

NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

Vol. VI No. 3

May, 2000

THE STORY OF RUTHI CLARK

by Lila Nelson

Both the personal and weaving histories of Ruthi Clark leave a number of questions unanswered. Because she was of Norwegian origin, we would like to learn how her background related to her textile activities after she immigrated to America. Perhaps by publicizing what is known, a more complete picture of Ruthi and her life will emerge. From Vanita Hicks, her friend and executor of her estate, permission has

been given to share biographical information she compiled and sent me in 1955 together with news clippings; I am indebted to Vanita for most of the material in this article.

Ruthi L. Clark was born Ruth Klever in Oslo, Norway, on October 4 in either 1900 or 1903, the oldest of four children. After her parents divorced, her mother married Lunde (first name unknown), a step-father admired and loved by Ruthi. The Lundes had four additional children about whom we have no knowledge.

There are somewhat differing versions of Ruthi's introduction to weaving. She told Vanita that she resisted her step-father's wish that she attend Housemothers' school since she expected to have servants doing her housework. Her step-father said she needed the knowledge in order to supervise the servants properly. So at age 18 she attended the school, where she evidently had some exposure to weaving along with basic courses in cooking, gardening,



Ruthi Clark 1977 – Portland, Oregon

sewing, and attending domestic animals. Lunde also seems to have insisted on a course of study in nursing, refusing to subsidize Ruthi's developing interest in weaving. Undaunted, she saved "pin money" until she had sufficient to enroll in an evening class. Lunde was concerned about those evening hours which he assumed were spent at the hospital until, revealing to him her first finished piece from the loom, she received his praise, a refund of her tuition, and encouragement to continue. Later, she studied weaving in both Norway and Sweden.

In the 1920s, Ruthi married and had three children: Inger, Per and Aslok. Inger, born in 1921 or 1923, married Ivar Hansen; they supposedly had one son and a grandson named Marius. (A letter to her written July, 1997, to an address in Lillestrom, Norway, produced no response.) Per was born in 1925 and Aslok in 1927. Their last names, either Rod or Roed, would indicate this as the last name of Ruthi's husband. Vanita indicates that this husband died in 1980, but nothing further is known about him or Ruthi's connections with him, if any, after her immigration to America.

A short newspaper article from SANDEFJORDS BLAD dated May 24, 1935, announces a weaving exhibit of work by Ruth Klever Lunde and Helga Wangsnes, who operated a weaving school in Tonsberg. (Ruthi's return to her step-father's name would seem to indicate a separation or divorce from her husband.) My brief inquiries in July 1997 at the Vestfold fylkesmuseum in Tonsberg about this school yielded no information.

During World War II, Ruthi worked as a Red Cross nurse. Vanita believed she was a nurse's aide or medic. She told of travelling across Norway, going north on skis just ahead of the German occupation troops.

An article in HANDWEAVER & CRAFTSMAN, Winter 1957-58, states that chance brought Ruthi to America in 1947, where she arrived with one suitcase to visit briefly with her brother Irving in New York. A Portland

woman on the plane overpersuaded her instead to continue on to that city. According to Vanita's information, however, Ruthi sailed on the ship STAVANGERFJORD, arriving January 14, 1947 in New York with so much luggage that Irving had to make two trips in his car to accommodate it all.

Whatever version is correct, Ruthi ended up in Portland shortly after her arrival in this country and soon met Samuel R. Clark, whose family owned Clark's Furniture Store in St. Johns. They married October 9, 1947. (Samuel died September 1, 1967, and is buried at Willamette National Cemetery.)

Ruthi's first name as well as her last underwent slight transformations during her lifetime. Beginning as Ruth, it was temporarily Americanized to "Ruthiell" after arrival in this country. Eventually the "ell" was dropped and Ruthi L. Clark became the final legal identification.

In late 1949 Ruthi remodeled her Portland home to provide space for teaching weaving, spinning, and dyeing. A newsclipping from an unidentified Portland newspaper dated March 8, 1950, says that ... "Ruth and Sam Clark and eight looms live happily in the big house at 9036 North Willamette Boulevard."

Around 1952 Ruthi began teaching at the Portland Arts and Crafts Society, becoming head of the department in the summer of 1955. In addition, from 1957 to 1962 she taught weaving to the women inmates at the Rocky Butte jail. About 1963 she left the Arts and Crafts Society after losing a power struggle with another weaving teacher and decided to start her own weaving school. In September of 1964 Ruthi's Weaving Studio opened at 2900 Southeast Belmont Street in Portland.

Ruthi indicated that her favorite loom was the contramarche built by Arthur Bergman of Poulsbo, Washington. She sold many of his looms to her students and, perhaps in gratitude, he designed a shuttle which he called the

"Ruthi". The 1957-58 article in *HANDWEAVER & CRAFTSMAN*, however, illustrates Ruthi working at a loom resembling an upright Glimåkra tapestry loom, and the article discusses at length her reproductions of old Norwegian tapestries as well as her spinning and dyeing the yarns needed. She owned a blue Norwegian spinning wheel said to be, in 1957, over a hundred years old.

Ruthi primarily reproduced traditional pieces of weaving (as pictures of details from a Wise and Foolish Virgins coverlet, a photograph of Ruthi beside a large hanging in Vestfoldsmett, and other examples testify), but she also did some original work. A detail from a contemporary tapestry, "The Frozen Arctic," attributed to Ruthi and a student, is pictured in the 1957 article as well as an adaptation of a Sangford coat of arms.

To describe Ruthi's teaching, I quote directly from Vanita's biography:

Ruthi taught weaving to many people in Portland, but her teaching style was that of the "Old School". Students were led through their first project making hand towels using various techniques, but she taught very little theory. It was sometimes difficult to get an explanation of why something was done. This technique was satisfactory in the 1940s and 50s when women wanted merely to do the fun part--the weaving. In fact, for some weavers Ruthi did most of the threading, rolled on the warp, etc., and after they left for the day, Ruthi would often spend hours correcting their mistakes. In the 1960s and 70s the type of student changed, and some felt frustration because she was not accustomed to explaining the reasons behind each phase of the weaving process.

In the late 1970s Ruthi suffered a broken hip and a heart attack, followed by a second very severe heart attack in 1979. Although she still continued teaching and went regularly to her studio, her health was no longer good. She died of a third heart attack on February 7, 1981 and is

buried with her husband at Willamette National Cemetery.

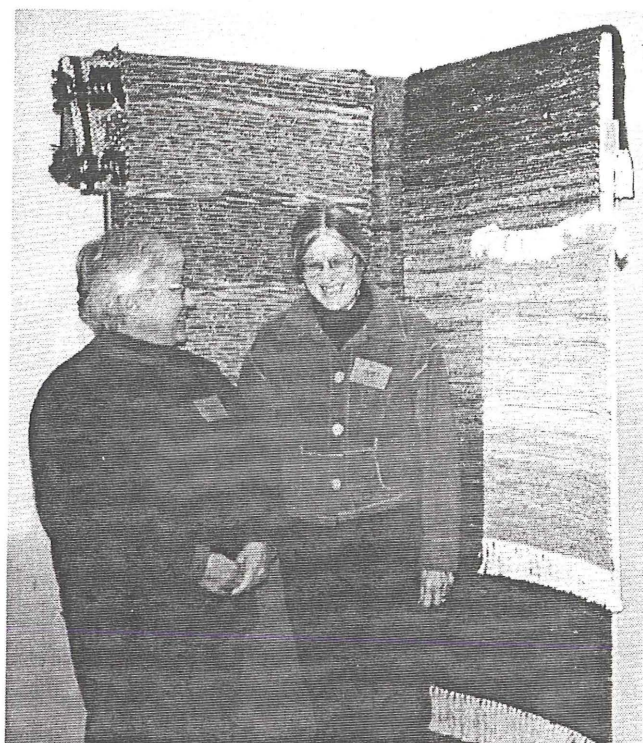
Many of Ruthi's tapestries were taken back to Norway by her daughter Inger Hansen for distribution to members of Ruthi's family. Some were purchased by or donated to Vesterheim Museum. These included a variety of her weaving together with examples of yardage, some of the latter said to have been woven by a Mr. Mason around 1970-71. Still others were sold during an estate sale, and some were supposedly donated to the Oregon Historical Society.

More determined efforts in Norway to locate Ruthi's family and research of the school she operated in Tonsberg should provide further information about her early weaving history. Perhaps former students in Portland, Oregon, as well as records of the Portland Arts and Crafts Society, can fill out the American section of her story. It would be interesting to know how much, if any, of the Norwegian tradition influenced the weaving that resulted from her work and teaching in the northwest part of our country.

JANET MEANY AND PAULA PFAFF TEACH AT JOHN CAMPBELL FOLK SCHOOL

Janet Meany, Norwegian Textile Guild member, and Paula Pfaff were most welcome at the John Campbell Folk School in the most southwestern corner of North Carolina. This week in January was for advanced classes in blacksmithing, book art, felting, weaving, bead-making, forging flatware, hammered dulcimer and Windsor chairs. All the students in this weaving class had Janet and Paula's book and welcomed the additional references and new drafts they brought. Most were experienced rug weavers and were ready to try the harder techniques and new tips that the teachers exposed them to.

From the Boone, NC area Ruth Smith and I jumped at the chance to be with these teachers while they were at Campbell. Ruth said that it



*Paula Pfaff and Janet Meany at
John Campbell Folk School*

was a treat to see the actual rugs featured in the book. She was amazed to see what completely different rugs were produced with different color combinations, fabrics and the same pattern. She agreed that these were very competent weavers.

Although we learned about the practical, workaday rugs, most of the rugs woven were art quilts, in my estimation. In short I was in awe of their abilities. I, of course, did small rugs and balked at beating the weft as I should have. When Paula finally got me to agree to beat on the Macomber, I asked if I could have a small ceremony with the loom and beg its forgiveness for beating so hard! For some reason none of the students were sympathetic with me. I used various fabric thicknesses, twisting techniques, and colors I had never tried. It was fun. I fell in love with the Finnish pattern, Arja's rug, which used three shuttles with thin strips and created a colorwash. I used quarter to one half inch bias strips which made the weft process faster.

As for loom history, Janet took pictures of several looms that looked like small gazebos. Her most complete slide shows with historical and personal references to rugs, looms, and weavers found the right audience that week. The

class also enjoyed the samples of old and new rag rugs that the teachers had either made or collected.

The students in the other classes enjoyed meeting these Minnesotans at the family style meals in the new dining room. Paula and Janet also took in the culture offered there in morning songs (modeled on Danish Folk School), country dances with students, staff and community family members.

If the ride wasn't so bad for them, they should be a regular feature at the school.

John Campbell Folk School website:
www.folkschool.com

by Donna Duke

CONVERGENCE 2000

We look forward to seeing many of you at Convergence in Cincinnati. As we mentioned before, our meeting will be on Friday, June 23, from 12:00 noon until 2:00 at a place to be announced when we arrive; and it will be a brown bag affair open to all interested. Kay Larson will bring us up-to-date on the 2001 Seattle conference. Noel Thurner will share with us the history, importance, and use of wool combs. Do bring show and tell if you can find suitcase space.

by Lila Nelson

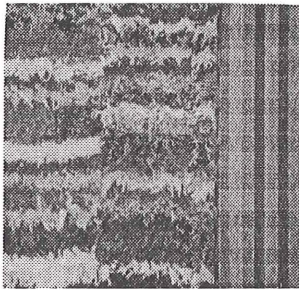
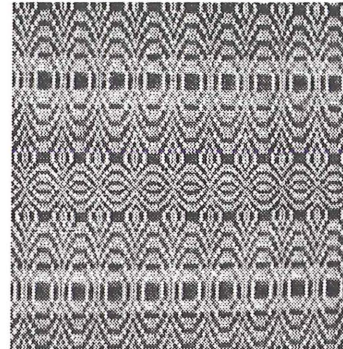
NANCY JACKSON TEACHES TAPESTRY

Norwegian Textile Guild member Nancy Jackson is teaching tapestry classes at her Timshel Tapestry Studio. Classes include the following: Norwegian Åklæver, some Norwegian Tapestry techniques, all levels of Aubusson/Gobelins Tapestry as well as classes dealing with individual techniques for the tapestry artist/weaver. For more information contact Nancy at - Timshel Tapestry Studio, 10 Beuna Vista Ave., Vallejo, CA 94950

Norwegian Coverlet Weaves Taught at Vesterheim

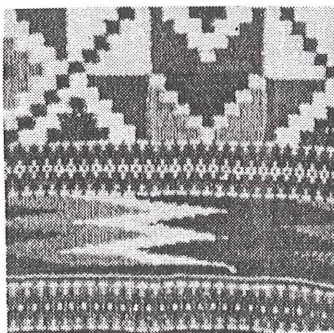
Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa, is offering four workshops in traditional coverlet techniques. This is the perfect opportunity to try one or several weaves. Each course includes an evening warping session, a tour of the museum with textile curator Laurann Gilbertson, and access to museum artifacts for close study. Students will also enjoy a special Norwegian meal and *kaffe* break at the beginning and end of their stay, respectively. For information contact Laurann; to register call Angie at Vesterheim Museum 319-382-9681.

Norwegian instructor Liv Bugge, a Vesterheim Gold Medal Weaver from Notodden, Telemark, will teach Telemarksvev on July 22 - 26, 2000. This six-harness overshot has been a popular weave for coverlets in Telemark and other parts of Norway. Students will experiment with color and treadling to create a piece suitable for a table runner. Intermediate level. \$220.00 / \$195.00 for Vesterheim members.



Norwegian Textile Guild's own Betty Johannesen of South Bend, Indiana, and students will explore the incredible variety of Rya (Pile Weave Coverlets) from August 7 to 11, 2000. Betty, a Vesterheim Gold Medalist, will teach both "boat" and "bed" rya using many different threadings, knots, and materials. Students should have a basic knowledge of weaving. \$175.00 / \$150.00 for Vesterheim members.

Can't decide which coverlet technique? Try four different coverlet weaves with popular instructor Syvilla Bolson, Decorah, Iowa. In her first course from August 21 to 25, she will teach *krokbragd* and inlay techniques including *vestfoldsmett*. Students will weave a 20" wide wall hanging inspired by a Stavanger Coverlet in Vesterheim's collection. For anyone with a basic knowledge of weaving. \$175.00 / \$150.00 for Vesterheim members.



Sample More Techniques in Syvilla Bolson and Jan Mostrom's workshop on September 11 - 15, 2000. Learn *rutevev* (geometric tapestry), *lynild* (zigzag, lightning), pickup and inlay techniques common on Nordhordland Coverlets from the northwest coast of Norway. Students should have a basic knowledge of weaving. \$175.00 / \$150.00 for Vesterheim members.