



The Coverlets of William Leinbach

Once you step through the door of Bill Leinbach's weaving studio, the boundaries of time seem to lose their meaning. It's as if you've been transported back almost 200 years, to an age when the word "industry" meant hard work rather than big business, and machines were still powered by man. Even the sounds are unfamiliar to the modern ear: the soft "woosh" as the shuttle flies across a web of cotton threads, the gentle rustle as the heddle frames raise and lower the warp, and the resounding thump as Bill pulls home the heavy batten, bringing the newly laid woolen weft up to join the slowly growing cloth.

Bill Leinbach's appearance enhances the illusion. A member of the Old German Baptist Brethren, he wears the beard and simple clothes typical of the men of this traditional religious group—a look that has changed little since the Brethren first settled in Pennsylvania in the early 1700s.

Born in Berks County, the heart of Pennsylvania German country, Bill's early life was strongly influenced by the traditions of the area. In college he studied Ornamental Horticulture, but he became fascinated with early textiles when he learned how to spin using an old spinning wheel. Before long, his interest in early textiles developed into a wish to weave similar fabrics by the same methods his ancestors used.



Bill Leinbach specializes in weaving "overshot" coverlets in the time-honored tradition of his Pennsylvania ancestors. The fine examples shown opposite indicate the skillful workmanship that goes into each of the coverlets he weaves.

Now an experienced craftsman, Bill specializes in weaving cotton and wool "overshot" coverlets that are virtually identical to those made by weavers two centuries ago. In overshot coverlets, threads of both the warp and weft shoot over each other to create solid blocks of color that contrast sharply with the background. The colored wool weft and natural-colored cotton warp also can be interwoven to produce the half-tones

that add depth to the overshot pattern. Only the finest combed cotton and worsted virgin wool yarns are used to weave a Leinbach coverlet.

Bill's handsome, four-harness loom is particularly well suited for this time-honored job; it once belonged to a weaver named George Norris who lived in Weare, New Hampshire, during the late 1700s. Bill had learned from a friend that this particular loom might be for sale, and contacted the owners: the family then living in Norris's home. After much correspondence and many telephone calls, Bill made the long drive from Pennsylvania to New Hampshire, only to find that the loom was in pieces in the attic. While assembling the pieces to make sure that the loom was complete, Bill discovered many other tools tucked among the attic's dark and dusty corners. After negotiating, Bill was able to buy the loom as well as all the tools that were stored with it, obtaining, essentially, an entire weaver's workshop dating back to the 18th century.

Inspired by these unusual acquisitions, Bill taught himself to weave the linens, blankets, and coverlets typical of earlier times. During the past 13 years he has produced bolts of handwoven linens for the Ephrata Cloister (a historic religious community), made "fustian" (a coarse fabric of linen and



Above: In a scene that could have been set two centuries ago, Bill Leinbach dyes his woolen yarn in a hefty iron kettle over a wood fire. The dyes are made from natural materials like the indigo plant but are bought from a dye house, just as they might have been in colonial times.

Because of their rich look, Bill sells a third more coverlets woven with home-dyed yarn than those made with commercial yarns.

Above right: Before the wool can be dyed, it must be unscoured and made into skeins. Bill uses a six-armed "clock reel" to speed up this tedious job.

Near right: An adjustable "barrel swift" holds the skein while it's wound onto a spool. Bill is preparing to make a warp for an all-wool blanket; traditionally, a coverlet's cotton warp would have been started the same way.



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cotton) for use on the beds at the re-creation of George Washington's headquarters at Valley Forge, and made coverlets for numerous customers. During work on the nearby Hans Herr house, a historical restoration, Bill served as textile consultant.

After weaving full time for eight years, Bill moved from one part of Pennsylvania to another and lost most of his established clientele in the process. In his new location, Bill found himself unable to make a living from his weaving alone, and took on various other jobs. Finally, a friend asked Bill to take shuttle in hand once again and weave him a coverlet. Since that time, Bill's frequent appearances at craft fairs, along with a renewal of the public's interest in coverlets, have helped build his business anew. Along with his coverlets, Bill also makes baskets and has found time to restore the mid-19th century brick house in which he lives with his wife Edna and their two children. Bill's weaving studio is attached to the house; he and Edna dismantled an old log structure they found in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, to build it.

Like his predecessors, Bill offers a selection of standard coverlet patterns with romantic names like Double Compass, Royers Road, Double Chariot Wheels, True Love's Knot, and Blooming Leaf. If other designs are desired, Bill consults a historic pattern book. Besides cotton-and-wool overshot coverlets, Bill weaves summer and winter coverlets (see explanation on page 57), all-wool plain-weave blankets, and coverlets with a twill weave and a traditional "goose-eye" or "bird's-eye" pattern. The whimsical name of the latter stems from the coverlets' overall pattern of small diamonds—each of which has a spot or "eye" in the middle.

To give his coverlets the richness and depth of color typical in early examples, Bill dyes much of his weft yarn by hand with dyes made from natural materials. In addition to the colors created with natural dyes, Bill also offers his customers a choice of fine yarn in 26 different hues that he buys from a commercial manufacturer.

The crowning touch of a Leinbach coverlet is the cartouche or signature block. This text block, located in one corner of the coverlet, may contain anything from a simple date to a biblical quotation. Or, this block may be used to commemorate a special family event such as a wedding anniversary or birthday. Most often, the cartouche



Above: Bill mounts the full spools on a rack, then threads the yarn from each spool through a warping paddle. This tool helps Bill to guide six or eight lengths of yarn at a time around the pegs of the massive warping frame without tangling them. The frame keeps the multitude of warp threads at the same tension and ensures their equal length.

Near left: The cotton warp for the coverlets measures 51 inches in width and 50 yards in length. This is enough to produce six coverlets—about a month and a half of work.

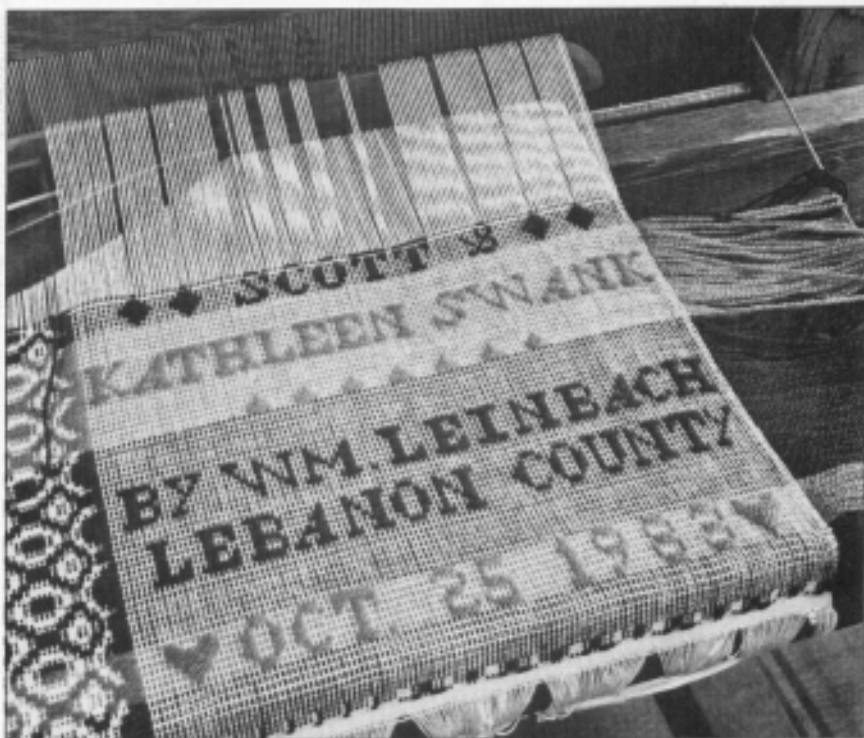
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contains the date the coverlet was made, the person it was made for, and the name of the weaver.

The size of each coverlet is designated by the customer. By carefully joining the 50-inch-wide woven panels, Bill can create overshot coverlets large enough for even a king-size bed.

Coverlets colored with natural dyes range in price from \$550 to \$750 depending upon the complexity of the pattern, the size of the coverlet, whether a cartouche is desired or not, and how much lettering is required for the cartouche. The coverlets woven with commercially dyed yarn start at around \$435. Bill also weaves a sensational white-on-white coverlet that is priced in the same range as the naturally dyed variety.

For more information on ordering a coverlet, write to William Leinbach, 356 Royers Rd., Myerstown, PA 17067.



Above: The personalized cartouche is in the first part of the coverlet that's woven. Bill plots out the pattern on graph paper, then uses a "pick-up" stick to manually depress and raise the necessary threads for each row of weaving.



Center: The coverlet is woven in two or three panels depending on the size requested (crib, single, double, queen, or king). The sections are stitched together to match the pattern at the center or side seams. Once the loom has been set up it takes Bill one week to make each coverlet. Crib coverlets can be made in one day.



Bottom left: Bill's coverlets are handcrafted with great care and are designed to be cherished and passed on to future generations. Bill made this special coverlet for his son several years ago.