

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

March 21, 1955

### **Needlework Samples**

In our last column we wrote about a collection of old clocks which we recently viewed in Arizona. Today we come back to Monterey and are happy to recall a collection which visited here a short time ago and probably a number of persons did not see, although it was worth all the time it took out of a busy life and its value could not be counted in dollars or cents. It was the result of hours and hours of our grandmothers' or grand aunts' or someone's ancestors time to make these charming examples of exquisite needlework.

The exhibit was of "samplers," owned by a well-known candy firm and collected by them to show to the present generation as examples of how a lost art occupied the leisure time of those who lived a few generations ago.

We liked the introduction to the small booklet which the company presented to all visitors to the exhibit: "I am a small square of linen and some few yards of varicolored silk thread. Long years ago, when America was young, I lay across the lap of a little girl whose hands patiently patterned me. She sewed the alphabet and learned her letters, formed a verse and learned devotion, embroidered flowers and learned nature, worked a border and learned art. Through me, in part, she learned to be a woman and a wife."

We have been told that the sampler has a long and honorable history. Samplers were "worked by ladies" as early as the 14th century. Some authorities even state that both the needle and the thimble were invented expressly for sampler work. That was in the 16th century.

It is interesting to note that history tells us that the earliest American sampler to come down to us was the handwork of the pilgrim maid Loara Standish, who was the daughter of the gallant Miles Standish, immortalized by Longfellow in his poem.

Although many fine samplers were dated earlier, it is about the year 1790, onward to 1840, that we look for the best American samplers - those, that is, of exceptionally delicate workmanship and unusual pictorial interest. The Whitman collection which was shown in Monterey comprises 600 samplers and is insured for \$500,000.

Another thing we learned from the exhibit was why samplers were worked. The answer is this: Samplers really grew out of the lack of books on sewing and embroidery. They were themselves the forerunners of pattern books, such as we have today, showing ideas for mending, darning, buttonholing, cross-stitching, drawn work, hemming, and so on. The background was usually linen, hand-loomed, and therefore long and narrow.

In the Old Custom House in Monterey there is a very charming old sampler, presented to the History and Art Assn., a number of years ago - 17 or 18 years - by Miss Louisa Wilson of Pacific Grove. The needlework had been done by her mother, Mrs. Louisa Walbridge Wilson, in the 1840's. Mrs. Wilson had married in Vermont and gone with her husband to Guadalajara, Mex., where he opened a cotton mill. During the revolution they made their way out of Mexico, via muleback. Mrs. Wilson's sampler shows a sample of bead work, petit point, drawn work, cross-stitch, and other stitches that a "lady" should know in order to be a fine seamstress. The sampler is framed and is one of the most admired items in historical exhibits in the Old Custom House. This example is the only one on exhibit in Monterey. It is hoped that others may be added to the collection of historical objects in the Historical Monuments in the city. The directors of the History and Art Assn. will be happy to be the custodians.

It is also interesting to note that there are never two samplers alike. Therefore, a sampler is the most personal of all antiques. Because of that fact they merit close and careful study and their careful needle work appreciated.