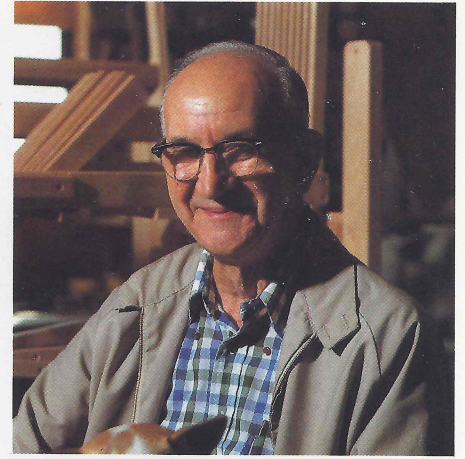


Designer and Weaver:



E.E. Gilmore

The Looms Of E. E. Gilmore

By Toni di Franco

On a small back road just off Highway 99 sits a large quonset hut and several small houses shaded by a row of trees. This is the home of the internationally acclaimed Gilmore looms, designed and manufactured by E.E. Gilmore of Stockton.

This tall, lean man with a quiet air is a legend among handweavers. He has produced his looms commercially for 44 years, and this fall he celebrates his 50th year of handweaving.

Gilmore was born and raised in Stockton. In his younger years he worked in his father's planing mill, developing an expertise in working with wood. In 1930 his sister died, and, he recalls, "a cousin of mine, who was a weaver, thought my family needed something else to think about. She suggested that we try weaving. My parents weren't interested, but I decided to try it. I built my first loom from the designs she gave me from a weaving class she had taken."

The initial design was a 45 inches wide "jack type" loom, where the harnesses which separate the pattern threads are lowered by foot treadles in the weaving process. His first project was a 20 inch wide table runner woven in a "honey-suckle" pattern.

From those early beginnings Gilmore developed his weaving skills, experimenting with pillow tops, and then he progressed to an evening coat for his mother. However, he soon became dissatisfied with the loom he had built, for it was awkward and unwieldy. As he worked on this problem, he recalls that "one night I had a vivid dream about a new type of loom where I would push the harness frames up from below. By so doing, the weaving process would proceed much more smoothly. It was the forerunner of my present loom."

In 1936, due to a heart condition, Gilmore's doctor advised him to quit work for a year. Knowing that Gilmore had designed his own loom, the specialist suggested that he take up loom production as a career. "I took his advice," smiles Gilmore, "and in the spring of 1936 I sold my first loom, which I made out of oak."

Soon after that he was asked by Mary Atwater, the "grande dame" of American



The hands of a weaver: Fabric being woven by Gilmore for his motor home (summer and winter weave).



Gilmore in his weaving studio working at a 32-inch loom (left); Jim Lucas adding harnesses to a completed loom (right).

handweaving, to bring his 34-inch wide eight-harness loom to her studio. He packed up his car with the loom and drove to Montana with high expectations. When Atwater saw the loom, he recalls, she remarked that "it won't weave." "I said it would," he continues, "but she said I needed to drop the harness frames two inches to correct the tension on the threads, and it would weave." Atwater told him that if he corrected the problems on the loom, she would recommend it as the best loom made. "I followed her advice," he chuckles impishly, "and that's what got me where I am today."

The Gilmore loom, lovingly developed over years of experience in working with wood and in handweaving, is, according to many handweavers, the finest loom made. While attending a California handweavers' conference, smiles Gilmore, "a woman was looking at my loom and told her friend that it was the 'Rolls Royce' of hand looms."

The secret of the Gilmore looms may lie in the fact that Gilmore is a perfectionist. Each piece of wood for the loom is carefully selected for its intended purpose. The frame of the loom is maple, while poplar and birch are used for secondary

parts. "My looms are made only in a natural tone of wood, because it looks best," says Gilmore. "I don't believe in staining it an unnatural color."

In a large area of the quonset hut the wood is cut to size and then carefully shaped and sanded so that no rough edges are left. When the final finishing touch of a clear lacquer sealer is added, the loom has the texture of fine silk. Gilmore remembers his father commenting on his son's work years ago when he said, "Perfection isn't near good enough for you." The flawless finish of his looms and their fine design attest to Gilmore's abilities as an expert craftsman.

Gilmore looms are known throughout the United States and at one time were sold internationally. Although advertisements are placed in weaving journals, Gilmore feels that his customers are his best sales people. He still corresponds with people who have purchased looms from him in years past.

Gilmore looms have always been in great demand, and at the height of the weaving renaissance in the late 1960s, a customer had to wait almost two years for the completed loom. Currently, the waiting time is about two months. "People are still weaving, though," remarks Gilmore, "and in 1976 I sold more looms than I've ever sold in my life." 160 to 180 looms are now produced each year under the watchful eyes of Gilmore and his long-time co-worker, Jim Lucas.

At 81, Gilmore still works a half-day in the shop on loom construction. Although an operation on his knee slowed him down several years ago, his exercise program has brought him back to his original energetic level. His creative mind is still at



Harness frames which lift the pattern threads.

work, both on loom construction and on weaving.

"I'm weaving more than I did before," he points out with obvious satisfaction, "and weaving has been one way of keeping me abreast of new ideas and the needs of handweavers." This may be one of the keys to his long success in the weaving industry. As a weaver he has developed new designs on tools and looms which have facilitated the handweaving process and have added an aesthetic dimension to the weaving implements. The "feel" of the equipment is as essential to some handweavers as the actual weaving process. And the "feel" of Gilmore's looms is definitely quality merchandise.

In addition to the famous Gilmore looms, the workshop turns out loom benches, shuttles to hold the yarns, spool racks to help in the set-up of the loom, and other weaving devices.

In the weaving studio on his property Gilmore shows the various sizes of looms which he has designed, from the apartment sized 22" loom to the 32", 40", and 46" sizes. He is presently weaving a piece of yardage in orlon and cotton on his 32-inch loom in a weave called "summer and winter." The effects of the design are that one side of the yardage is dark, and the other side is light — thus summer and winter. He will make curtains from the yardage for the cab of his motor home.

"I'm partial to a 32-inch wide loom," he declares, "because it's easier to weave on, and it handles nice." He explains that a person can weave most things on this size of loom, from pillow covers and table runners to yardage for garments. Many retired people opt for this size of loom.

Loom under construction with Gilmore label burned into wood.



Loom prices range from \$300 to \$1,350 each, depending upon the size of the loom and number of harnesses.

Behind the weaving studio is Gilmore's home, which he built with the help of his close friend Jim Lucas. Their careful handiwork is in evidence here, from the natural pine walls in the bedroom, to the heavy beamed ceiling which they installed themselves.

The house speaks of handweaving. In a corner of the living room, a chair cover woven by Gilmore in blue and white double weave displays the familiar saying, "Be It Ever So Humble There's No Place

Like Home." The bedspread and curtains in his bedroom are woven with red and white cotton in a traditional pattern called "single snowball." Even the lining of the curtains is handwoven, to protect the fabric from fading.

In the living room, Gilmore proudly takes other weavings from his trunk which he has woven over the years. "I wove this Guatemalan-style runner in 1939, and it took me one hour to complete one inch of weaving," he comments. The bright fabric was woven with 64 threads to the inch, no small feat for any weaver to accomplish, and it took him nearly a year to complete it. He has also woven fabric up to 120 threads to the inch. "People think I'm crazy to do this kind of weaving," he muses, "and they've told me it's no wonder I make looms where there's a state hospital handy."

In fact, Gilmore looms have been used in state hospitals throughout California and the entire United States. Weaving is considered excellent therapy for mental patients. Looms are also used extensively in physical therapy programs for rehabilitation purposes.

This fall, as Gilmore celebrates his 50th year of handweaving, his active mind already has plans for future projects. He is always creating, always on the move. His loom production will continue, as it has in the past, giving new and old customers satisfaction from a piece of equipment meant for long use and creative explorations. □

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A completed Gilmore loom.

