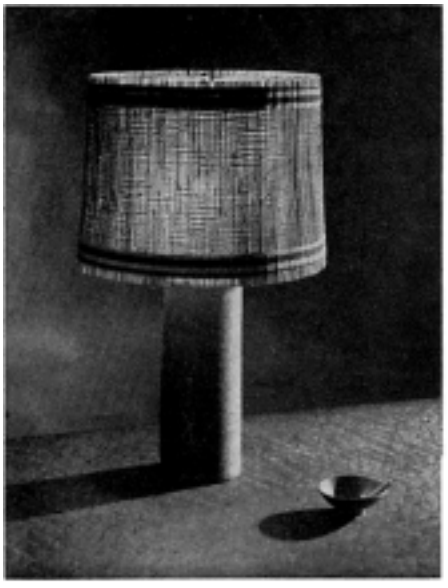
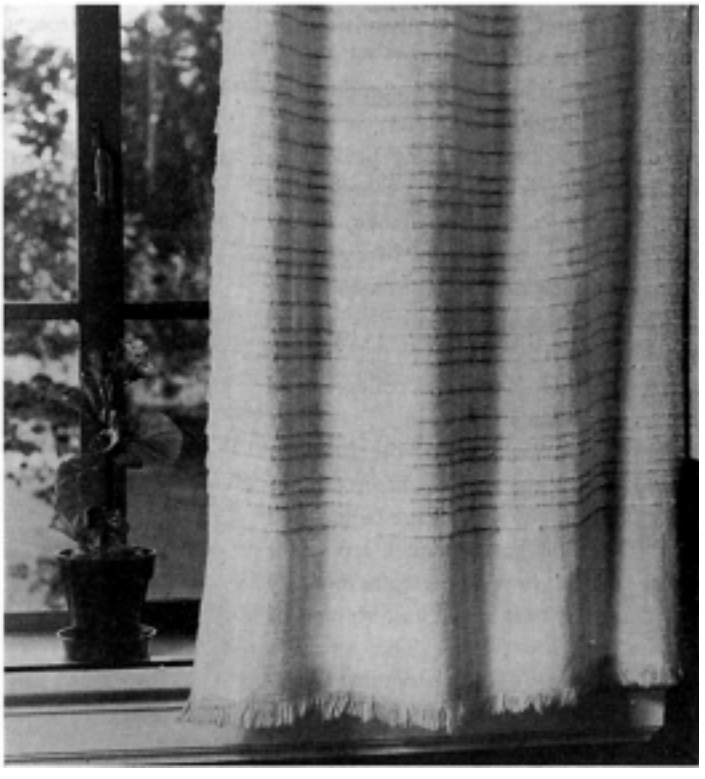
HANDWEAVING IN THE SOUTH TODAY

By TONI FORD



Lamp shade—woven of native broom sedge by Penland Weavers' division of the Penland School of Handicrafts. Lamp base designed by Douglas Ferguson of the Pigeon Forge Pottery, Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, using native red clay. Tool work is done free hand with steel tools, giving a texture compatible with the broom sedge which grows in this same red clay.



Drapery material by Toni Ford—cotton and spun rayon.

THERE MUST BE enduring values in an art which has persisted through so many centuries, through so many changes of fashion, through so many years of technical advancement. When grandmother sat at the big oak loom which almost filled her small cabin home, weaving coverlets, linsey, and jeans from fibers which she herself had spun and dyed with nature's dyestuffs, her art was an economic necessity; the means by which her family was clothed. But even with the hard work involved, with the limitations of her equipment, and with the narrow range of materials available to her, grandma found soothing comfort and a joy in the rhythmic beating of the loom that was part of the warp and woof of her existence. And now her granddaughter has discovered the same satisfying pleasures of this art.

This renaissance of handweaving came after a period of almost complete inactivity in the craft. It is really a strange sort of industrial revolution in reverse, especially in the South's textile centers. When Michael Schenck and Absolom Warlick set up the first cotton mill in the South in Lincoln County in North Carolina, way back in 1813, a momentous step was taken in the economy of the region, one that meant the beginning of far reaching changes. Machine spun yarns soon replaced the product of the spinning wheel and eventually resulted in making the use of the handloom uneconomical, for the power production of yarns led inevitably to setting up of power looms throughout the southern region.

Today the descendants of Michael Schenck have not only a large thread manufacturing plant but in addition a large department devoted to the production and distribution of a great variety of yarns exclusively for the use of handweavers. This is only one of the interesting evidences of our reverse industrial revolution; another is the fact that in the midst of this highly industrialized textile center is located what is probably the largest school of handweaving in America. In this part of the nation too there is an ever increasing number of people who are doing handweaving for pleasure or profit and some enterprises producing on a large scale which now have developed almost along industrial lines. Among these

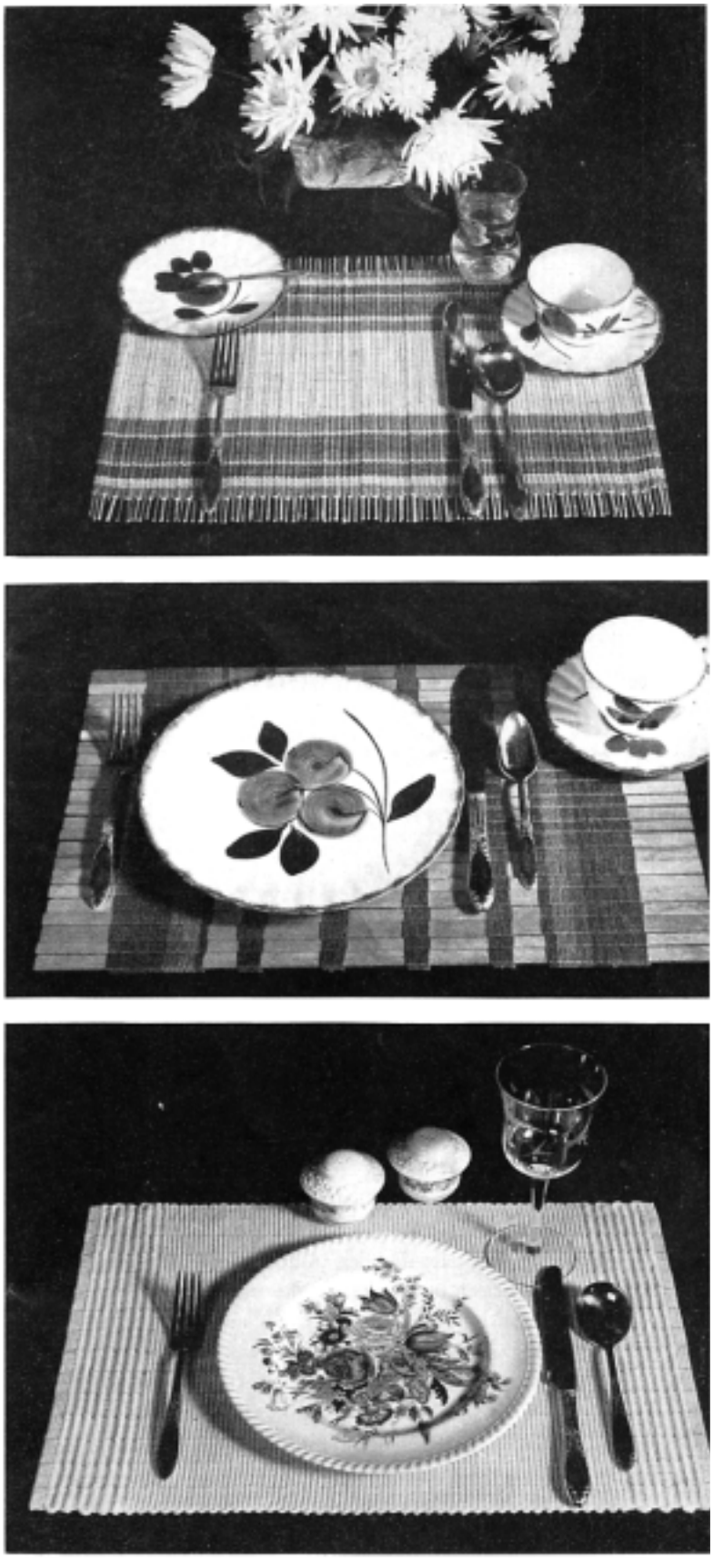
there is Biltmore Industries which for years has been making American homespun for the discriminating men and women of the country. And again there is Churchills' of Kentucky with a large plant devoted to making an extensive line of handwoven fabrics. The annual International Textile Exhibition at Greensboro, North Carolina, draws to it the finest examples of the weaver's art from this section as well as from others. But one of the most convincing pieces of evidence as to how far this industrial revolution in handweaving has come is the quantity of original work being produced by these regional handweavers, evidence that the return to the handweaver's art has progressed through the stages of revival and sentiment to become a modern and living art of our own day.

Of course the come-back of the art here, as everywhere else in the country, first evidenced itself in this sentimental revival of the old time weaving and no one knows how many thousands of yards of materials came from how many thousands of looms, reproducing faithfully the colonial patterns of early America, even with the same types of yarns. To how many incongruous uses these fabrics were put in present day homes where they didn't belong, no one will ever know. It is with considerable relief that we look to the best handweaving being produced today in this section. There are numbers of reasons for this change in approach, of course. There has been a marvelous development in yarn manufacturing. One now finds amazing numbers of cottons for a million uses, wools in numerous and intriguing forms, and synthetics almost beyond imagining. These have stimulated the inventive to much original work.

The schools of the South where handweaving has been taught in the past few years to many thousands of students, have promoted freedom of expression on the part of students and encouraged use of unusual materials and techniques. At Black Mountain College in North Carolina, Anni Albers has been a moving spirit in the use of the handloom in designing models for modern industrial reproduction. The well-known crafts school at Penland, North Carolina, and the educational program of the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild have aided and abetted original and creative weaving among the craftsmen who have come under their direction.

We are gratified then to observe that among our southern weavers the art of handweaving is firmly established as a modern art on its own with aims and uses more diverse than grandmother ever dreamed of; with techniques and adaptations that would amaze the old time shuttle pusher and with modern looms and equipment which bring this fascinating skill within the capabilities of almost anyone with a seeing eye and a sensitive hand.

It is an exciting new adventure and an exciting industrial revolution in reverse that has resulted in the development of this new-old art right in the midst of many of the world's most modern textile centers. It is a gratifying and stimulating thing to find one's self in the midst of such a movement and it is hoped that you too will catch a little of our enthusiasm when you look at the photographs that we have chosen to illustrate what has been written here of handweaving in the modern South. • • •



Place Mats—Top, woven from broom sedge on brightly colored cotton warp. Penland Weavers. Popular in New York.

Middle—Thin strips of pure wood woven on a cotton warp by Alpine Weavers, Alpine, Tennessee.

Bottom—Ribbed texture, Alpine Weavers. Photographs by Woodrow Wilson.