

“BEGINNINGS”

1953 - 1988

35 YEARS OF HANDWEAVING

By Erma Maerzke

The six original members of the Handweavers of the Valley Guild met for the first time in April of 1953 at the home of our founder Cora Kyte. The goals of the group were to promote weaving skills among the members and in the area and to help people with physical disability by developing weaving skills among them.

Basic to an understanding of the character of the founder of our guild, Cora Kyte, is the fact of her Quaker background. She was most content when she was rescuing someone who needed help or encouragement. She was for years a third grade teacher in the Delano Elementary School System. Cora was a firm but kind disciplinarian. She was artistically talented, a great advantage in her weaving. She lived with her husband on an orange grove in Jasmine Colony east of Delano. She wove many beautiful things: linens, clothing (at one time yardage for a white silk suit), rugs, shawls, afghans and gifts for her nieces.

Part of Cora's interest in weaving was inspired by her sister, Mabel Keatly, a member of the "Southern California Handweavers", who told her of the Burnham weavers, husband and wife, who made looms and taught weaving. Nina Burnham had had poliomyelitis and Mr. Burnham designed his first looms for her therapy. The Burnhams came to the area several times during the guild's early years bringing looms and yarns to sell and conducting classes for two weeks during the summers. Nina was a lovely person and a very patient teacher.

In May of 1953 the Guild staged our first benefit tea to raise funds for our projects. The Burnhams helped with their weaving. We had sixty-one interested guests. By 1955 we were encouraged by the number of new members from adjoining villages: Springville, Porterville, Bakersfield, Wasco, Buttonwillow and later from Visalia, Hanford and Riverdale.

In 1959 we had close to forty members. Weaving conferences were attended in Richmond, San Jose, Pasadena and Long Beach. Weavers helped set up looms for the State Hospital in Porterville and contributed time and yarns to the sheltered workshop at the local high school.

By 1966, ready or not, we joined the Central Coast Weavers to put on the Southern section conference in Bakersfield.