

Lancaster Farming *Antiques Center*

Tattered, Torn Textiles Tell Significant Stories

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STEVENS (Lancaster Co.) — Wendy Christie fingers the tattered edges of a 19th century feather bed cover.

While the untrained eye might dismiss the worn fabric as worthless, Wendy sees the richness of the weave and the value of its history. Stained and yellowed with age, the piece speaks volumes to Christie, an expert on Early American textiles.

"It's a legacy to the people to whose culture it belonged," she said. "Women without a voice spent their lifetimes serving their families. This is all that's left to communicate with us. When we value these pieces, it's like giving a voice to the women (who made them)."

Christie, who has appeared on several Martha Stewart television segments, lectures, operates an antiques shop near Adamstown, and who sets up at 12 shows annually, believes that her passion for textiles was inherited.

Her great grandparents immi-



Coverings for this late 19th century bed were hand sewn by Christie using scraps of textiles. She refuses to "damage" pieces by cutting because the Early American textiles are not a renewable source.



The display of blacks, browns, and whites makes a striking visual statement in Christie's shop.

grated from Scotland and were silk weavers. Her father's side of the family printed calico fabrics and specialized in Turkey red dyes. Her grandmother was a dressmaker and made business suits for women during the 1930s.

"I grew up loving plain woolen fabrics, admiring their textures and their richness," Christie said.

She learned smocking, basting, and other sewing skills from her grandmother. But best of all, when she sees fabric, she sees possibilities.

It's a talent, she said, she shares with most women who grew up in a working class, rural family — no matter what era.

"Give us a piece of fabric — and it offers so many possibilities."

Although fabric is used to make clothing, draperies, household uses, and much more, Christie disdains the idea that fabric must be used.

Why do we need to do anything with it? Why can't we just display it? she asks.

Display it is exactly what Christie does at her studio at 1035 N. Reading Rd., Stevens.

Rows of neatly folded fabric are interspersed with a collection of china and select antiques.

The fabrics show the variety of textures, the evolution of fabric weave since the beginnings of America, — all in hues of white, black, and browns — her favorite colors.

When Christie started buying Pennsylvania homespun in the early 1990s, she found little information about it.

Her master degree's in studio fine arts and philosophy, which at first glance appear diverse, influenced her to find out as much as possible about early textiles. Her fine arts studies provided a background for appreciation of the textiles and the history entailed, and the philosophy caused her to examine her passion for it.

She asks, "What hung in the outhouse? What was used to wrap around a dead baby? How did handwoven tape differ from that used to tie featherbed cases

to that used for garters? What did people like me do?"

"I realized what I was looking at was the only voice and legacy that legions of rural American women left. That it was the only tangible thing to show that these women were even on the planet," Christie said.

Her research uncovered that 90 percent of the Early American textiles were not woven at home but were spun at home. The spun yarns were taken to a weaver and woven into utility goods for table linens and bedding. Women bartered back the finished fabric and made them into goods to provide for the family.

In Pennsylvania, cotton was readily available for spinning from the 1800s on. It was easier to spin than linen and flax, which is extremely labor intensive.

German styles usually covered straw mattresses with tow, which incorporated short pieces of flax into the linen, giving it a nubby, rustic appearance. Bleach tow refers to utility grade fabric. A linen sheet to sleep on could either have been of a fine or coarse weave. Feather bolsters resulted in the person sleeping in an almost upright position.

In addition to buying and selling, Christie also completes consignment projects such as outfitting antique beds. She will not cut into antique pieces, and discourages others from using them every day because "they are not a renewable source." However she will hand-stitch pieces of fabric that can be used without damage by cutting. Her forte is making feather bed covers topped with pillows by layering with vintage scraps.

Christie offers a few pointers
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In her studio, Wendy Christie is surrounded by things she loves: 19th century rural American cloth, china, and select antiques.



"It's addictive," Wendy Christie said of collecting 19th century rural American cloth. "Each piece is better than the other."



Good design transcends time, Christie said of the Early American textiles. Many of the fabrics were used every day and were not meant to be fanciful or even to be displayed.