THE CANADIAN FOLK HANDICRAFTS SOCIETY

"Great oaks from little acorns grow."

BY MISS MARY M. PHILLIPS

FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE CANADIAN HANDICRAFTS GUILD

THE end of the rail has reached at last a primitive little village on the shores of a many-armed lake in the heart of the mountains: a train, crawling up the steep winding grades like some monstrous serpent, behind its snorting, puffing engine, brings a party of campers to pitch their tents on a clearing at the head of one of those many arms, several miles from the settlement: on the other side of the clearing is a log house, with barns and stables built in the same manner, where "Monsieur et Madame" pursue an active, thrifty life aided by their numerous children, the latter no negligible asset in pioneer conditions.

The campers need milk, so after a hot walk to the farm they willingly rest in the kitchen while Monsieur tells the story of hewing the logs for the first cabin, clearing field after field from the surrounding forest; bringing up a family; sending them off into the world; marrying again and bringing up a second family, eighteen children in all; with no near neighbors, no shops, no railway. Madame then suggests a visit to the attic—there the reason why her family look so well cared for as well as the source of much of the prosperity is made clear. Such a wonderland! The spinning wheels and looms; the shelves filled with cloth, linen and catalogne; some of it dyed from roots, bark, berries and grasses in soft tones of blues, browns and greens, with here and there a touch of bright yellow; bundles of straw braid ready to make hats (those wide-brimmed, pointed-crowned hats that are such a protection from the sun); rolls of hides tanned for "les bottes sauvages," mocassins and harness; sheep skins for mats; stores of maple sugar and syrup; bacon and hams; herbs for seasoning and for medicinal purposes; in fact the Swiss Family Robinson themselves were not better equipped on their marvelous Island; moreover there were added, with intention, touches of form or color having the sole object of making these necessary, every day articles pleasing to the eye.

Then into the mind of the Artist came the thought—Why should this knowledge and skill be lost with the coming of the Railway bringing its daily freight of factory produce from the outer world? It is true that the Pioneer age is passing away from the Country and the manufacturing age is upon us, but here we still have handicrafts that in the Old World are being revived for artistic as well as other values. Why not encourage and retain them while knowledge and skill are yet with us, adapting the things produced to the needs of present conditions, thus giving pleasure and benefit to both makers and purchasers? Is it not worth while to increase the appreciation of good workmanship and true beauty applied in the making of things required by all for many and different purposes? Is it not worth while to give the craftsman the support of wider sympathy in his greater joy of creation, and by adequate remuneration enable him to occupy leisure time in making something which he alone can? No factory can give the touch of character that marks the individual's work.

And so the Acorn fell.

During the final decade of the last century the thoughts of men and women were occupied with many new movements in the realms of Art, Science, Social Life and Religion. Recent discoveries involving changing conditions entered into all phases of life, the social status of women in particular giving rise, perhaps, to an exaggerated emphasis being laid upon women's work as women's work, but yet by the formation of Women's Clubs developing power which had hitherto lain dormant. Ruskin and Morris having entered their protest against the ruthless destruction of individual expression in the Applied Arts, in consequence of the development of manufacturing processes, an aroused interest in this form of art expression became general, leading a Women's Art Society in Montreal to take up the study of these minor arts in addition to their other work. Lectures and exhibitions were held to encourage the application of artistic powers apart from the painting of pictures.

Eventually, in the autumn of 1900, the Society held a large and important Exhibition of Arts and Crafts, both old and modern work being shown. This contrasting method of arrangement was arresting and instructive, many valuable and beautiful examples were brought to light, opening the eyes of hundreds of visitors to the value of things they had hitherto passed blindly by. The catalogue, carefully compiled and unusually full of information, was itself a choice specimen of the Printer's

Craft. A small section of the Exhibition was given over to a display of Canadian work, where the excellent and unsuspected variety decided the Society to hold another Exhibition, purely Canadian, as soon as possible with the object of developing Canadian handicrafts.

The Acorn had sprouted.

More than a year elapsed before this project could be carried out, but in the meantime notices were sent broadcast over the Dominion in order to give time for preparation, these circulars stating also that if sufficient encouragement were received a permanent sales depot would be established.

This Exhibition, though not as large, was possibly more definitely instructive than the former, the unique and beautiful collection of Indian crafts alone claiming serious study as well as admiration. Many people became interested in the idea of encouraging Canadian home art industries, and the general success of the Exhibition apparently warranting the venture "Our Handicrafts Shop" was founded May, 1902, in Phillips Square, Montreal, in charge of a special committee with separate funds. It aimed to be a practical means of encouraging home art industries, not only for the money which the sale of such work would bring to workers, particularly in remote districts where money is a rare commodity (and rarer still in the hands of the women), but through sales assured by wider markets, to retain and develop artistic taste and skill as well as habits of thrift and industry, the pursuit of such crafts developing powers which bring riches greater than money into the life of the individual and the nation.

Exhibitions were gathered and sent out from this little "Shop" to other parts of the Dominion and the United States with many fears and misgivings, for insurance, carriage, damage and loss were heavy risks to be faced. However, at the end of the first year, over and above expenses the workers had been paid $904.30; the Committee were duly elated and spurred on to redoubled efforts.

The Acorn had grown into a little oak plant.

While all crafts were equally encouraged it was found that in the Province of Quebec the arts of spinning, weaving and dyeing linen and wool were practised to a greater extent than elsewhere. The demands for products so useful as well as artistic grew rapidly; in fact the looms were likely to be kept as busy as in the days when the family depended upon them for their clothing.

Needlecraft was also stimulated by the exhibition of beautiful Russian embroideries made by the Doukhobors, that strange race to whom the Canadian Government granted lands in the North West when they emigrated from Russia to enjoy religious freedom and immunity from military service in a country where the call to war then seemed the most improbable of events. The hardships of their first winters in a new land were largely mitigated through the skill of their women with the needle. A quantity of their embroideries were placed in Our Handicraft Shop where the beauty of design, colour and technique called forth admiration.

In 1905 the little oak plant had grown so fast that it was generally realized that it required the undivided attention of a separate organization. Financial responsibilities were becoming heavier and with a semi-commercial aspect necessitated wider powers than could be exercised by the parent society under which the special committee worked. Thus, in 1905, the "Canadian Handicrafts Guild," a body of men and women, came into existence to care for a vigorous oak sapling.

As set forth in its constitution, the "Canadian Handicrafts Guild" is a benevolent association for the purpose of encouraging, retaining, reviving and developing Canadian Handicrafts and Home Art Industries, providing markets for the same, facilitating and spreading habits of industry and thrift, holding and taking part in exhibitions, providing any kind of instruction connected with the objects aforesaid, and carrying on all sorts of business operations necessary for the said objects, but without personal profit to the members of the Guild.

That the Guild has not neglected its charge may be briefly shown by the following summary of its activities since 1905.

Exhibitions have been held throughout the Dominion and others sent to London, Dublin, Melbourne (Australia) and the United States.

County and Provincial Fairs have been visited and work judged by experts from the Guild.

Assistance given to start the weaving industry in connection with Dr. Grenfell's Mission in Labrador.

A Technical Library established.

The nucleus of a Crafts Museum collected.

Donations of rare specimens of Indian work made to the Museum of the Montreal Art Association.

A pamphlet on Home Dyeing, compiled by the Prince Edward

Island Branch, published in English and French.
Prize Competitions held, practically annually.
Branches and numerous Agencies established.
Paid to Workers—in 1905.....$ 4,804.62
Paid to Workers—in 1919..... 63,346.48

The Acorn has grown into a healthy young oak tree with branches stretching across the Dominion. May it live and flourish as an oak tree should, sound of heart and strong of limb, deep rooted in the soil.

Thought may properly be given to the technical, the aesthetic, the human side of the Guild's work included in, but not obviously expressed in the foregoing facts and figures.

The farm referred to at the beginning of this article has given place to a large country house and grounds; the little village has become a small town with a busy railway station from which hundreds of passengers speed away to their country houses and camps scattered among the hills and lakes throughout a radius of many miles; these houses are furnished in great measure from "Our Handicrafts Shop" for, alas, in this district where the little acorn grew, the inhabitants are allowing, with short sighted policy, things which they could make as well themselves to be provided by others from other parts of the country. But old ideas of thrift have given place to modern ideas of "get rich quick," with as little labour as possible, and "spend as you go." They do not realize that much leisure time could be used to greater advantage than it apparently is at present, particularly by the young people, in occupations which would be enjoyable as well as profitable without interfering with their chief work in life.

But five hundred miles away the Guild may lay claim to founding a real village industry with present signs of stability. There a small purchase of a few dollars' worth of rag weaving not very many years ago has been multiplied to many thousands in the past year. Owing to this and general prosperity, this small community is now living in comfort, not as formerly, dependent upon the season's herring catch and potato crop for the winter supplies.

It is strange how certain work becomes characteristic of places and people without apparent reason, surviving in one place, dying down in another and reviving again—how and why, it is hard to say. In this little village by the sea, settled by refugees from France after the Edict of

Nantes, by exiled Acadians and soldiers from Wolfe's regiments, a characteristic craft has survived and developed. Whether these French refugees, whose relations settled in England and founded the silk weaving industry there, are responsible for handing down to their descendants in a country where silk manufacture was impossible, a peculiar skill in the fine weaving of common cotton rags, showing rare taste in a delicate harmony of colour, is a point that may be left to the opinion of the reader according to the measure of his or her belief in hereditary power. The fact remains that from nowhere else does the Guild receive such well made, artistic work of this kind.

In Prince Edward's Island, a Branch of the Guild has developed a rug making industry with gratifying results due to the careful attention given to design, colour and technique by devoted members. In connection with this craft the Branch has also done most valuable work for the art of home dyeing by compiling the result of painstaking research experiments and tests relating to the use of natural dyes and publishing them in pamphlet form. This pamphlet the Guild republished later in French. A few years ago excellent heavy cloth was made in the Island but it is a matter for regret that an industry so staple in character should apparently be dying out.

At present the chief source of supply for homespuns both for men's and women's wear is the north shore of the St. Lawrence where the amount derived from the sale of their handicraft forms no inconsiderable portion of the inhabitants' income as the demand for these serviceable and attractive materials grows steadily.

Here, and elsewhere in Canda, a heavy cloth was formerly made, similar to Irish frieze, but rather closer and harder in texture, usually a light grey in colour. The cloth was closely woven and then shrunk, the surface raised with teazles, matted, smoothed, steamed and pressed until impenetrable to wind and weather, rain and sleet rolling off it like water from a duck's back.

From this cloth, and sometimes from a dark blue blanket cloth, was made a coat that merits special description; and though today it is almost unknown except in the pictures of Kreighoff or Julien, yet it was so fitting for the climate that it used to be generally worn by men and boys in stormy winter weather. The Blanket Coat worn by members of Snowshoe Clubs is a descendant.

It was cut double breasted, with a fly hiding the buttons, and close

fitting, the seams were piped with red, epaulettes of several layers of red and blue cloth cut in a semi-circle and pinked at the edges in a dove-tail pattern were set into the top of the sleeve; a "capuchin" or hood was buttoned to the collar and when drawn over a "tuque" formed a perfect protection against the wildest storm.

With this "capote" was worn the "ceinture flechée," that sash of many colours, intricate stitch and design, handed down from the days of the old voyageurs who used their sash for more than one purpose. They were known by the name of "L'Assomption" sashes in the Hudson Bay Company's Stores, as they used to be made in that district and strange to say, during the Exhibitions of 1902 and 1905, an old woman from that place could be seen making one.

It is a common error to suppose that these sashes are woven on a loom; they are really braided with strands of many colours spun from lamb's wool into a very fine and tightly twisted, hard, smooth yarn. The strands are cut to the length desired, including the fringe; a sufficient amount is left for this at one end, then the strands arranged in groups of colours and knotted side by side upon a flat stick the width of the sash. The worker beginning at this end gathers half in each hand and braids with thumbs and forefingers towards the centre and back again. The loose end naturally becomes twisted and has to be straightened from time to time. Owing to the fine, smooth texture and durability it has been said that these sashes were made of silk and had moose hair interwoven, but the writer has never seen any old specimen made of silk, and as for moose hair, it is too coarse and brittle for the purpose.

The work of making these sashes is much too slow and painstaking to appeal to the modern worker or to be profitable under present conditions, but the art need not be lost as the Guild has descriptive records, including photographs, and one member at least who can make them.

From the Lower St. Lawrence comes also that unique tufted decoration which is woven, not embroidered with a needle, in quaint patterns, full of meaning for those who care to read the motifs of historical, ecclesiastical or natural origin, such as the "fleur de lys," "Marie et Joseph" and the "Pine tree" or the "Snowflake."

Flax is also grown, prepared and woven into linen and sometimes dyed with the true old indigo dye. But the temptation to meet the de-

mand for fashionable colours leads away from Nature's durable, soft but less vivid tones.

So far old Canada and her crafts have been considered, but the new settlers in the great North West have a claim upon the Guild's care and have not been neglected.

English and Irish laces, embroideries, linens and fancy weaving from foreign settlers, wood carving, metal work, leather work—examples of all have been received and every encouragement given to retain these crafts. The Branches in the West send to Headquarters in the East work to be sold, as well as selling in their own sales depots. Just because the settlers in the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and the Far North come from many countries, bringing with them varied skill, it is yet too soon for special crafts to have become localized, and the people are so fully accupied in adjusting themselves to their new environment that the amount of these by-products, the output of leisure hours is not large.

Turning from thoughts of the new settlers in our land to its original owners the question may well be asked:—Is the Canadian Handicrafts Guild doing anything to preserve the wonderful crafts of the Indian? Yes. From Coast to Coast members of the Guild have journeyed giving most careful attention to the preservation of knowledge and skill still existing among our Indian tribes, endeavouring, in the face of many difficulties, to adapt themselves to civilized needs while retaining purity of design and workmanship. The West Coast baskets made from cedar bark, roots and grasses are so far less influenced by the white man's ideas and materials than any other craft, much to their advantage. From the North come bead, silk, and fine porcupine quill embroidery on cloth and deer skin, also carvings on bone from the Eskimo —from the plains transparent bead work made on looms, and embroideries; from Ontario porcupine quill work on birch bark; from Quebec and the Maritime Provinces sweet hay baskets, splint chair seats, snow shoes and other work.

To sum up—the Guild tries to help individuals to help themselves in their own homes by exercising a craft in which they have the greatest natural aptitude and to inculcate knowledge of the pleasure, benefit and dignity of hand labour well done.

The story has been often told but bears repetition, of the poor crippled boy lying helpless and well nigh hopeless—a burden upon his

mother, until restored to energy and self respect by a member of the Guild who taught him to make baskets. Today he is a grown man supporting the family.

Realizing very fully from intimate knowledge the restlessness of the younger generation in rural districts and the undue exodus to the cities, the Candian Handicrafts Guild is doing its part toward making country life more attractive.

Traveling Exhibits are sent out, articles written for the Agricultural Journals, and personal visits paid, when exhibits are explained and practical information given. Prize Competitions are held annually also, with especially tempting prizes for boys and girls.

It is felt that too much emphasis cannot be laid upon the importance of training both boys and girls to take an intelligent interest in making things with their own hands—for to observe, to investigate, to plan, in order to make or produce, never fails to bring the reward of fuller and more useful lives.