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Dorothy Dean Heryford
Iowa State College

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When Our Grandmothers "Wrought" Samplers

By DOROTHY DEAN HERYFORD

I WISH my great grandmother had made me a sampler! Back in 1830, when all the other Elizabets—and numberless Elizas, Priscillas, and Anns, too, for that matter—"wrought" each her sampler and filled it with figures, quaint flowers and decorous cross-stitched verses; back in those days my great grandmother must have been an idle indulged little girl. But, just possibly, she didn't realize that the sampler Cousin Jane was working on would someday hang framed in the place of honor over the fireplace in Grandniece Jane's California home; undoubtedly she didn't guess that any great granddaughter of hers would ever bewail her lack of needlecraftiness.

Our grandmothers' charming custom of sampler making has languished in this bustling generation. Their quaint embroideries have become precious with age and memories. We treasure our own family sampler—if we are lucky enough to have one—and wonder how the diminutive hands of Ann Wilson "Aged nine years" could fashion so many trim, tiny stitches. And we smile at the stern little verse that accompanies the reposeful landscape—and feel a little relieved that we live, after all, in a generation where samplers are loved—but not made.

Although we like to think, in connection with samplers, of the childish industry of our earlier ancestors' demure little daughters, nevertheless, samplers were made in Great Britain

and Europe far sooner than in America and they were made by adults, not children. Just when the first sampler was made, we do not know; there are references to sampler embroidery in the sixteenth century verse and story, and, naturally samplers must have existed some time before casual mention of them was made in literature. The oldest dated specimen which is now in the Victoria and Albert museum was worked in 1643. But Reverend Burroughs, of Ames, has a most interesting one—older than that—finished by nine-year old Martha Slee in England in 1634. This is the oldest child's sampler which I have ever heard or read of; so far as I know, the oldest in existence. It is creamy yellow in color and the design is a familiar one—Adam and Eve standing under a cross stitched tree of life.

Few very early samplers though they must have existed, can be found today. In the Essex Institute of Salem, Massachusetts, is one of the earliest samplers—a drawn-work strip done by Anne Gower before she became Governor Endicott's wife and came to America to live. It was made probably in about 1610.

The very early samplers were, like this one, simply strips of cloth, usually linen, often a yard or more in length, and hardly a fourth as wide. They were simply collections of laces and embroidery designs. The patterns were arranged without thought of pictorial effect; often they were simply



Simple, but think of the time it took.

scattered unaffectedly about without any plan whatever.

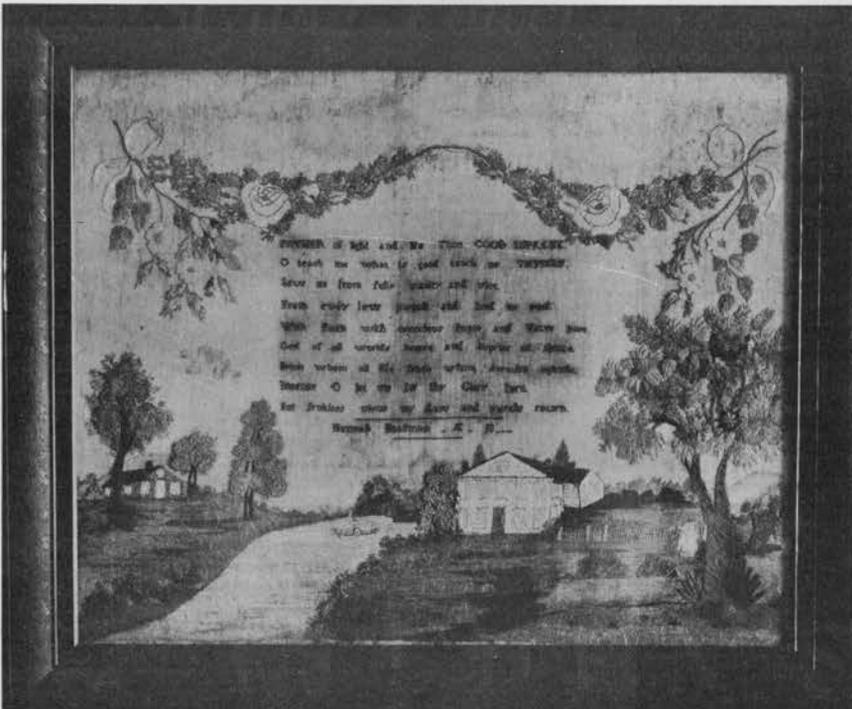
Later, preciser arrangements appeared and the alphabet, numerals, border designs, decorative animals and human figures added their part to the general interest of the piece. During the eighteenth century, texts and verses became increasingly popular. The samplers became designs in which the parts were related, and the sampler—as we usually think of it today—came gradually into being. Little by little the work was abandoned by women and given to children whose patient hands "wrought" and "worked" most of the pieces we treasure.

The sampler was, at first, a naive and entirely delightful thing. The designs were formalized rather than naturalistic; more symbolic than real. The colors were varied but gentle and subtle throughout. In the later samplers the colors became stronger and contrasts were greater. The stitchery, especially in the early seventeenth century work, was intricate and beautifully even. Some of the work was even made alike on both sides. The bird's eye, satin and cross stitches were used most in alphabets; darning stitches, back, stem and long and short stitches were used frequently in the other parts of the embroidery.

The material most widely used for samplers was hand woven line. It ranged from very fine to a coarse canvas-like texture; its color from creamy white to yellow. Later with poorer work, came poorer materials—cheap cottons and wools. But, fortunately, these fabrics were not too widely employed. Thread for the embroidery was linen or-twisted silk, or even cotton.

But what we really prize in our

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An 18th century child worked painstakingly on this pictorial sampler.

Japanese style as some Americans do. For one thing, going without shoes allows one's feet and ankles to become so large. The privacy of the board fence is frequently pleasing to Americans and it may be one reason why occasionally Americans are thought by the Japanese to be rather haughty. It is hard, though, to adopt all of the customs of another country and few

Americans live exactly as the Japanese do.

"I found it hard to learn the language, too. Every time that I tried to practice my Japanese on Japanese acquaintances, they became eager to assist me in understanding them by practicing their English on me. They are all so very courteous and ready to please. Then, too, since Japan has so many foreign contacts in the large cities she is very cosmopolitan after all and it is surprising how very many Americans one sees there."

The Vogue for Samplers

(Continued from page 2)

samplers is not the materials of which they were made—though these were important—but the work itself and the expression of the personality of the maker through those engaging designs and dainty stitches. We like to smile a little pityingly, at the picture of a patient little needlewoman sitting at



Mottos seldom heard today.

a dame-school painstakingly stitching in cheery blue cross stitch the words—

"Content one with an humbl shade
My passions tamed, my wishes laid;
For while our wishes wildly roll
We banish Quiet from the Soul
'Tis thus the busy beat the Air
And Misers gather Wealth and Care."

And meanwhile our own ten-year old Bettys and Helens come rollicking in from tennis, or baseball or hockey—too young, we think, to be chided about "Quiet of the Soul"—for a few more years at least!

Ours is the more wholesome generation of the two, we decide, comfortably. Yet our grandmothers' moralizing verses expressed sentiments far from unwholesome—and certainly refreshing. Sometimes a little disconcerting, perhaps: what domestic tilt can proceed comfortably with these words sternly chiding from the mantelpiece:

"What is the blooming tincture of the fl skin
To peace of mind and harmony within?
Or the bright sparkling of the finest eye
To the soft soothing of a calm reply?"
This masterful reproach should chasten anyone.

One of the most interesting samplers I know of was worked by Faney King (aged nine years) in 1809. The picture is of Adam and Eve realistically worked in long-stitch, a wily serpent coiled about a prolific apple tree and two chubby angels tirelessly waving palm branches over the whole scene. The verse says:

"And the man said The Woman
Whom Thou gaves to be
With me she gave me of
The Tree and I did eat."

The childish fingers which "wrought" and "worked" these samplers have long since abandoned work to rest, folded, in quiet oblivion. But the decorour cross stitched sentiments expressed by those stern little needle women are read and smiled at by their children and their children's children. If only we could, as artlessly as they, leave some heritage half so charming!

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