

Allie Dudley: This is the weaving studio. We have all of our floor looms out here, a few counterbalance looms. We have this really nice warping board wall that is my favorite feature of the studio and we've got sewing machines, washer dryer, our yarn closet back there and then our equipment room.

Kami Ahrens: Hello and welcome everybody, you're listening to It Still Lives, the Foxfire podcast, where we take you on a journey through Southern Appalachian history one story at a time. I'm your host, Kami Ahrens, and this month we are finally talking about weaving. I've gotten a lot of requests from our listeners to cover the topic of weaving. So throughout the month, I'm going to be doing little shorter episodes that will include historic audio about weaving or other topics, but today for our main podcast, doing something a little different. Sharon Grist and I, back in February, recorded this interview when we took a field trip out the John C. Campbell Folk School. For those of you who don't know about the folk school, it's located in Brasstown, North Carolina. So it's not too far from here in Rabun County, Georgia. It was founded by John's wife Olive and it was intended to be an alternative to higher education for rural communities, to get people to stay in their local areas and to preserve crafts and traditions. And it's actually modeled after folk schools in Denmark, around the turn of the century. And Olive actually went over there to study some of these folk schools to bring this type of methodology of teaching back to the mountains of North Carolina. So, you can learn so much more about the folk school; it's really an incredible place and has an amazing history. And I'll link information to get to the folk school on our website at foxfire.org.

But we took this trip out to the folk school because we wanted to meet with their new resident weaver. So they have just an incredible wealth of people there who are so talented that teach, take classes there, that are artists there, and Allie Dudley is the new resident artist in weaving. And Allie's primary responsibilities are managing the studio and setting up class schedules, but as you learn through this interview, Allie has a lot of different ground that they cover. And Allie is a young weaver; Allie is only 27 and already extremely proficient in historic weaving.

So we were really interested in talking to them about their journey to becoming a weaver, and just how they got so versed in these historic methods and reading historic patterns. So during this interview we started talking to Allie about this journey to becoming a weaver and some of their primary responsibilities, but it evolved into this really great conversation about craft, the role of craft in the community, and how traditions are changing over time. So I think this is a really great place for us to start looking at weaving in Appalachia, because it's such a broad topic with such a deep history. I think looking at the state of things now is a great lens for us to go back and look at some of the historic recordings that we have around the craft of weaving.

I hope you all enjoy this, if you're a craft person or not, I think there's some really interesting things that come up in this conversation. And definitely if you're a weaver or a crafts person, please reach out to us. We'd love to see what you're creating and we'd love to share that as well. Without further ado, I'll leave this interview to y'all.

Allie Dudley: I'm Allie Dudley. We are here at the John C. Campbell Folk School in the weaving studio. And I am the resident artist in weaving, beading, lace, rugs, needlework/thread art, and now also

quilting and sewing, so very long job title. I mostly make the schedule of classes that goes throughout the whole year. I'm in the middle of starting that now for 2023. And I also do like studio maintenance, set the studio up for classes, make sure everyone has what they need in the studio. Right now my loom is in storage. I did have my loom set up in my house when I was living up the road, but it was like a really small house, very tight fit. So I was like doing a lot of small sampling pieces, so it was hard to put a ton of yardage on the loom if I didn't have somewhere to stand to put it up. I've been doing a lot of weaving in class this year, because I've also been the like on-call person to come in and assist if people needed it. So I had a really fun time in September I think, Susan Levielle was here. I helped her with her counterpane weaving class which was really fun. I got to do wedge weave tapestry with Connie Lippert. And I also get to take a lot of classes here, as a perk of being a resident artist, so I've gotten some studio time in.

When I was a kid, my grandma taught me how to knit. Very classic story. I feel like a lot of people who are into textiles like it was someone in their past as a child gave them some knitting needles. I knit a lot of scarves for a long time until I was in college, and I was like, "I should try a sock now." So I knit a pair of socks and then I got into cross-stitching and I had a friend who went—I had a lot of friends who went to Warren Wilson College and I was visiting them—this was like before I moved to Asheville, when I was still living in Chicago. And my school started really late, so I came to visit them in like September after their classes had started.

And one of my friends was on their like work program in the weaving studio. So, students go take classes and volunteer and have a work crew that they're on. She was a weaver and she was like, "Oh you are a knitter, you might like weaving. You should come check it out." And I went to the studio and she had me thread a loom, and I was like, "This is so cool." Like the most boring part that everyone hates usually, I was like, "I love this. Let me get in here." And there was someone who was weaving double bow knot coverlet that was on a loom. And I saw that and I was like, "I need to do that." That's my future. And then I went back to college and googled "Chicago weaving," something's got to be out there. And I found the Chicago Weaving School. So my senior year, I started taking classes there on the weekends for like four hours, they teach you like a sampler and then you can kind of do your own thing. So my first solo project that I did was a double bow knot placemat that my parents still have on their table. And it's so wonky, like my beat was so off, it took me the whole thing to get it concise, so like one half is like way stretched out and the other half is like all squished together. But it's cute and it reminds of how far I've come as a weaver.

There's just something about weaving that everyone through like all of time, like humanity, has found some sort of weaving or weaving adjacent like craft. And it's just such like an integral part of who we are as humans that I really feel, it's so powerful to have a connection to weavers of the past and using their drafts. And I'm not super interested in figuring out anything new and crazy, because like everything's already been done. People have literally been doing it for thousands of years. And what's the point—like why would I try and figure this problem out myself when someone else has already done it and I can just go work through their notes and see what they did and learn a lot? So I think like the weavers of the past knew what they were doing and it's very helpful to have them to lean on.

Overshot coverlets are really like my jam because I saw—I don't know what it is about it—I saw it and I was like, "I need to do this." So I think that's like why, that like opened the door into historic textiles for me. I thought that I knew what I was doing weaving coverlets; I was like, "I've done a coverlet. I know how to weave overshot." And then in the fall of 2020, I came here to the folk school to do their weaving

mentorship program, which was like four weeks of classes with like four different teachers. And one of them was Susan Levielle—who I assisted her counterpane class this summer too—but she’s now my buddy. And she’s really special and knows so much about historic weaving ‘cause she’s been doing it her whole life, and she, the class that she taught was on overshot and how to weave it and all the different things you can do with overshot drafts. And she like really whipped my butt into shape, weaving overshot. Like I didn’t know how to do it until like she actually really walked me through it.

So that really also got me into like looking more into different kinds of structures because the thing about weaving overshot and the way that Susan taught me to do it was you read the cloth instead of just reading the draft. So I feel like up until then, I was really like, I would take a draft out of the book and I would write it out, like do my little draw-down graph and then I would sample it and weave it, but I would just be following the paper that I had written out. But with Susan’s method of weaving overshot, you treadle everything the way that the draft is drawn in to the loom. So you’re basically doing a mirror image on a diagonal. And there’s like a line that you can see in the pattern if you’re doing it right that you can go off of those blocks in the cloth instead of reading the piece of paper. And so, learning how to do that and read the cloth instead of reading the paper really helped me understand the structure and like why I was weaving in that sort of way, and it helped me see what I was doing instead of just going off of the paper. It was just like, it was like I had just been reading books and then like someone actually showed me how to do it, like, for the first time, and I actually understood what I was supposed to do.

Sharon Grist: It’s very liberating. It’s a big jump, but then once you have mastered that skill, you know, people talk about reading your knitting, so that you can see what should come next.

Allie Dudley: Yeah, and it helped me a lot with like decoding drafts since then. So like working with the counterpanes, it’s a completely different structure. Overshot is like a plain weave, like ground cloth, that you then take a pattern weft that you then put in and out of it, so if you like go in and snip out all of the wool and pull it out, you’ll have just like a plain weave fabric. But the counterpane was a lot of like lace, so threads jumping over like two and under two, or over four or six, whatever. And I had not like really investigate that structure as much, but I went in and I took a bunch of the drafts from the Frances Goodrich counterpanes and coverlets book and I was working through some of the drafts from this lady Sarah Nelson, who lived outside of Asheville that Frances Goodrich got a bunch of drafts from, and tried to work off of her historic notation. Because I would like, the computer draw downs in that book are very tiny. You just have to blow them up on a copier or something if you want to be able to see them, so I was like, “I’ll just go in and test myself a little bit and use her drafts.” Historic notation is written out differently than weaving books these days, so a lot of people don’t learn how to do that. And Susan actually taught us that in her class too. So that’s been really fun to have that skill and go in and actually see the notes of historic weavers from like 100, 200 years ago, instead of relying on someone else’s interpretation of them. But then I would take those and see if I could figure out, like follow her written instructions, and see if I could figure out how to make the cloth she was making. ‘Cause her instructions were also like—she didn’t tell you the tie up that you needed to use. So like in weaving, like each treadle is attached to one or more shafts or harnesses. And you can’t really read the pattern unless you know which ones are pulling on which ones. Because then you don’t know what threads are moving up and down. So her instructions were like, “Step on the one on the left. And then step on the one on the right. And then go back and forth between the two in the middle for a while until you get it this long, and then go back to the other thing.” And so, it was like a really fun puzzle to look at the picture of her fabric and see if I could figure out her tie up and what the heck she was talking about.

Kami Ahrens: So before I moved here—I'm from Missouri—before I moved here, I probably never had really seen overshot. But I know it's very strong here regionally. Do you know the history of overshot in this region and why it's so prominent in Appalachia?

Allie Dudley: I don't know like how it came to come here. I know it's like from Europe. So weavers brought patterns that they knew when they moved over here, but I do know that the reason why it was so popular, or like it was an easy thing for people to do, is because when you thread a loom for overshot, you can leave out that pattern and just end up with a plain piece of cloth. So people used to wind on like 40 yards onto their loom. Huge, like so much yarn. And instead of winding on for like one project and then finishing it and doing another one with a different warp like a lot of modern weavers do, they would just do that and then you could weave your shirt fabric and then you could also with that threading, weave a blanket and then once that was done, go back to your plain weave. Or you know, pull out the threads and rethread them. It was a lot more economical to just wind on the warp once every couple of months or whatever, and then weave off what you needed. So it's very versatile structure is like why I think it was so popular.

Kami Ahrens: That's very interesting, I didn't think about that it was just plain weave. One thing I want to jump to is during your gallery talk, you had a really great definition or how you define craft. And I was wondering if you'd be willing to share that with us.

Allie Dudley: I feel like I keep having more thoughts about it and wanting to like tweak things, but craft is like so special to me and why I think that it's important to people and communities is because you can't do it by yourself. You like need to have a foundation of a community knowledge or shared tradition in order to do it. Like I could never in my entire life have designed a loom from scratch without ever having seen one and then like knew what to put where, and then like made cloth. Like it would not have happened. So it's just like, people have knowledge already and it's out there if you want to look for it. I think that art you can—and this is totally fine, I'm not like, this is not me like taking a dig at people who do like art that's like without having a formal background, because I think that's cool and great. But like you can just make art without, you know, having any formal training in like painting or drawing or whatever, and you can make great art doing that. But I think craft, if you want to, if you want to be a good craftsperson or like a skilled craftsperson, you need to have community around you and share knowledge.

Kami Ahrens: Do you want to share your definition again Sharon?

Sharon Grist: I had been in touch with Tommye Scanlin who is Professor Emeritus at North Georgia College which is now North Georgia—part of the university system. We had, we've known each other for I guess close to 40 years and I have said that I felt that craftspeople were predominately producing something utilitarian. Now it could also be beautiful and you know an exception to that could be like a woodcarver who sets out to carve an owl, and you know the purpose of that owl is to be beautiful. You know, you're not going to take that owl and use it as a hammer or you know, it doesn't have to be utilitarian, but I think most craft is utilitarian. As opposed to when an artist sets out, now it can be painting—when I think of art it's usually two-dimensional—although I consider Tommye's work as art, it's two-dimensional tapestry weaving. But I think when an artist sets out to work, they either are trying to capture a memory or encapsulate an emotion or evoke an emotion from the person who's viewing their piece. There's no emotion when I sit down and weave 16 teal plaid kitchen towels, one after another after another this week. You know, that's—I'm proud of my work, I do my very best.

Kami Ahrens: I think there's also a sense of lineage in craft. And I think there's a sense of memory, even if you maybe don't have that specific memory. 'Cause when I think—and this is all from personal experiences and personal emotions, but I'm thinking like when I see something that's the product of a craft like weaving, like a kitchen towel of yours (*to Sharon*), it's something that immediately takes me to this sense of connection like you're saying, and this sense of like a memory of that something past. And I think that's just a natural by-product of this lineage of human connections through craft. But again that's personal bias speaking.

Allie Dudley: I've been realizing lately that the lineage is really integral in my life and why I think that craft is so appealing to me. Like Tommye is my tapestry mentor. So special, love having her around. And she, I talked about this in my talk too, she has like helped give me, helped me realize the importance of lineage too because she, whenever she teaches tapestry, is like, "Oh, I learned this from Archie Brennen and Susan Martin Maffei. And they do it like this and that's why I do it like this." And now I tell people, "Tommye does it like this and that's why I do it like this. So it feels really special to have that connection. And I think that, I've also been working a lot with Martha Owen who is the knitting, spinning, dyeing, felting, surface design resident artist here. She's really great, has a flock of sheep. Does a lot of knitting with handspun, and that's a lot of what I've been doing with her. I took a class with her and Melissa Weaver Dunning in December that was really special. And just like doing the spinning and weaving with it and making my hand-spun cloth and being in a group of other people who all really wanted to be doing this kind of thing, that I felt—and we were singing a lot of songs too—it just felt so special. And I was like, "Dang, why couldn't this be everyday life like this?" And sometimes now I feel like bitter that I didn't have this connection to this important part of humanity for so long. Who would I be if I'd been brought up in this kind of community? But then it's also like what am I doing now with that, why am I here. There's got to be a reason.

Kami Ahrens: Do you feel that it's different here? 'Cause as I said earlier, I grew up in the Midwest and this was like not a thing. And not just like these little communities—and I'm sure they existed and I just didn't know about them at the time—but this like larger sense of a regional identity and a connection to place and connection to the history of these crafts. Do you feel that it's different here in western North Carolina, Southern Appalachia?

Allie Dudley: Yeah I think so and I'm not sure why exactly. There's probably, someone's probably written a book about craft identity in Western North Carolina but I definitely, I was living in Virginia last year with my parents during the pandemic when it first started and I really felt like a disconnect from craft community. No one I was hanging out with was like a craftsperson. A lot of farmers, which was like cool, another thing that I was trying to bring into my life, but I felt like I was missing that. And I'm sure there are folks out there, but yeah. And I think Brasstown is interesting too because a lot of people here are transplants who have come here specifically because of the craft culture. So definitely a skewed perspective living in Brasstown. But, you know, I was up in Asheville and I was like knitting somewhere and some person was like, "Oh my God, you're a knitter? That's so wild, do you sell them? Can I buy something?" and I was like, "No, I'm just knitting a sweater." And like it reminded me of when I used to knit on the bus in Chicago and random strangers would be like, "Woah, that's so weird." But here in Brasstown, nobody ever does that because everyone knows how to knit and it's normal, it's just a normal part of life. Doing your craft.

Sharon Grist: Do you think it's a regional, you're asking a question about region, I'm wondering if it isn't more related to our specific time in history. One hundred and fifty years ago, I don't think it would have been uncommon.

Kami Ahrens: You know this used to be an integral part of your community, and especially in terms of building kinship ties, right? And so, you know, I'm thinking about this, what have we gained as things have changed, but maybe what have we lost too?

Allie Dudley: Yeah, the loss is something that I feel like I'm working through right now. Like realizing, for me personally, that there's just been this huge loss of knowledge and like where can I find it. It's not gone, it's out there somewhere. But feeling like I've missed out and how do I make up for that, all that lost time.

Kami Ahrens: And I think there's more lost than just knowledge too. I think there's a whole piece of our culture and our existence and the way we relate to people that maybe's been slowly eroded over time.

Sharon Grist: I recently read a little—one of those things that comes across on Instagram, how the women in India, once they got washing machines and they weren't still washing their clothes down at the river together. Once they got washing machines, after a number of months, there was just a general sense of despondency and lethargy and depression. And they finally figured out that's because everybody was in their own homes washing their own clothes in their own machines. Instead of gathering in community at the river, that that was so important to our emotional psyche.

Kami Ahrens: And I think we had somewhat of an awakening during the pandemic too. I think people really realized that we can't just be isolated independent people. But on a more like positive note I guess, you're talking about the future and like what do you do with this knowledge you've gained, how do you see opportunities for increasing access to craft? Because I think that's another huge thing is you know, if you're living in a small apartment or you don't have a house, you obviously don't have space for a loom. You know, if you're a parent or a guardian and you have to take care of kids and work two jobs, you don't have time for craft. Certainly a lot of people can't afford to take craft classes. So have any thoughts of ways to make it more accessible to diverse communities?

Allie Dudley: That is something that I've been thinking about since, at the talk at Rabun Gap, Beth Loveland asked me that question. And I realized, first of all, that it's not craft's fault that it's not inaccessible, right now. So like, having everything be automated, people don't need to weave their own clothes anymore. So nobody has a loom. People don't need to be doing all these things with their hands, because you can just buy something that's like so cheap. Why would you spend the time doing it if you were busy. It's made life easier but has also made craft inaccessible. So like, there used to be a weaver in everyone's neighborhood. And if you really needed to, you could go and you could use a loom and you could weave yourself something. Or you could find people around you who had the tools and you could borrow them in your community, and share the tools and share your time and share your knowledge with each other. So realizing that I think helped me be less defensive about being a craftsperson. Because I like want everyone to be able to weave, but it's like I know that not everyone can. Still working on the next step for that. But I think that I am trying to learn more about making tools 'cause I think that just having the tools is a huge step towards being able to craft. Yeah. Having the tools, having community space, I think a lot of it is really basic stuff, in terms of having a shared community space to work in. But I don't know how to build that right now, you know?

Kami Ahrens: It is tricky, it is tricky. And we've done some stuff with classes and I find kids are really interested in a lot of this stuff. And there are ways that you can utilize recycled materials or other things to really just get them started, if you're just teaching skills. But it is challenging to find ways to make it accessible, especially if people don't come to you.

Allie Dudley: Yeah, I think it's really important to be open to new people. 'Cause I know that, I've heard people talk—this has not been my experience with older weavers who I've met, but I know that a lot of young people can get discouraged by older people being like, "Oh you have to figure it out on your own because I had to do it like that." So I don't want that to stop people from wanting to get into craft. It's hard to find stuff, and I want to share. So any weavers out there, hit me up.

One thing I am excited about for my future, very immediate future. I just got a grant from South Arts as part of their Emerging Traditional Artist program. So me and I think 23 other people also got this grant. It's \$5,000 for like learning opportunity, we have three years to spend it, and we're going to be doing some gatherings. We had one on Zoom already and we have another coming up. but I am really excited to take this money and go to Marshfield School of Weaving in Vermont. Which I think is going to be another, they focus a lot on historical textiles. So I'm really excited to learn about that. There's a lot of ways that they weave. They only use barn looms or antique looms up there from the 17, 1800s. that's not something that people really still do down here. People've got barn looms but there's a lot of tricks that you need to know to weave on them. So I'm really looking forward to getting access to more of that historical weaving knowledge. And yeah, be around tools that people built by hand and start the gears turning on me learning more about woodworking.

Kami Ahrens: Have you found that people are receptive to you as a young weaver?

Allie Dudley: A lot of people—when I got this job, I heard from Tommye and a couple other folks that they were happy that I was here in the weaving studio because I am so like historically minded in a young person that they felt that everything was going to be okay. Like I'm not trying to throw out all of our old books or anything.

And this is my other soapbox I'm on is like get kids doing crafts or like hand skills 'cause when I was a kid, I went to the summer camp I worked at, the Living Arts School, and they had us like carving spoons with knives when we were like 9, 10. And not that the spoon carving itself made me like mature faster, but I think just allowing kids to make mistakes and like learn how to do things.

Kami Ahrens: They're so much more responsible than we give them credit for. If you give them something that offers them the opportunity to have real responsibility, they usually flourish. I agree, I think it's so important for kids to get hands on work.

Sharon Grist: Before the pandemic, I had two different school groups. Two young fellas, they were each about ten years old, each one of them said to me after they saw the weaving—they said the exact same thing, which is what made my ears perk up—each one of them said, I'm quoting word for word, they said, "That looks so satisfying." And it's the word satisfying that really made me think, "Oh there's hope that all this video stuff, maybe they're finding out is not satisfying and that there's more out."

Do you wish that we could get back to a barter society?

Allie Dudley: Oh yeah, oh yeah you know I do. Yeah, I've got a lot of big dreams. It is hard thinking about the kind of world I want to live in and how practical is that right now? And maybe, I feel like "How do we get back there?" is not necessarily the question I should be asking myself, but how do we move forward together in community and like take care of each other?

Kami Ahrens: Well thank you so much for joining us this week, I hope you enjoyed this conversation. I could've sat and talked with Allie and Sharon just all day; it was such a great trip and I really can't wait to go back out and to learn more about Allie and to watch them grow in this position. But also to meet other artists at the folk school as well. So again, if you are interested in Allie's work or if you're interested in the folk school, head on over to our website, that's foxfire.org. Scroll all the way to the bottom, you'll see there's a series of posts at the bottom. Should be the first one on the left. I'll be linking information from our website to the folk school and to Allie's work so that you can see beautiful examples of overshot and other types of weaving that Allie does. And make sure to tune in throughout the month as we get to release those other episodes that will give you a glimpse into how weaving was done when Foxfire first got started. And I've got another great interview lined up for you next month, so please be sure to join us in April as well. Thanks and we'll talk to you then.