

# Saving Our Weaving Legacy

by Philis Alvic

The world is divided into two groups—those who save things and those who believe in a trim lifestyle. For those of us who hold on to material things, we know this stuff has great personal value. Some of us are even selfless enough to retain objects that are no longer useful to us, but that we feel will be of use to someone else.

The world has used some unkind names for those of us who save. I myself have even been referred to as a “pack-rat.” But recent world conditions have put the savers in a new perspective, especially those who pass things along for other people to use: we recycle.

As a long-time weaver, I have many valuable tools of my trade around me. I am not too sure when these things pass from the active phase to the passive. Since I might require some item at some unspecified time in the future, I will continue to squeeze more and more into my studio. Occasionally there is a grand reorganization, and long-unused items are finally given away. But mostly, more stuff continues to be shoved into the same limited space.

Some people might consider it to be morbid, but I am concerned about what will happen to my valuable things when I am no longer around to preserve them. Looms and other weaving paraphernalia, yarns, books, and finished pieces have obvious value. However, besides tangible tools and products, I also have invested time in generating materials on paper and in accumulating thoughts and ideas. Will the worth of these be apparent to someone else? The answer is “Yes,” but only if the right set of eyes sees them.

## The Researcher’s “Bug”

Now for an elaborate aside. During the last few years, research has

been added to my many occupations. An interest in weaving in the southern Appalachian mountains, generated by Allen Eaton’s *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*, was reawakened. As a result, I’ve been seeking information in old filing cabinets, rummaging through boxes of miscellaneous papers, and delving into college archives. Because many of the caretakers of the material I am searching for do not place the same value on it that I do, it is often not preserved in very good order.

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researcher’s bug, I am in an absolute panic that someone will dispose of written material before I can get to it. Places that had weaving during the early part of the century are now craft schools, special focus schools, or craft cooperatives, if they exist at all. They have had more pressing concerns than preserving their own history. And as space was needed, records were removed to cardboard boxes. If luck came into the equation, the boxes found a remote rest-

ing place and were not relegated to the trash.

Many real gems are surrounded by junk, with “gems and junk” in the eyes of the beholder. My interest in the work of Georgia weaver Mary Hambidge happened at about the same time South Carolina scholar Joan McLaughlin began her research for a Mary Hambidge biography. Joan was very pleased to find someone who could supply her with information about the weaving, and I was equally delighted at discovering a helpmate in unraveling the intricacies of Mary Hambidge’s life.

Since Joan delved into old boxes of paper, while the garments and yardage captivated me, I asked her if she had come across any sheets with numbers on them. I had not discovered weaving records with the finished items, and I knew that weavers do figuring on paper before going to the loom. Joan pointed me toward some notebooks of calculations she had found but could not decipher. I easily discerned threads per inch multiplied by width to indicate total threads in the warp, and the length then multiplied by the total yardage to give the yarn requirements.

In many ways, a researcher is a detective, piecing together little bits of information to form some kind of picture of a reality. The more clues, the better the picture. But the ability of the sleuth to put the pieces of the puzzle together is a significant factor, too. In my studies I have always appreciated knowledgeable minds such as Joan’s to test theories and try out different scenarios.

Because I am a saver and a researcher, it is very important to me that my stuff survives me and that other people’s much loved endeavors are also available past their demise. I

am not imposing value judgments on accumulated items, but I accept the criteria that some thoughtful person considered it worthy enough to save. And if a weaver held on to it, some other weaver undoubtedly will find interest in it.

### Saving Your History

In preparation for this article I contacted a number of places that might accept the stacks of paper that we weavers accumulate as a by-product of our involvement with weaving. I asked if they would be interested in papers of people who weren't famous. Past U.S. Presidents build libraries for their papers, and other notables have found welcome depositories for the paper associated with their endeavors. But I wanted to know if materials would be accepted for the subject alone, rather than the stature of the saver. Would papers connected with the personal history of an ordinary weaver be significant enough to claim space in an institution dedicated to saving?

The logical place to start was with those institutions that have some professed concern with textiles. The stated mission of the Thousand Islands Textile Museum is to preserve work of 20th century weavers. They have in their collection records from Berta Frey, Marguerite Davison, Gail Redfield, and many other handweaving notables. But work from those who didn't write books is also acceptable. Their textile study collection is one of the largest of contemporary weaving records and is steadily growing. Other textile museums usually have a special historical focus for their collections and are primarily interested in objects, but they might be open to inquiries about possible submissions. The San Bernardino County Museum has the papers of Mary Atwater and

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others. Here local weavers are the preservers and organizers of the materials.

The Handweavers Guild of America, Inc. has several committees that accept material for circulation to its members. Books, Textile Kits, and Slide Kits are the categories that welcome submissions.

For those fortunate enough to live in a major city with an active weavers' guild, many of them maintain libraries of weavers' papers. This gives one's weaving colleagues access to those things that probably were shared during functional years. Weavers' guilds have knowledgeable members who are willing to put the donated materials into an easily accessible form.

State historical societies are a place to deposit papers. But you do have to be concerned about the state in which you happen to reside, because all states are not equal. Historical societies are supported by a combination of state and private funds, and the financial base is much more generous in some than in others. Also, in most states historical societies are connected with museums, and there may be strange dynamics between the archival function and the display of objects. So, the special focus needs to be checked into before making commitments.

By far the most eager response to my question of accepting papers from

non-famous people came from college and university libraries. At most institutions of higher education the depository of paper is called “Special Collections,” and is presided over by an archivist. An archivist is a unique mixture of a librarian and a historian. After the initial decision to accept the materials, as a group, they are savers that do not discriminate. Decisions of worth are left to those who choose to pursue research. Nancy Baird, a historian in The Kentucky Museum Library on Western Kentucky University's campus, is in favor of accepting everything, because she feels that one is not given a second chance to say “Yes.”

When I suggested that some types of visual materials might be better placed somewhere else, the Special Collections archivist at Berea College, Shannon Wilson, gave me a lecture on “collection integrity.” In short, he wanted everything—weaving records, business records, writing, research notes, material in process, swatches, slides, photographs, sketches, workshop notes, and letters.

Most of the librarians I talked with were especially emphatic about letters. It seems that in this electronic age most people no longer communicate with their friends and colleagues by the written word. Letters and notes present a much more candid insight than the official printed word is meant to do.

Mr. Wilson went into some detail about how different categories of materials would be preserved and made ready for presentation. Archivists divide the materials into categories and store them in file folders in flip-top boxes. This is a neater version of the cardboard box in the attic, but there is a lot in common. The order is only as good as the cataloger. And because

supporting information and explanations don't accompany the item, the researcher must have knowledge of the subject.

Richard Shrader, archivist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said, "More history is lost to over-zealous housekeeping" than any other source, and he followed that with the sentiment that "any preservation was better than none." Then he acquainted me with the rather startling fact that more material is saved and deposited in archives by lawyers than any other professional group. If anything, my talk with Shrader convinced me that I had been rather imprudent in the few things I have discarded over the years.

Generally librarians agreed that materials should be donated within the region in which one lives. Keeping things within the region where they were generated makes sense because there will probably be other pertinent information there, too. If the materials are taken too far afield, locating them will be difficult.

When I inquired as to how a person might find where collections were hiding, Nancy Baird introduced me to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, called "nuckmuck" by many librarians. This directory has the name of the person who donated the papers and a breakdown of the collection. Unfortunately, the information given is not standardized, because individual sites describe their own holdings and some are more extensive than others. Also, since submissions are voluntary, many places that have collections might not contribute descriptions. This may be a reason against contributing to specialized private institutions. They are less likely to realize the value of reference listings than universities or historical societies are. NUCMC itself is usually only available in large research libraries because of its cost.

In searching for information, remember that the librarian is your friend. The phone works well in ascertaining the extent of collections and whether or not a particular collection is worth a trip to investigate.

Liza Kirwin from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art said that scholars like to give the impression that only the enlightened can use original sources, but actually anyone is allowed access to public archives. Showing up between designated hours seemed to be the only requirement.

Securing information once it is located is a matter of operating the copying machine. Most libraries have inexpensive copying charges. Archivists view this as one means of protecting the documents. They believe there is much less chance of damage or theft if a copy can be obtained easily and cheaply. Photographs and slides can be duplicated too. Copyright restrictions can apply for other than personal use. If you know what material you are looking for, most librarians can arrange for copying and mailing it to you. With the high cost of travel, what appears as an astronomical copying bill can be cheap by comparison.

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Everyone contacted in connection with this article stressed the importance of a person making arrangements for the deposit of papers while still lucid and able to evaluate terms. Major concerns should be:

- The extent of materials that the institution is willing to access.
- The conditions required for the presentation of materials.
- The health of the institution (the preserver should have potential for longevity).
- Access given to those who might be interested in the material, such as restrictions on viewers, hours and building access, and availability of inexpensive copying.

Weavers are generally modest about

their accomplishments, but in preservation this is not a virtue. Your work should be saved for other weavers. Papers fall into two categories: primary sources and secondary sources. Those in the primary category are things you have generated yourself, i.e., your weaving records. The secondary sources are those things one collects written by other people. These are more valuable than they might appear on the surface. Information can take many forms and be in many sources. Bringing together like subjects is a valuable service and may lead a researcher to discover material lurking in an unusual place. Be a dear, and note the date and place where the source information was obtained on the top of the page.

Don't wait until some later date to consider your effects. Even if you are in perfect health, a freak accident is always possible. Do not leave the things you love to the people you love unless they are well instructed as to your wishes. You owe it to the history of weaving. Yes, that sounds a bit pompous, but I wish that earlier weavers had taken their papers more seriously. Whether or not we think we are worthy, we are the history of tomorrow. Leave the value judgment to those who follow.

### A Data Base for Weavers' Papers

I would like to start a data base of weavers' papers. Please be my source of information. Send me names of 20th-century weavers and where their papers have been deposited. When collected, this information will be made available to interested persons through a computer data base. Please send names and places, and I'll contact them for more information.

Responses to this article should be sent directly to Philis Alvic, 1622 Miller Ave., Murray, KY 42071. ✉

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*Philis is a recipient of the COE in Handweaving.*

*Editor's Note: HGA's Your Weaving Legacy booklet is available for \$2.50, including shipping and handling, by writing to HGA, 120 Mountain Ave., B101, Bloomfield, CT 06002-1634.*