, and we moved back to Basin, where she continued to write, publish, and teach until her retirement in 1946, when she turned over the Shuttle-Craft Guild, the Course in Handweaving, and the *Bulletin* to Harriet Tidball.

Mother's idea of retirement was to continue teaching private students, and to start a series of weaving institutes at various places in the United States and Canada, to step up her research, especially in the pick-up weaves native to the Indians of North and South America, to visit Guatemala and write a book about the weaving there, and to continue to write articles on weaving and related textile crafts. After her move to Salt Lake City in 1948, she finished writing *Byways in Handweaving*, which was published in 1954 when she was 76 years old. This book is a discussion of weaves not requiring a large loom, such as inkle weaving, card weaving, plaiting, braiding, etc., many derived from primitive sources. After *Byways* was published she started work on the revised edition of the *Recipe Book*, somewhat hampered because a head injury suffered in a fall from her drafting-stool had damaged the focusing ability of her eyes. She also started work on a book of designs for handweavers. The *Recipe Book* was finished before she died in 1956, and was published, as I have mentioned, by your Guild as a memorial. The unfinished book on design was

published by Mrs. Tidball in 1961.

Mother was not young when she first started the Shuttle-Craft Guild—she was close to forty — and if my father had lived she would probably have stayed an amateur, though I am sure she would have continued to weave and learn. As it was, when she searched for a way to make a living she turned out to be the right person at the right time. There was a need for a special kind of leader in the field, and she filled the need admirably. She was not content to settle for the four-harness overshot weaves—the Summer-and-Winter technique and the double-weave had been declared lost arts when she revitalized them—learning the hard way by taking apart old samples, thread by thread. As she said many times, to speak of a lost method of weaving is ridiculous as long as there is a sample and a weaver who wants to know. She developed the Crackle weave from an obscure type of Swedish weaving used for linens, and turned it into an alternative to Summer-and-Winter for weavers who had only four harnesses to use. Her adaptation of the Bronson weave, discovered by her in an English book of patterns, was so great as to make an entirely new technique, now called Bronson II or Atwater-Bronson. Her development of pick-up techniques made even two-harness looms capable of all sorts of exciting patterns without the sacrifice of efficiency. The *Bulletin*, coming out every month, was always a source of new and interesting weaves and new applications of old weaves. Her students learned to develop original patterns and try new ideas, and they learned excellent craftsmanship, too.

Thus the art of handweaving owes to her and her students its revitalization as a living craft, the resurrection of the Summer-and-Winter and double weaves, the introduction of the Crackle weave, the alteration of the Bronson weave, the popularization of the Finn-Weave, and the various techniques of pick-up weaving. Weaving also owes to her persistence the development of the wide variety of excellent looms now available, and the enormous selection of materials suitable to the craft. In fact, persistence is a mild word. The battles she fought with the Bernet Brothers were epic. Many good loom designs are good because she deviled the designers, and refused to recommend the looms until they reached her standards. Her method of pattern notation, derived from musical notation, and her breakdown of the secrecy in which the old-time weavers held their patterns, have made thousands of understandable and easily used patterns available to any weaver. Her *Book of American Handweaving*, first published in 1928, is still the standard text for many weaving classes, and an auxiliary text for most of the others, and her students are teaching other weavers all over the world.

All this sounds as though my mother did nothing but weave, morning, noon, and night. Far from it. Somehow she found time to attend school plays and graduations, arrange after-football game dinners for college students, help with homework, and trim Christmas trees. She did a lot of writing not at all connected with weaving. She wrote short stories, some of which were published. She wrote a detective novel that was published here and in England, and several other novels that have remained unappreciated. She also wrote letters. She wrote to my brother and to me, to numerous relatives, to any and all weavers, students or not, who needed her help, but that was just the beginning. She had a theory that, if something was surprisingly well done, or distressingly badly done, one should write to the person responsible and say so. She wrote to senators and representatives and legislators and other public servants. She wrote to hotel managers and airport directors. She wrote to newscasters and editors. On one occasion she wrote directly to Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone complaining of the quality of the tires on her new car—and they bought her a new set of Goodyear tires.

Housekeeping was not one of her gifts, but she was a marvelous cook. One of her favorite radio programs was the Mystery Chef. She sent him several recipes, one of which was printed in his cookbook. She was one of the best camp-cooks I ever saw, and she could not only cook and eat trout, she was at her happiest standing waist-deep in a Montana creek, catching the main course for dinner.

She was, by her early desire and training, an artist. Most of the pictures I have on my walls she painted. They are watercolors, pastels, and charcoals, landscapes and portraits, many of them dating back to preweaving days, pictures of mining camps in Colorado and Mexico, of Bolivian Indian men and women, pictures especially of Basin and the mountains around the town. One summer before I was born, she went to a family seaside settlement in New Jersey. The walls were bare boards with many knot-holes and knots. She decorated the communal dining room with drawings around each knot so that the walls became a sort of tapestry of watercolor—all lost in a hurricane a few years later, but remembered still by my cousins. My grandmother treasured a huge linen tablecloth embroidered all over with fish and water plants, done freehand. Mother just started at one corner and worked her way around the edges, developing the designs as she went.

She was one of the rare people who really see what they are looking at. She looked at the mountains a dozen times a day and always found them new and beautiful and worth remarking. Her gardens were apt to be jungles, because she enjoyed the weeds as well as the flowers. I suppose she was excited by every evidence of beauty in existence, and the happenstances of her life are what turned her attention especially to textiles and hand-weaving.

One of her main interests from the time she went into the hospital service until the time of her death was the profession of Occupational Therapy. Indeed it was a hard choice for her when she left Occupational Therapy and turned weaving teacher, a decision largely influenced by my existence. At that time Occupational Therapy was being developed mainly in mental hospitals, an environment she did not feel was ideal for a small child. She maintained close touch with the profession, and wrote many pamphlets and articles for the use of practicing therapists. It was largely for the use of therapists that *Byways in Handweaving* was written, though it has proved a tremendously valuable book for everyone interested in the creation of textiles without the use of a large loom. At the time of her death she was helping a neighborhood child regain the use of his hands by teaching him card-weaving and braiding, and it was her encouragement that took many members of your Guild into voluntary work in local hospitals.

Mother loved politics. When my father was a mining engineer in Butte, before I was born, she was one of the active workers for women's suffrage, and she was an important part of the campaign that sent Jeannette Rankin to the senate as the first woman senator. She campaigned for every Republican presidential candidate from Coolidge to Eisenhower. She loved baseball. She never missed a Dizzy Dean radio broadcast, and though she found the early TV coverage of baseball hard on the eyes and uncoordinated, she would have loved the games as they are televised today. When she lived in Butte, she was sometimes the only spectator except for a blacksmith, who also went to every game. She loved dogs, and there was always at least one around the house. In Basin, before my father's death, she raised Russian wolfhounds, and sometimes had as many as fourteen on the premises. One of them remained a member of the family until she died at the age of fourteen while we were living in Cambridge. Those Guild members who knew mother will remember Duchess, a hysterical Doberman who showed her affection so violently that it was dangerous for mother to be welcomed home from a trip to the grocery store.

Mother loved her family, seeing us all as better and brighter and more gifted than we were. She herself was a good deal more than life-size in her enthusiasms and energies, her likes and dislikes. She was never either wishy-washy or boring.

What did she look like? There is a picture of her taken in the last year or so of her life, in the front of the *Recipe Book*, and there are several younger pictures on exhibit here, but none of them convey the animation of her features or the flash of her steel-gray eyes. She was not especially tall, and was a bit stooped in the later years. She usually wore a black dress, a size or so too large, under a violently patterned artist's smock, whose pattern did not always disguise the India-ink spots. She never cut her hair and wore it in braids wrapped around her head. She had a low voice,

which was never raised, even when she was angry. She was not especially interested in appearance, and considered clothes to be a covering rather than an adornment, and cosmetics a waste of time, though her taste when buying clothes for others was always good. I wish all of you could have known her. She would have been proud of what your Guild has done over the past years, interested in the exhibit we are to open, and grateful for the publication of the *Recipe Book*.

Some of Mother's weaving is here on exhibition with that of her fellow Guild members, and I would like to say a little about some of the pieces. The rust-colored overshot coverlet goes back to the very early days. It kept me warm when I was young, and predates the revival of Summer-and-Winter weaving. The blue-and-white Summer-and-Winter coverlet is one of a group she wove here in Salt Lake City as gifts for her grandchildren. This one was woven in 1953, when she was 76. The Summer-and-Winter square, with a border all around, is one of the very early pieces, done in Cambridge when she was researching the weave. The Crackle-weave tablecloth is one of the early pieces in the development of this weave, and the Atwater-Bronson towel is one of a group woven to demonstrate this weave for an institute. The pieces of leno were woven on the 100m Mr. Gilmore made for her as a present for her 75th birthday, and the rugs were also made on this 100m, and are shown being woven in the picture in the front of the *Recipe Book*.

The rugs are part of a reaction. For perhaps the thousandth time a non-weaver looked at her looms and said, "Ah, I see you make rugs." Meaning as usual, hit-and-miss rag rugs. Mother, who seldom wove rugs, and never rag rugs, reacted by weaving several as far as possible from the hit-and-miss, and writing a pamphlet on the subject. The patterns for some of these pieces can be found in the *Recipe Book*, as can some patterns contributed by members of your Guild.

In closing I would like to say thank you to your president for thinking of inviting me to join you, and to thank the members of the Guild for seconding her invitation. I hope that this is only the first of many such exhibits, and that the Mary M. Atwater Weaver's Guild of Utah has as fruitful a future as it has a past. Thank you.