



P h y l l i s G e o r g e

Kentucky
Crafts

H a n d m a d e a n d H e a r t f e l t

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M i n n i e Y a n c e y



Pure food for the soul is what awaits anyone who passes through the front gate — the "Star-gate" — of Minnie Yancey's farm off Log Cabin Lane in Berea, Kentucky. This self-styled pioneer woman weaves some of the finest rag rugs in Kentucky on a fifteen-foot loom — one of the largest in the state, designed and hand-made by Minnie herself. The day I visited she took me upstairs to show it to me and to display the notches she had carved into it — one for each rug weaved on it, including one for Frank Sinatra and one for Kirk Douglas.

Weaving rugs is Minnie's most commercially recognized craft, but she has many talents. She is an artist and a writer; an herbalist and a healer; a spiritual adviser to many people who travel miles to seek her

guidance and advice; a teacher of pioneer skills — weaving, loom building, herbal healing, soap making — and she designs and sews her own line of clothes.

Minnie proudly describes herself and her children, all of whom are now grown, as "feral" — which to Minnie means strong and completely self-sufficient. Their "can-do" spirit springs directly from the generations of Appalachians in her family who originally crossed the Cumberland Gap to settle in central Kentucky. It is a confidence that allows her to carry on, even after a tragic fire in 1982 destroyed her home and all of her belongings.

Minnie is passionate about her many talents, all of which she is willing to share with those who seek her out. Her farmhouse is phoneless, but people find her anyway — those young and old who come to visit and learn from one who knows so much about so many things.

I met Minnie when the crafts markets opened in 1980. I was struck by her extraordinary rugs and looms, but also by the pure

pioneer spirit that emanates from her. I ask her to come to my home every year at Derby time to do weaving exhibitions for my guests. The day I visited Minnie I was touched to see pictures of our many good times together hanging next to a beautiful portrait of her mother.

She shared with us her dream of how she wants to spend the "second fifty years" of her life. As she says, "Everything I've done over the past fifty years has gotten me to this point." She hopes to weave Beethoven's nine symphonies — her favorite weaving music because "you can hear all the chapters of your own life within them" — into a rug that is fifteen feet wide and four stories high, to hang in the escalator well at the Neiman-Marcus store in Beverly Hills. The idea was born when Minnie exhibited there as a featured artist at the Kentucky Crafts Show in 1981. Minnie is one of the few people I know who could take on such a wild and massive undertaking and make it happen. The bigger the challenge, the greater the enthusiasm of this "feral" Appalachian woman.



Im influenced in my weaving and artwork, in my writing, my cooking, my painting, my soapmaking, in everything I do on earth by what I smell and what I hear. I use my five senses to organize things on the earth into something people can use. I'm influenced too by primitive things — going back to my great-great-grandparents. My great-great-grandmother Effie walked four hundred miles across the mountains through the Cumberland Gap to find a new land. She was alone, save for her only son. When he was eighteen, they went to the county seat, far away, and put the land in his name. They all said, "How, Effie, was a lone woman able to do all that?" She put her

hand on the fence post — and I can show you that very one — and she said, "It's a poor hen that can't scratch for one little chicken."

Artists have to be able to feel free — that's what drives us. Effie was an artist, too. She found a new medium for her artwork. The new land she claimed became the "canvas" for her artwork, and she painted the lives of all her descendants on that canvas.

My parents didn't weave, but I learned from them how to put pieces of wood together to make a loom. They were both carpenters. They were innovators; they were pioneers. People don't realize all that they did. Our ancestors didn't haul their looms over the mountains. They just car-

ried with them the knowledge of how to make them. The man would bring his ax and his drawknife and his forging materials. The woman would bring her pocket-knife and her garden seeds. But they also brought the knowledge of how to do everything.

I guess I always wanted to weave. But looms cost a lot of money, so I decided I'd just build one. At first I didn't build what you'd call a "grand piano" loom, I just built a "spinet." It only wove forty-eight inches, but it could weave coverlets out of any kind of fabric you wanted. It would also do rag rugs, so I started weaving rag rugs. All weavers weave rag rugs some time in their lives — it's traditional. I used old clothes



and coats for material. But I wanted a wider rug, so I decided I'd take some two-by-fours and build some kind of upright loom. It just seemed like it was in me to do it. I got the loom built and I started making my own clothing designs.

I get all my knowledge of how to do things by reading and talking to people and by putting things together in my head. I sit down with a pencil and paper and I work backwards. I think of a rug I want to weave that is fifteen feet by twenty feet, then I think out what I have to build to make what's in my head.

"If I know I'm going to need a fifteen-foot-wide reed and beater, I know that the rest of the loom is going to have to be at least sixteen feet. I had to make a loom that large, and still fit it in my house!"

I will share what I know with others. I figure if anybody asks me something three times they really want to know, so I'll tell them things. If they drive all the way out here to Log Cabin Lane through the Stargate to see me, they must really want to know. And I love to tell people how to do things.

A lot of people think that food only

comes from supermarkets, that water only comes from pipes. My own four children all can weave, spin, make soap, cook, they know about herb medicine, all of it. They really like the word I use — *feral*. It means having a certain wildness about you, the ability in your genetic makeup to make it, to like it, if someone dropped you into the wilderness alone.

Feral people prefer to make their own choices and they are happy with the choices they make. I think of myself as feral. I could live about anywhere in the universe. Whatever planet or cloud they'd drop me on, I would want to live there, and I would figure out a way to live there.

Following your own creative call is the easiest path in life. Just roll on your back and go with the flow — it's much easier. You don't have to do a thing but make yourself available to that greatest artwork of the universe — then it all just comes.

Whenever I weave a rug, I try to cause the viewers to experience the work through all of their senses. Using all five senses at once activates a person's sixth sense, and that's what I work for. The simplicity of it all is so beautiful. Wordsworth experienced all five senses when he looked at a single blade of grass.

When I'm making a rug for someone, I keep working the colors until the rug says "Yay-yuh!" If I can't get it to say "Yay-yuh!" then I cut it off the loom. If that rug goes out into the world unhappy, who knows what destruction will be wrought. There must be "agreement" in that rug, and from that comes joy all over the world.

"You don't have to pay \$2500 for a walnut loom. You can just take some two-by-fours and build your own loom. The fabric is what matters, and I'll get the thread from somewhere. That's the real pioneer spirit."

