

Rug Weaver Finds Time To Preserve Dying Craft

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It's a old-fashioned handicraft that's easy to learn, inexpensive, and in demand. So why is it a dying art? Because it requires one more ingredient most people now days, unfortunately, are short of — time.

Mrs. Verna Renno of Belleville, Mifflin County, takes that last important ingredient and puts it to good use braiding rugs out of wool or knit remnants. By making as many as 18 to 20 braided rugs each year, Renno is carrying on the craft her mother, grandmother, and her husband's mother used to do to add warmth and color to the wood floors in their homes.

"It's a wonder what you can do with material," she says, sitting in her spacious, finished-off basement surrounded by boxes and boxes of cloth material. "It's a good way to use worn out clothing. People know I do this and give me material from rummage sales and yard sales to make them a rug."

Her average rugs measure three feet by five feet and take her about two weeks. The biggest she's made was four feet by eight feet, but she says the rugs get awfully heavy at that size.

Braided rugs can be made out of wool or knit. She prefers knit

because it is cleaner to work with. Wool produces a lot of lint. Both are easy to clean. Mrs. Renno suggests spraying both wool and knit rugs with a rug shampoo and using a sponge in warm water to take off the shampoo. Never put them in the washing machine, she suggests. It's hard on them and they may come apart.

In selecting material, Renno chooses bold colors like red, green, and black. She likes to keep one color consistent throughout, such as black, and tries to keep the color scheme, such as different shades of green, the same throughout. She also chooses plain material, but sometimes uses a very small print or plaid. "If I don't like the color of the knit, I just use the wrong side (of the material)," she adds. When braiding, she uses one dark color with two light ones. The rug she's working on now is various shades of blue with a constant black.

Renno starts by cutting the material into strips one and one half inches wide and as long as possible. Because wool is a heavier material, the strips can't be cut as wide or the finished braid, which should be a half inch across, would be too wide. Renno keeps half-inch scraps close by for thinner materials that might need a filler strip tucked inside to add bulk.

If the strips are short, she cuts the ends on the diagonal and sews the strips together on the sewing machine to make longer strips that make braiding go faster.

To start a rug at the center, Renno takes three strips or plaits and puts their ends together, cuts off both corners to make a V-shape, sews these together, and then flips one plait over the raw edge to make a finished V-shaped end. Before braiding, each plait needs to be folded to cover raw edges. Fold each strip so the raw edges meet in the center, then fold in half again forming a long thick strand.

Renno braids a couple of yards to start, keeping the braids tight, then measures it. She believes charging one dollar a yard is the fairest way to come up with a price. It takes about 51 yards to make a 32 inch by 48 inch rug.

After braiding a while, Renno takes the first 20 inches, although it depends on the size of the rug, and starts stitching the braids together to form the rug's oval shape. She uses a sturdy black thread from a harness shop if the rug's continuous color is black. For tans and greens, she uses a beige thread.

Renno passes a "stubby" nosed needle through the braid, being careful not to catch any material in the process, then does the same with the braid beside it. By doing it this way, all stitches are hidden, front and back. Renno says it is important to keep the rug stretched out flat when lacing it together, and to not pull the stitches too tight, otherwise the rug will bulge. Because the thread she uses slips, Renno knots the ends before knotting a new thread on to continue stitching. She hides the knots within the folds of the braids.

When the rug is completely woven and stitched, taper off the final braid and end with the darker color. Then simply lace it to the rug to secure it.

Mrs. Renno began her craft after her husband Erie "retired" after 30 years as pastor of the Locust Grove Mennonite Church. He has spent the past 10 years ministering at Valley View Haven retirement home. They have three daughters.

"I always ask the children and grandchildren what they want for their wedding — a braided rug or a comfort. They always say a braided rug."

Renno knows how easily one can find material for a rug and hopes this will encourage others to learn the craft. One woman, Renno says, bought the beautiful deep red and black wool from the Woolrich outlet and had her make six rugs. Her nephew, a school teacher in Michigan, gave her 30 of the school's old knit uniforms. With only two colors, Renno wondered how the rugs would look, but she wove four circles of a blue/blue/gray scheme then four circles of a blue/gray/gray scheme, adding that they turned out just fine. She also told her nephew the rugs would out wear him!



Verna Renno of Belleville carries on a dwindling tradition — braiding rugs. By sharing tricks of the trade such as connecting lengths diagonally and folding them properly to plait, she hopes to inspire others to learn rug braiding.



Shades of green, brown and beige form this four by five woven rug.



Using a large needle with a blunt end, Renno goes through the braids being careful not to catch any material to lace the rug together. All stitches are hidden both front and back.



Mrs. Renno measures the braids and charges by the yard.

Homestead Notes