

University of North Carolina at Asheville

A Tradition of Weaving: How Biltmore Industries Grew,
Survived, and Thrived from 1917 to 1942

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the Department of History
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts in History

By
1029

Asheville, North Carolina
23 April 2010

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Has it come yet? Is the post running late? They haven't lost it have they? Did my wife get a hold of it? Such a flurry of thoughts ran through the minds of many a Biltmore Industries customer as he or she avidly awaited the arrival of the U.S.'s finest homespun fabric. Under the guidance of Charlotte Yale and Eleanor Vance, Biltmore Estate Industries built up a reputation for fine Scottish-style woolens since 1901 in their little shop in Asheville, North Carolina. Under Fred L. Seely, who purchased Biltmore Estate Industries in 1917, the nationally renowned high quality textile production continued. Biltmore Industries became synonymous with quality handwoven products. Soft, supple, and durable, Biltmore Industries woolens were in high demand nationally and internationally. A Biltmore Industries woolen garment marked the wearer's social status as well as economy as their long wear-life put hard-earned money to good use. Mayors, congressmen, ambassadors, even foreign national leaders strutted in Biltmore suits.

The Craft Revival movement in the Appalachian region made commercial production of handwoven woolens possible. Biltmore Industries was not a textile factory in the modern sense of the term, though the Industries did have shift workers and produced large quantities of wool fabric daily. No large industrial power looms assaulted the weavers with their noise, no black smoke constantly spewed from smokestacks to obscure the mountains. As Biltmore Industries sat right next door to the Grove Park Inn, a popular travel destination in Asheville, these pollutants could not be present.¹ In addition, a well-paid, highly skilled weaver produced each length of Biltmore Industries cloth. Fred L. Seely presided over this luxury industry, a charismatic, intelligent, and well-connected individual regarded as one of Asheville and North Carolina's preeminent citizens. Fred L. Seely's astute management, good business instincts, and connections, propelled Biltmore Industries into an internationally renowned business even through the economic hard times of the early twentieth century.

¹ Allen Hendershott Eaton, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 70.

Because of the involvement of the early founders of Biltmore Estate Industries, Vance and Yale, in the Appalachian Craft Revival, the vast majority of Biltmore Industries' historiography chronicles Biltmore Industries as a Craft Revival industry. Academics such as Bill Anderson, Garry Barker, Jane S. Becker, Eileen Boris, Lynn Jones Ennis, Kelly H. L'Ecuyer, and Kathleen Wilson mention Biltmore Industries in their various works. Anderson bases his *Southern Arts and Crafts: 1890-1940* on the North Carolina's Mint Museum's exhibition of Craft Revival era products. Anderson's *Southern Arts and Crafts* and L'Ecuyer's work "Uplifting the Southern Highlander: Handcrafts at Biltmore Estate Industries" focus on the forces driving the Craft Revival and the effects of those forces on the Craft Revival.² Barker's *The Handcraft Revival in Southern Appalachia, 1930-1990* along with Becker's *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940* cover the movement after it stabilized during the mid-1920s.³ Becker, in particular, explores the political, economic, and social forces that directed the Revival's development. *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America*, by Eileen Boris, and Kathleen Wilson's *Textile Art from Southern Appalachia: The Quiet Work of Women* provide a general context of the greater Craft Revival movement in America and England.⁴ Kathleen Wilson describes the Blue Mountain Room in the Woodrow Wilson White House, for which Biltmore Industries provided some decorative fabrics for, in her *American Homespun for the President's House: Ellen Axson*

² Mint Museum of Art, Morris Museum of Art (Augusta, Ga.), and Birmingham Museum of Art (Birmingham, Ala.), *Southern Arts and Crafts: 1890-1940* (Charlotte, N.C: Mint Museum of Art, 1996); Kelly H. L'Ecuyer, "Uplifting the Southern Highlander: Handcrafts at Biltmore Estate Industries," *Winterthur Portfolio* 37, no. 2/3 (Summer - Autumn 2002): 123-146.

³ Garry Barker, *The Handcraft Revival in Southern Appalachia, 1930-1990*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Jane S Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁴ Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America*, American civilization (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Kathleen Curtis Wilson and American Textile History Museum, *Textile Art from Southern Appalachia: The Quiet Work of Women*, 1st ed. (Johnson City, TN: Overmountain Press, 2001).

*Wilson and the Decoration of the Blue Mountain Room, Appalachian Craftsmanship in Washington, D.C., 1905-1926.*⁵

In addition to these academic sources, non-academics have written several works that related directly to the Appalachian Craft Revival and indirectly to Biltmore Industries. The works by participants such as Philis Alvic, Allen Eaton, Frances Goodrich, and Jared Van Wagenen flush out the details of the greater Craft Revival movement and illustrate by the very brief mentions of Biltmore Industries just how tenuous the connection between the two was.⁶ The publications of MATCH, Inc. and the Robert S. Brunk Auction Services provide compilations of material culture from the Craft Revival such as advertisements of Biltmore Industries' goods.⁷

Understandably a popular topic of research at UNCA, several History Department seniors' theses delve into the history of Asheville. The senior theses of Symantha Petitt, John Kloman, and Jackie Naylor deal with weaving, handicrafts, Biltmore Industries, or Fred L. Seely.⁸ Naylor uses the Biltmore Industries Archive in her thesis; however, she limits her use of the archive to illustrate Seely's professional relationships with his female employees and his attitudes towards women in general. Petitt's and Kloman's theses, as they deal with Biltmore

⁵ Kathleen Curtis Wilson, East Tennessee State University (Johnson City, Tenn.), and Woodrow Wilson House, *American Homespun for the President's House: Ellen Axson Wilson and the Decoration of the Blue Mountain Room, Appalachian Craftsmanship in Washington, D.C., 1905-1926* ([Johnson City, TN: Eastern Tennessee State University, 1999).

⁶ Philis Alvic, *Weavers of the Southern Highlands* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003); Philis Alvic, North Carolina Humanities Council, and North Carolina Arts Council, *Weavers of the Southern Highlands: Penland* (Murray, KY: P. Alvic, 1992); Frances Louisa Goodrich, *Mountain Homespun: A Facsimile of the Original, Published in 1931* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Jared Van Wagenen, *The Golden Age of Homespun* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963); Eaton.

⁷ MATCH, Inc, *Appalachia Hand Craft Catalog* (Berea, KY: MATCH, Inc, 1981); Robert S. Brunk Auction Services, *May We All Remember Well: A Journal of the History & Cultures of Western North Carolina* (Asheville, NC: Robert S. Brunk Auction Services, Inc, 1997).

⁸ Symantha Petitt, "Weaving, Molding and Whittling the Past and Present of Western North Carolina: The Socioeconomic Impact of Handicrafts on Western North Carolina," (B.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 1996); John Keith Kloman, "Marketing the Biltmore Estate," (B.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 2001); Jackie Naylor, "'As Always You Prove Your Loyalty to Us Girls': Fred Seely's Attitude Toward Women in the Workforce and in Education," (B.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Asheville, Asheville, 2004) http://toto.lib.unca.edu/sr_papers/history_sr/srhistory_2004/naylor_jackie.pdf.

Estate Industries and Biltmore Industries as businesses, have more bearing on this analysis of Biltmore Industries. Kloman's thesis centers on Biltmore Estate and its various subsidiary industries whereas Pettitt covers the socioeconomic impact of the Craft Revival on Western North Carolina in general. This work is focused firmly on how the Craft Revival established the foundation for Biltmore Industries, how specifically Biltmore Industries functioned as a business, and how Fred Seely's management diverged from Craft Revival beginnings.

Biltmore Industries developed out of the Craft Revival and traditional Appalachian weaving. The Craft Revival happened primarily in the South because the area had a recent history of handweaving for home use.⁹ Writer Allen Eaton helped solidify the romantic mythos of backwoodswomen weaving the family's cloth needs into the twentieth century.¹⁰ Traditional handweaving in Appalachia began with fiber selection. Highland weavers utilized traditional fibers such as wool, flax, and cotton.¹¹ Wool cloth made around sixty percent of all home cloth production.¹² Mountaineers collected these fibers and processed them by hand; machines were not used prior to the twentieth century.¹³ For dye-stuffs, women foraged in the woods around their cabins for regionally popular native dye plants like indigo and red and yellow madder.¹⁴ The weaver "dressed" the favored four-harness loom, or set up the warp, which determined the length of fabric produced. The weaver threaded alternating warp threads through thin strips with an eye, the reed, which held the individual threads of the warp in the heddles.¹⁵

The Craft Revival Movement linked well with Progressive Era ideas of how society should function. From the outset, the Craft Revival Movement centered on philanthropic goals,

⁹ David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region*, The Fred W. Morrison series in Southern studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 60.

¹⁰ Eaton, 55, 92.

¹¹ Van Wagenen, 266; Alvic, *Weavers of the Southern Highlands*, 38, 105.

¹² Van Wagenen, 266.

¹³ Van Wagenen, 252, 262.

¹⁴ Goodrich, 84.

¹⁵ Alvic, *Weavers of the Southern Highlands*, 155.

with supporters in the area like Mrs. Edith Vanderbilt. The Marxian view of the maker in control of the product of his/her labor complemented the Progressive Era ideal of harmony between workers and industry.¹⁶ The ideal Progressive American society was one where people made a nostalgic return to the simpler colonial life, both in economic production and morality. William Goodell Frost, president of Berea College in 1899, linked this ideal with the people in the Appalachian region, and stated that isolated mountainfolk lived a colonial lifestyle.¹⁷ The romanticized nineteenth-century woman, embodiment of household order and harmony, represented the moral touchstone for her family, further evidenced by Frances Goodrich's remark that a weaver never had weak-character children.¹⁸

Traditional weaving in the South supplied a convenient handicraft for the Craft Revival Movement to take up during the early part of the twentieth century.¹⁹ Many commercial handicraft shops like Biltmore Industries came out of the Craft Revival Movement. These industries used the myth of traditional Appalachian crafts to add nostalgic value to products. However, though mountainfolk may not have viewed themselves as particularly poor or backwards, urban Americans saw Appalachia, even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as poverty stricken and isolated.²⁰ George G. Arthur, manager of Biltmore Estate Industries, remarked that it was despicable for "American white people," to be "living in poverty and squalor."²¹ For the Craft Revivalists, teaching Appalachian mountaineers handicrafts was a

¹⁶ Eileen Boris, "Crafts Shop or Sweatshop? The Uses and Abuses of Craftsmanship in Twentieth Century America," *Journal of Design History* 2, no. 2/3 (1989): 175.

¹⁷ L'Ecuyer, 124.

¹⁸ Beverly Gordon, "Spinning Wheels, Samplers, and the Modern Priscilla: The Images and Paradoxes of Colonial Revival Needlework," *Winterthur Portfolio* 33, no. 2/3 (Summer - Autumn 1998): 167-168; Goodrich, 25.

¹⁹ Boris, "Crafts Shop or Sweatshop?," 176.

²⁰ MATCH, Inc, i, 22; Whisnant, 85.

²¹ March 8th, 1917 article by Sallie Wistar, B.S. Newspaper Article-Philadelphia Ledger, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

way to uplift the economically depressed rural South.²² Many of the Craft Revival schools like Penland and Berea started with children, hoping to educate them, keep them out of trouble, and make them into highly skilled laborers. Philanthropists, like Dr. Mary Martin Sloop of the Crossnore School, also targeted women, educating them in a craft in which they could independently earn money as well as preserve traditional handweaving.²³ The Progressives and Craft Revivalist also wanted to bring the virtues of self-reliance and harmonious industry to an America full of textile mills and other large factories.²⁴

It is important to note that while many of these Craft Revival schools wanted to preserve traditional Appalachian handweaving, they only succeeded in preserving the tradition of it. Frances Goodrich, a New Yorker, and other revivalists focused on Appalachian weaving changed nearly every aspect of traditional weaving from its “backwards” state. Metropolitan women like Goodrich believed that by virtue of education and urban affiliation their aesthetics merited more than native aesthetics. Insistent on straight seamed coverlets, Goodrich changed the aesthetics of mountain weaving, in which crooked seams were acceptable.²⁵

Some of the first mercantile Craft Revival industries were the Allanstand Cottage Industries and Biltmore Estate Industries. Frances Goodrich established Allanstand around 1895.²⁶ The crafters did not actually work at Allanstand. Instead, they took finished intermediary products home to make the coverlet. A weaver, for example, would dress the home loom with a pre-finished warp, weave one of Goodrich’s designs with pre-finished weft, and return the finished material to Allanstand for payment.²⁷ Allowing women to work within the

²² Gordon, 170.

²³ Eaton, 78; Michael Joslin, *Highland Handcrafters: Appalachian Craftspeople* (Boone, N.C: Parkway Publishers, 2005), 29.

²⁴ L'Ecuyer, 125.

²⁵ Goodrich, 4-6, 9; Gordon, 173; Whisnant, 153.

²⁶ Goodrich, 21, 30; Whisnant, 7.

²⁷ Boris, “Crafts Shop or Sweatshop?,” 177; Goodrich, 21-30.

home for pay enabled reformers to walk the thin line between changing the status of women but not so radically that society would resist.²⁸ Henry T. Sharp lauded Goodrich for providing an industry that employed thousands of mountain women.²⁹ For this first industry, it was not a question of whether or not a niche existed to fill; it was creating that niche in the first place.³⁰

Biltmore Estate Industries (BEI) approached the Craft Revival business differently than Allanstand. To begin with, BEI set up shop near the urban environment. Like Frances Goodrich, Eleanor Vance and Charlotte Yale came from Northern states, Ohio and Connecticut respectively.³¹ Shortly after settling in Asheville in 1901, Vance and Yale started The Boys Club of Biltmore Parish. Inspired by the neighborhood boys' interest in Vance's woodcarving, Vance and Yale were committed to teaching children a craft, instilling good manners, Christian ethic, and a desire to help others.³² Once invited by Mrs. Vanderbilt, Vance and Yale began to teach the children on the Estate handicrafts.³³

Radical departures from Appalachian tradition and Allanstand practices occurred when Mrs. Vanderbilt wanted Scottish-style all wool fabric.³⁴ Most traditional Southern wool had a cotton warp and wool weft; to have warp and weft both made out of wool brought a new fabric and production techniques to the area. Vance and Yale went to a small mill in Reems Creek, outside of Weaverville, where they learned how to process and spin wool fibers. When the mill closed down, Vance and Yale purchased some of the powered equipment, saving time and

²⁸ Boris, "Crafts Shop or Sweatshop?," 177; Katherine Caldwell and Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, *From Mountain Hands: The Story of Allanstand Craft Shop's First 100 Years* ([Asheville, N.C.?: Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, 1995), 4.

²⁹ December 3, 1934, Letter From Henry T. Sharp To Harold Ickes, Harold Ickes 1932, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

³⁰ Goodrich, 22.

³¹ Goodrich, 30-32; L'Ecuyer, 130.

³² L'Ecuyer, 130-132; Eaton, 69.

³³ Goodrich, 30-31.

³⁴ Eaton, 70.

money by removing hand processing of wool.³⁵ Additionally, Mrs. Vanderbilt sent Vance and Yale to England and Ireland to learn the finer points of wool weaving, unlike Allanstand employing locally taught weavers.³⁶ The advanced English methods of sheep rearing and wool processing enabled Vance and Yale to produce the fabric Mrs. Vanderbilt wanted. The quality demanded made use of local sheep's wool impossible, as free-ranged sheep picked up small debris that no process entirely removed. BEI purchased wool from large Australian ranches, which kept sheep in enclosures free of anything but grass.³⁷ In addition, Mrs. Vanderbilt imported a Scottish loom that the boys in the woodshop duplicated to supply BEI. Despite numerous deviations from Appalachian traditional weaving practices, BEI did use natural dyes.³⁸

BEI instituted its weaving program in 1906, where Vance and Yale followed Goodrich's practice of preparing the intermediary steps in the shop. Weavers living on the Estate wove the finished product in their homes.³⁹ However, unlike Allanstand, which remained decentralized, BEI gradually moved production from weavers working in-home to a centralized production in the Biltmore shop.⁴⁰ By 1917, due to financial troubles after her husband's sudden death, Mrs. Vanderbilt decided to sell BEI. For approximately \$11,000, Fred Loring Seely purchased the Industries in their entirety. By dropping Estate from the name, Seely made the Industries separation from the Biltmore Estate plain, as it was no longer owned by the Vanderbilt family.⁴¹ Under Seely's management, weaving became the focus of Biltmore Industries.

³⁵ Goodrich, 30-31.

³⁶ L'Ecuyer, 131; Eaton, 70.

³⁷ Homespun Printouts Ads "Early", The Story of Making Biltmore Hand-Woven Homespuns, Box #22, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; Goodrich, 32-33; Gordon, 172.

³⁸ L'Ecuyer, 143.

³⁹ Homespun Printouts Ads "Early", The Story of Making Biltmore Hand-Woven Homespuns, Box #22, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁴⁰ Goodrich, 32.

⁴¹ L'Ecuyer, 145-146.

Fred Seely relocated the Biltmore Industries to a site right next door to the Grove Park Inn, deeper into Asheville proper than Biltmore Estate Industries location in Biltmore Village. At this site, Seely constructed larger buildings for the Industries, in the same style as the Grove Park.⁴² Unlike Allanstand, which was located in the rural environment, Biltmore Industries was an urban textile factory.

In 1917, the year Seely acquired the Industries, weaving took a drastic turn from Biltmore Estate Industries weaving and traditional Appalachian weaving. Instead of allowing weavers to work in the home, Seely completed the centralizing process started by Vance and Yale; all weaving after the purchase was done on the Industries' premises. Natural dyes went by the wayside in favor of the more cost-effective synthetic dyes. Seely purchased more combing and carding machines to allow for increased production. By 1919, Seely also acquired twenty additional looms, bringing Biltmore Industries' total of looms up to forty-five. With the increased capacity, the Industries could now produce upwards of nine hundred and fifty yards of cloth per day.⁴³ The cloth that Biltmore Industries produced changed from a thirty-six inch wide standard to a twenty-eight inch wide standard.⁴⁴ Moreover, as Seely's most divergent action from the original intent of Mrs. Vanderbilt, men replaced women as the principle weavers under his management. The replacement became clear in the employee pay rolls, where men took over weaving and women controlled the intermediate stages of cloth production.⁴⁵ The changes Seely made were from the point-of-view of a businessman, not a craft revivalist. From the change over

⁴² "The Story of Making Biltmore Handwoven Homespun," Homespun Museum, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁴³ November 5, 1919, *Asheville Times* bi 0087, UNCA Special Collections Binder Advertisements for Biltmore Estate and Biltmore Industries, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁴⁴ April 1917, Early Prices of Cloth 1915-1947, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁴⁵ Payrolls ending January 10th, 1929-December 26th, 1929, Pay Rolls 1929, Box #4A Employees Weekly Payrolls and Storage, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

on, Biltmore Industries was about industrial cloth production, even if the fabric in question was a high-end luxury type of fabric. To prove the effectiveness of Seely's changes, Biltmore Industries sold over seven hundred yards of material in one day during 1919.⁴⁶

The urban environment allowed Biltmore Industries access to city water, sewage, and power. After the factory was established, Seely wanted to have an independent sewer and power supply for the Industries in 1927.⁴⁷ These amenities would give the Industries more stability during power outages and droughts, because sharing city resources meant sharing city restrictions as well. In 1922, there was a severe drop in water pressure, something that could negatively affect a business that used large amounts of water like Biltmore Industries.⁴⁸ Again in 1925, Asheville was endured a harsh drought, forcing Seely to post bulletins in the Grove Park Inn prohibiting any type of wasteful use of water.⁴⁹ If the drought affected the Grove Park Inn, Biltmore Industries must also have been affected by the water shortage. As the owner of a prosperous, high water consumption business, Seely was consulted on where new reservoirs for Asheville should be constructed.⁵⁰

Even though he had turned the Industries into a primarily financial venture, Seely remained on good terms with Eleanor Vance and Charlotte Yale, who went on to found Tryon Toy-Makers. While learning the ropes of the weaving trade, Seely relied heavily on these two women for guidance. Correspondence travelled freely between the three, for instance when

⁴⁶ November 3, 1919, *Asheville Times* bi 0088, UNCA Special Collections Binder Advertisements for Biltmore Estate and Biltmore Industries, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁴⁷ November 10, 1927 Letter From Fred L. Seely To J.W. Haynes, Water Shortage 1925, 1933, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁴⁸ August 31, 1922, Letter From Fred L. Seely To Asheville Water Department, Water Shortage 1925, 1933, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁴⁹ August 15, 1925, Bulletin "Drought in Asheville," Water Shortage 1925, 1933, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁵⁰ February 1, 1928, Letter From J.W. Haynes To Fred L. Seely, Water Shortage 1925, 1933, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

Seely asked if mercerized cotton would make a good tablecloth material for the Grove Park Inn in 1920.⁵¹ Seely even asked if the weavers at Tryon would be better able to make such a tablecloth. Yale assured him that they thought Seely would be able to produce it, but suggested that Seely use linen instead of cotton. Though cotton fabric was not the typical product of Biltmore Industries, which remained wool-suiting material, Seely tried to tie the nostalgia of the traditional handicrafts to the Grove Park Inn.⁵²

Seely not only asked for help from these women, but freely traded information on new fads in techniques. One such instance was Seely's recommending a German dye chemist to Vance and Yale, and comparing the successes of that and other dye experiments.⁵³ Seely did not seem to view Vance and Yale as competitors, possibly because the Tryon Toy-Makers main focus was on woodcarving and toy-making rather than homespun, though weaving remained a part of the Tryon shop. Vance and Yale also had a stake in Biltmore Industries, which they had built from the ground up, and Seely felt safe from sabotage by the two women. In his charismatic manner, Seely invited Vance and Yale to come to the Grove Park Inn.⁵⁴ The relationship between Vance, Yale, and Seely was not just professional, but also personal. The Tryon ladies consistently asked after the family's health and well being and exchanged health remedies with Mrs. Seely when members of the family were ill.⁵⁵

⁵¹ July 12, 1920, Letter From Charlotte Yale to Fred L. Seely, 1920 Toy-Makers Tryon Letters, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁵² November 15, 1920, Letter From Charlotte Yale to Fred L. Seely, 1920 Toy-Makers Tryon Letters, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁵³ September 29, 1920 Letter From Fred L. Seely to Eleanor Vance and Charlotte Yale, 1920 Toy-Makers Tryon Letters, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; October 1, 1920 Letter From Fred L. Seely to Eleanor Vance and Charlotte Yale, 1920 Toy-Makers Tryon Letters, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁵⁴ September 18, 1920 Letter From Charlotte Yale to Fred L. Seely, 1920 Toy-Makers Tryon Letters, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁵⁵ 1911, Letter from Charlotte Yale to Mrs. Seely, Vance and Yale Biltmore Industries Tryon Toy-Makers, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

Even after she sold the Industries to Fred Seely, Mrs. Vanderbilt continued to be very interested in their production. Seely also used her status as an upper class American to bolster sales. Though she did not get her orders of material free, Seely did cut Mrs. Vanderbilt a discount on the fabric she purchased. From 1920 to 1925, Mrs. Vanderbilt ordered around one hundred and sixty yards.⁵⁶ Seely also asked for Mrs. Vanderbilt's approval when coming up with new ideas, like dye colors. Yet again, the relationship between Seely and Mrs. Vanderbilt was congenial, both asking after each other's families when corresponding.⁵⁷ In a flyer describing the evolution of Biltmore Industries, Seely even gave Mrs. Vanderbilt credit for reviving the native skill of handweaving in the Asheville area.⁵⁸

Seely's charismatic nature had gained him many acquaintances and friends in prominent positions whom he could turn into walking advertisements for Biltmore Industries wools. Gifting public figures with suiting lengths of Biltmore homespun was one of the tactics Seely used in the hope that the recipients would order more and tell others about the fabric. With this strategy, Seely was very much the type of man who went to the top first. Seely sent such a gift to President Harding in 1923, stressing the fact in the enclosed letter that Biltmore Industries was the largest handweaving industry in the world three times over.⁵⁹ To show the Biltmore Industries connection with prominent people, and thus solidify its status as a patriotic and nostalgic product of America, Seely traded on President Coolidge's name, making a fabric dye

⁵⁶ Order for Mrs. Vanderbilt, September 23, 1920-April 4, 1925, Edith Vanderbilt Homespun Orders Labeled "Advertising" 1920-1925, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁵⁷ April 14, 1921, Letter From Biltmore Industries (JEB: LC) To Mrs. Edith Vanderbilt, Edith Vanderbilt Homespun Orders Labeled "Advertising" 1920-1925, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁵⁸ Biltmore Industries Flyer, Homespun Printouts Ads "Early", Box #22, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁵⁹ May 21, 1923, Letter From Fred L. Seely to President Harding, Warren G. Harding President Gift of Homespun from Seely, U.S. Presidents, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

A suit length is about a seven-yard length of uncut finished cloth ready to be made into a suit by a tailor.

called Coolidge Red.⁶⁰ In 1928, Seely asked for any photographs of Mrs. Coolidge in her Biltmore Industries homespun suit, possibly to use for advertisement.⁶¹ In 1930, upon a recommendation from a friend, Seely sent Congressman S. Wallace Dempsey, a member of the Rivers and Harbors committee, a suit length of homespun.⁶²

Again, in 1935 during the Roosevelt Administration, Seely wanted to return Mrs. Roosevelt's check for an order of fabric, intending to give it to the First Lady as a gift.⁶³ During the Roosevelt Presidency, it appears that the entire First Family had at least one outfit of Biltmore Industries homespuns.⁶⁴ Mrs. Roosevelt ordered nearly two hundred and fifty yards from 1933 to 1943.⁶⁵ The First Lady was very interested in weaving and even asked for yarns from Biltmore Industries so her aides, Miss Cook and Miss Nelly, could practice weaving at the White House.⁶⁶ Seely also gave the First Lady a personal tour of Biltmore Industries when she visited in 1937.⁶⁷

Seely also made inquiries of J. Edgar Hoover's address so that he could send the head of the F.B.I. a sample of Biltmore Industries' goods. This offer originated with Seely, not Hoover asking for samples. In addition, Seely not only asked for, but also received Hoover's address to

⁶⁰ June 8, 1928, Letter From Hubert Holloway to Fred L. Seely, About Coolidge Red 1928, U.S. Presidents, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁶¹ June 12, 1928 Letter From Fred L. Seely to Hubert Holloway, About Coolidge Red 1928, U.S. Presidents, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁶² May 10, 1930, Letter From Fred. L. Seely To Fred L. Weede, Asheville Chamber of Commerce 1929-1936, Box #5 Politics Etc., Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁶³ March 19, 1935, Letter From Fred L. Seely to Malvina J. Scheider, Eleanor Roosevelt W-Signatures 1934-1937 & 1933-1943, U.S. Presidents, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁶⁴ July 9, 1934 Order For Mrs. Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt W-Signatures 1934-1937 & 1933-1943, U.S. Presidents, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁶⁵ Order for Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 28, 1933-July 22, 1943, Eleanor Roosevelt w-signatures 1934-1937 & 1933-1943, U.S. Presidents, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁶⁶ August 23, 1935 From Eleanor Roosevelt To Fred L. Seely, Eleanor Roosevelt W-Signatures 1934-1937 & 1933-1943, U.S. Presidents, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁶⁷ April 16, 1937, From Eleanor Roosevelt To Fred L. Seely, Eleanor Roosevelt W-Signatures 1934-1937 & 1933-1943, U.S. Presidents, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

ship the samples. Today the very thought of asking for the head of the F.B.I.'s address is audacious, let alone any expectation of receiving it. One of the reasons that Seely got Hoover's address was because he was already known as a businessman and had contacts in Washington, D.C. circles.⁶⁸ Over a six-year period, 1929-1934, Seely sent out a little over fifty thousand yards of material as gifts, free of charge.⁶⁹

Seely's gifting and word-of-mouth campaign worked surprisingly well, for by 1938 Biltmore Industries' woolens were a topic fit for the Senate Floor. Senator Neely of West Virginia brought up the topic, suggesting "that the able Senator from North Carolina [had] neglected to tell the Senate and the country that the Biltmore Industries in Asheville, N.C., [made] the best homespun wearing material in the world."⁷⁰ The mention on the Senate Floor of Biltmore Industries woolens could not have hurt the Industries, and as Seely targeted politicians with his gifting campaign this event would have been the type of advertisement he wanted.

Another political figure who helped spread the reputation of Biltmore Industries was the U.S. Ambassador for Mexico, Josephus Daniels. An ardent fan of the woolens, Daniels asked Seely for a suit length as a gift for Mexican President Camacho in 1940.⁷¹ Daniels was a friend of Seely's as well, not just a walking advertisement for Biltmore Industries goods. It was Daniels who remarked in a personal letter to Seely that his wife had made up a dress out of his suiting homespun because he had not gotten it to the tailor quickly enough.⁷² Daniels remained a

⁶⁸ October 21, 1938, Letter to J. Edgar Hoover From Fred L. Seely, J. Edgar Hoover F.B.I. w-signature 1938-1929, Famous People, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁶⁹ 1929-1934, Yards of Cloth Made 1930s, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁷⁰ January 6, 1938, Congressional Record—Senate pg. 127, Noteworthy, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁷¹ December 4, 1940, Letter From Fred L. Seely to Josephus Daniels, Ambassador Josephus Daniels 1931-1940, Famous People, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁷² January 22, 1935, Letter From Josephus Daniels to Fred L. Seely, Ambassador Josephus Daniels 1931-1940, Famous People, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

long-term customer of Biltmore Industries, ordering more than eighty yards of fabric, roughly enough for ten suits, in just two years.⁷³

Seely did not contain his gifting of homespun just to notable federal politicians. North Carolina State politicians were good targets as well. A letter from the State of North Carolina Corporation Committee thanked Seely for the suit of homespun.⁷⁴ Seely also gifted suit lengths of Biltmore Industries homespun to members of local committees that he was interested in or on, like the Asheville Chamber of Commerce.⁷⁵

Seely also targeted famous people, not just politicians, with his gifting of homespun. In his perhaps overconfident manner, Seely expressed his pity that actor Will Rogers was wearing a suit of imitation homespun. To remedy this embarrassing situation, Seely sent Rogers a gift of Biltmore Industries homespun, enough for an overcoat and a full suit. Seely could not help name dropping of other prominent Biltmore Industries homespun wearers like Billy Sunday, Mr. Coolidge, and Lloyd George.⁷⁶

What marked Biltmore Industries woolens as luxury fabric was not just that they were hand-manufactured, but their cost. Depending on the width, weave, and weight of the fabric purchased, the price for woolens ranged from \$1.25 to \$4.85 per yard in 1917, maintained through the 1940s.⁷⁷ In modern terms, these prices equate to \$16.29 to \$63.20 per yard.⁷⁸ If a

⁷³ Orders from September 15, 1931 to April 7 1932, Ambassador Josephus Daniels 1931-1940, Famous People, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁷⁴ August 11, 1923, Letter From State of North Carolina Corporation Committee To Fred L. Seely, Political Letters 1907-1938, Political Letters Folio, Box #5 Politics Etc., Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁷⁵ June 21, 1930, Letter From W.M. Smathers To Fred L. Seely, Asheville Chamber of Commerce 1929-1936, Box #5 Politics Etc., Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁷⁶ December 20, 1926, Letter From Fred L. Seely To Will Rogers, Letter from Seely to Will Rodgers, Noteworthy, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁷⁷ April 19, 1917, Early Prices of Cloth 1915-1947, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁷⁸ CPI Inflation Calculator, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl> (accessed April 21, 2010).

suit typically took around seven yards of fabric to make, the cost today for a Biltmore Industries suit would be from \$114 to \$442, not including tailoring.

The Grove Park Inn also provided Seely with advertisement to the people who could afford Biltmore Industries goods. With the Industries right across the street, people could easily stop by and either observe a “traditional” American craft or buy fabric. In the Inn, Seely also had catalogues of Biltmore Industries homespun for patrons to look through. These catalogues explained that there were Biltmore Industries clients in China, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, Buenos Aires, Uruguay, Chile, Alaska, Hawaii, Bermuda, England, Scotland, Mexico, and Cuba.⁷⁹ Imagine the impression on American patrons when the English and Scottish, famed for their wool clothing, were buying Biltmore Industries homespuns. Biltmore Industries also had patrons across the country, in New York, Illinois, Tennessee, Massachusetts, Ohio, Georgia, and Texas. Students and professors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology were also sporting Biltmore Industries threads.⁸⁰

Once Fred Seely took over the Biltmore Industries, they flourished. The Industries produced respectable amounts of cloth, considering the fact that it was handwoven. Each year’s inventory noted the Industries’ productivity, which included yards made within that year and yards already on hand from the previous year. The inventory for 1920 only showed the business as having roughly 16,000 yards on hand.⁸¹ Seely made some progress by 1921, with inventory totals up to 50,000 yards.⁸² Again the following year, the Industries produced about twelve

⁷⁹ Biltmore Industries Grove Park Inn Catalogue of Homespun, Homespun Printouts Ads “Early,” Box #22, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁸⁰ Homespun Enclosed Leaflet “Absolutely Clean” Testimonial Locations, Homespun Printouts Ads “Early,” Box #22, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁸¹ Inventory of December 31, 1920, Inventories 1920-1921, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁸² Inventory of July 18, 1921, Inventories 1920-1921, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

thousand yards over 1921 production totals.⁸³ For 1929, Biltmore Industries produced 96,590 ½ yards of fabric, with an additional 66,634 yards on hand for a total of 163,224 yards of fabric. However, because of the Great Depression, the Industries began to produce significantly less cloth by 1932, dropping to 105,610 ½ yards total. The inventory for 1939 recorded a total of 91,258 ½ yards, and it was the only year after 1929 when the annual inventory was less than 100,000 total yards.⁸⁴ Even with the fifty thousand yard difference between 1929 and 1939, Biltmore Industries continued to produce more than it had when Seely first took over the business.

The Industries, especially after Seely's expansions, provided well paying employment for the Asheville area. In 1935, hourly wage earners at Biltmore Industries made between 32 ½¢ per hour to 52 ½¢, while supervisors made between \$2.50 and \$3.75 per day. Many of the wrappers, finishers, and others employed in the intermediate stages of cloth production worked close to forty hours a week.⁸⁵ Though many workers at the Industries were hourly wage earners or salaried, Seely had a different strategy for the weavers he employed. Weavers earned between 10¢ and 11¢ per yard produced.⁸⁶ With this type of earnings setup, it behooved the weaver to produce as much material as quality controls allowed. Seely also paid his men to learn new weaving patterns, around a \$1 a day.⁸⁷ Though significantly less than what they would have made weaving, it did allow them to learn different weaves that could earn them more money per

⁸³ Inventory of May 25, 1922, Inventories 1920-1921, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁸⁴ Inventory of Cloth for 1929-1939, Yards of Cloth Made 1930's, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

The term total yards refers to the yards produced that year plus the yards already on hand from previous years.

⁸⁵ Payroll for Week Ending January 9, 1935, Employees and Payrolls 1935, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁸⁶ Payroll for Week Ending January 2, 1935, Employees and Payrolls 1935, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁸⁷ Payroll for Week Ending February 1, 1933, Weekly Payrolls 1933, Box #4A Employees Weekly Payrolls and Storage, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

yard. Some weavers produced astonishing yardage numbers, well into the hundreds of yards per week. Weavers like R.C. Parker, Jack Buckner, W.R. Morgan, and C. Parrott produced 443, 465, 367, and 523 yards of material respectively in one week. These totals were not from just one type of cloth produced either, but generally two or three different patterns. High yardage producing weavers could potentially earn upwards of \$30.00 a week in 1929, or around \$380 a week today.⁸⁸ The high yardage-producing weavers actually made more than the highest paid supervisor, even when those supervisors were working a six day week.

However, after the Great Depression sunk in, its effect on Biltmore Industries was clearly visible in the weavers' production tallies. For the rest of 1929 after the stock market crash, many of the high producing weavers had yardages remaining in the hundreds.⁸⁹ By the first six months of 1933, weavers like R.C. Parker were barely producing over a hundred yards a week.⁹⁰ For the second half of 1933, Parker and other high producing weavers began to produce between one hundred and fifty to two hundred yards of material a week.⁹¹ In the following year, the

⁸⁸ Payroll for Week Ending January 17, 1929, Pay Rolls 1929, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; CPI Inflation Calculator, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl> (accessed April 21, 2010).

⁸⁹ Payroll for Week Ending October 3, 1929, Pay Rolls 1929, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; Payroll for Week Ending October 31, 1929, Pay Rolls 1929, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; Payroll for Week Ending November 28, 1929, Pay Rolls 1929, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; Payroll for Week Ending December 26, 1929, Pay Rolls 1929, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁹⁰ Payroll for Week Ending January 4, 1933, Pay Rolls 1933, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; Payroll for Week Ending February 1, 1933, Pay Rolls 1933, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; Payroll for Week Ending March 1, 1933, Pay Rolls 1933, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; Payroll for Week Ending April 5, 1933, Pay Rolls 1933, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; Payroll for Week Ending May 3, 1933, Pay Rolls 1933, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Grovewood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁹¹ Payroll for Week Ending June 7, 1933, Pay Rolls 1933, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries

production totals for those higher producing weavers continued to remain around two hundred yards a week.⁹²

Though Seely did manage to keep Biltmore Industries afloat and producing respectable amounts of fabric during the 1930s, the Great Depression did affect the business. Right after the stock market collapse, Seely announced in a memorandum that the worker's bonuses would be cancelled.⁹³ Though Seely did not explicitly state that the Great Depression was the reason for the cancellation, the timing made it the logical factor. For the business, Seely replied in a letter to Susanne Daniels that things were "much the same but a little worse for wear because of the depression."⁹⁴ Seely alluded to financial restrictions in his personal letters. Prior to the Great Depression, Seely donated to causes he felt strongly about, like betterment programs for African-Americans.⁹⁵ Seely also generously donated to the Democratic National Committee, some \$100.⁹⁶ By 1931, Seely remarked to E.J. Peebles that "the condition of the depression [was] a little more severe than it was, and [he] [had] been compelled to drop everything for the time being."⁹⁷ Seely refused an appointment to the Democratic National Committee because of financial hardships.⁹⁸

Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; Payroll for Week Ending December 13, 1933, Pay Rolls 1933, Box #4 Employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁹² Payroll for Week Ending January 17, 1934-December 5, 1934, Weekly Pay Rolls 1934, Box #4 employee Payrolls, Biltmore Industries Archive, Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁹³ January 20, 1930, Memorandum From Fred L. Seely to Bob Stevens, Worker's Bonus Cancelled 1-20-30, Noteworthy, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁹⁴ December 12, 1932, Letter From Fred L. Seely to Susanne Daniels, Susanne Daniels 1922, Noteworthy, Box#1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁹⁵ September 7, 1918, Letter From J.C. Pritchard to Fred L. Seely, National Training Center for Colored People Durham, NC Support for 1918-1919, Noteworthy, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁹⁶ December 14, 1913, From A.W. McLean To Fred L. Seely, President Wilson & Local Fundraising 1911-1919, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁹⁷ December 31, 1931, Letter From Fred L. Seely To E.J. Peebles, E.J. Peebles 1931-1932, Noteworthy, Box #1 Noteworthy, Biltmore Industries Archive, Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

⁹⁸ October 9, 1931 From Fred L. Seely to Jouett Shouse, Political Letters 1907-1938, Political Letters Folio, Box #5 Politics Etc., Biltmore Industries Archive, Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC; October 14, 1931 From Jouett Shouse To Fred L. Seely, Political Letters 1907-1938, Political Letters Folio, Box #5 Politics Etc., Biltmore Industries Archive, Groveswood Gallery, Inc., Asheville, NC.

