

BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Stephanie Allen-Krauss

Rug Hooker, Owner of Green Mountain Hooked Rugs, and Co-founder of Green Mountain Rug School

Conducted by Mei-Ling Israel on November 6, 2011 at Green Mountain Hooked Rugs, Montpelier, Vermont

Stephanie Allen-Krauss, b. 1954, is a Montpelier, Vermont-based fourth-generation rug hooker, business owner and educator. Her great-grandmother, Philena Moxley, owned a store, PC Moxley Dry Goods, where she sold embroidery and self-designed rug patterns in the second half of the nineteenth century. Her mother, Anne Ashworth, was a nationally-recognized rug hooking teacher who also ran a repair and custom dye-business and was a key member in the formation of national rug hooking organizations. Allen-Krauss learned rug hooking as a child from her mother. She holds two bachelor's degrees, one in elementary education and one in special education. In 2010, she received the Vermont Governor's Heritage Award for Outstanding Traditional Artist.

In the interview, Stephanie Allen-Krauss traces her family's history with rug hooking and describes the process whereby she started to make rugs. As an educator, she is especially adept at describing the craft form, its technicalities and materials, and its community of practitioners. The second part of the interview was a tour of her business and adjoining home, including the primary place where she works on rugs. This interview, illustrated with many rugs of her own making, highlights the deeply personal nature of her craft.

This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

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Mei-Ling Israel (MI): Feel free to go off on any tangents you like. I have a few questions, but you were just starting now by saying you “have a history”?

Stephanie Allen-Krauss (SAK): I have a history in rug hooking, yes. Let’s see, from my dad’s side of the family, my great grandmother [Philena Moxley], she was located in Lowell, Massachusetts, and she had a store, a shop where she created embroidery patterns and designs—wooden stamping blocks as a matter of fact, that’s what she designed—for the use of creating patterns for embroidery and for rug hooking, so she was a rug hooking person also. But at that time rug hooking was thought more of as a farm-wife sort of pastime, and it was ladies of the day, people who had time and money, who did the embroidery. So her business was really focused more on embroidery. But she did know quite a bit about rug hooking too. So, her business ran from approximately 1865 to 1885 or so. And she was a very interesting woman because she was a Victorian, but not the kind of Victorian that we picture in this day and age, she was quite an entrepreneur; at age nineteen she bought a set of these wooden stamping blocks [pause]. I’ll grab one here [takes some out of a case].

MI: [seeing stamping blocks] Oh great! I would like to take photos at the end.

SAK: Sure. So that’s what they are. It’s a block of wood with a design placed on top either drawn or a piece of paper with a drawing on it, then these strips of metal—first of all, these blocks are soaked in water overnight, to soften it up, then the design is placed over the top, then the metal strips are tapped into this softened block to create the design, then as the block dries, of course, the wood shrinks. Then it will hold the metal strip in place. Then she would make a solution of bluing and flour and water, it was kind of a thick paint sort of a thing, and she would get that block into it and then press it onto a piece of cloth., take it off, and then when the paint dried it would leave a design on there so a lady could follow it for embroidery, or for rug hooking.

MI: And did she do the metal work as well?

SAK: We don’t think so. My dad [Winthrop F. “Wink” Ashworth] thinks that his mother, my grandmother, said that she had a craftsman who did the work—a workman, really, who did the work for her—but she created, did the designs. So anyway when she was nineteen years old she bought 500 of those blocks from a man from England and she set up her own business. She actually worked in the back of her house, of some place she was renting, and she earned enough money so that she then went and bought a piece of land, she had a house built, so that she and her mother and sister could live upstairs and they could have the store downstairs. And all three of them worked there in this business. And then she married sometime later and continued the business for a while. Her sister tried to take over the business but her sister was not really mentally stable enough to do the business end of it so the business ended up closing. So we wound up with all these blocks in our family.

MI: They were passed down?

SAK: They were passed down, and somewhere in the 1960s I think my grandmother donated most of the blocks, the stamping blocks, to a museum, an historical society and museum, in Wenham, Massachusetts, so Wenham is not too far from where Lowell is, and that’s where my great grandmother wound up, and ended her life there, with my grandmother, and they lived in the house that I grew up in Wenham Massachusetts.

So the stamping blocks were donated, and they were out of the family. We retained about two dozen I guess. And those are the ones that I use to create patterns today.

MI: And you use them for rug hooking?

SAK: I use them for rug hooking. Most of the stamping blocks, some of the stamping blocks were burned—the bigger ones for rug hooking—were burned, during a coal strike or fuel strike, a fuel shortage, in the in 1890s, so my grandmother has a memory, had a memory of raking those tin strips out of the grate the next morning after the fire had been—so, kind of a sadness about that. But you know, you used what you had, did what you could to keep yourselves going during hard times so they burned the stamping blocks, some of the stamping blocks. Of the approximately two thousand that my great-grandmother had, I would say there about 500 or so, 500 or 600 that were left. And those 450 or 500 were donated to this historical museum.

MI: So what is your earliest memory of rug hooking?

SAK: My mom [Anne Ashworth] was a rug hooking teacher. So I get this from both sides of my family. So my mom, when she was pregnant with me, in all of 1954, that's when she learned how to rug hook. And she picked it up from a neighbor, a very, very elderly woman my mom went to visit this neighbor, and saw the hooked rugs and really loved them, so the neighbor said, "well, you can do this!" and so that's how my mom learned, she just picked it up, and she was a very crafty person anyway. And I feel like I sort of got it through osmosis anyway. My mom started teaching rug hooking shortly after I was born and then she would offer rug hooking classes to some of the local Girl Scout or Brownie troops or Boy Scouts or whoever—you know, any kids that came along. And so I was there and I heard her describe how to do the rug hooking. And we just sort of —my brothers and sisters and I—all sort of tried it. And I was the one who sort of stuck with it. It really—you know, I got the craft gene in the family, I guess. So I was about five or six years old when I started hooking my first piece. And kind of kept going with it—went on hiatus through my teenage years, as most teenagers do. But my mom also had a custom dye business where she dyed the wool fabric for—to sell, for other rug hookers. So I learned the dye business too, through my teenage years. And then in my early twenties when I was a stay-at-home mom, I learned how to do rug repair, she taught me how to do rug repair. So now, I do all that here in this shop.

MI: Great. Were there any specific stages—well, you just gave me some of them—but do you remember any other stages in your learning of the hooking. Like, was there a difference between your first and your second project, do you remember?

SAK: Oh absolutely, sure. I did some—my mom helped me quite a bit in the first project I did. Sort of almost hand-on-hand kind of help and I think she actually did hook a few parts of my first piece. And then after that I just branched off and started doing some very simple geometric designs. And as I said through my teenage years I really wasn't interested in sitting for any length of time and doing hooking, anything like that. But I really got into it more in my early twenties, got much more interested in the patterns, some of the designs that my mom created, so I would start picking up some of her designs and just start hooking those. We have a design business too, where we sell the patterns for the rug hookers. Not just by using the stamping blocks, but they are designs that my mom created on her own, so we have all of those.

And then, at, well let's see, probably in my late twenties—I guess it was late twenties—I was doing some genealogical research with my dad, and spent the whole weekend—my parents were living in Randolph, which is about thirty miles south of here, and I was living in Montpelier—and, so doing this genealogical research we came across my great-grandmother. And so my dad was saying, "well, you know great-grandma, she was the one that had the stamping blocks." And I was like, "oh yeah, I guess I vaguely remember something about that."

Well, he pulled out the ones that we kept, and interestingly enough, that very same weekend, just before he and I had this genealogical discussion, I had been helping my mom clean out her wool basement. And she thought she wanted to get rid of some of the wool she had collected and so I was sorting through some stuff and I was saying [with excitement] “oh I love this color, this is a beautiful color!” and, “this is ‘my pile,’ and this is the ‘to go’ pile, and ‘this goes into ‘my pile.’” So I just saw all of these beautiful colors, and I said, “well, I’ve got to make a rug out of this, I mean, this just looks really exciting.” So when my dad said, “oh, you remember the stamping blocks,” and he got them out and I looked at them, I said “oh my gosh, I see a rug here.” So I took one of the stamping blocks and spent the rest of the weekend creating a design using that stamping block and then took the colors I had—my ‘little pile,’ my ‘little stash’ from my mom, and it was there that I really started to create my own designs and progressed to creating more of the stamping block designs. I got interested in hooking some more of those.

And then over the course of time sort of the creative process, I expanded my design making to include other people’s designs. I started looking at their designs and anything that was particularly interesting I would hook their pieces, their designs, but in my colors. I branched off after that into doing things that were particularly memorable for me. My husband [Clint Krauss] was diagnosed with cancer in 1998. And through that—I wrote a whole story about that.

MI: Yeah, I read that.

SAK: Okay, okay—it was then that I needed a memento rug, so I got started in that vein. And that’s kind of where I’m at this point, where I choose, I choose designs that are more pictorial, that are more representative of something that means something. Something that has happened in my life or something that really reflects a special moment for me. It’s much more kind of from the heart. That’s sort of one part of my life. That is, for me, that’s my hooking, that’s the essence of my hooking, really.

But I also have business side to my hooking too, where I do commission pieces. So I’m hooking other things for other people. For example, this is one—this is a commission piece I’ve been working on [shows the piece in progress]. And this is to go with a woman who has created and embroidered bedspread and bed curtains, so they wanted a hooked rug to go with that. So that’s why this is in their colors and their design, but it’s my hooking. But—with a bit of my flavor in there—some of my colors, color choices, and I tinkered with the design here and there to make it more appropriate for rug hooking.

So as far as development goes, I can definitely see a change and a progression throughout my working on my craft. It’s gone from somewhat utilitarian to more of an artistic kind of thing for me.

MI: Do you have a favorite rug—do you have favorite rugs over time. Not just of your own but of other people’s?

SAK: Hmm. I don’t think I could pinpoint really one rug. Because it’s almost like saying, “which of your children is your favorite?” Because they’re all special in one way or another. And I’ve learned something from each one. And there’s something special about each one, of mine anyway. Other people’s, I look at, I enjoy the colors, I enjoy the design, I learn from them. But I don’t think I could say there is any one in particular that I would pinpoint as my favorite.

MI: Okay. How long does it take to make a rug? I know it probably varies, but I was curious.

SAK: I'm asked that question a lot. I do a lot of demonstrations at local fairs or gatherings, or whatever, and I have a lot of people who ask me, "How long does it take to hook a rug?" Well, I can hook a rug, a fairly simple design, simple colors, nothing fairly elaborate, a 2 x 3 rug in about forty hours, okay. In a wider cut strip, you know. But that is— that's my simple answer. The more complicated answer is that for a beginner who is learning how to hook a rug, it's obviously going to take longer and it really depends on the design that you choose, on how intricate you want to make that design, if you want to do, some say, fine shaded parts of it, if you use a narrower strip, if you use a wider strip—now, the narrower strip takes a lot longer because you are filling more holes, more loops. And, how often do you work on it? Do you work on it an hour every day, do you work on it only on the weekends, that kind of thing. I find for me, working on a piece one to two hours every single day, you really see a lot of progress more quickly.

MI: And what do you enjoy about the process of rug hooking?

SAK: It's my quiet time. It's my time to be internal. I'm the kind of person who likes—I like to have my hands doing something all the time. I don't really enjoy sitting and say, watching TV. I do love reading, but I do that more in the evening. And I love sitting first thing in the morning and hooking. It's almost a spiritual time for me. It's quiet, it's meditative. My hands are doing something, it's a repetitive motion, so my hands are working, but my brain is peaceful. It's also a time where my creative self comes out and I enjoy the colors and I enjoy thinking about how to represent something in cloth and fabric and color that I want to show in a rug.

MI: And is there anything not enjoyable about rug hooking?

SAK: Oh! Well, any rug hooker will tell you that the finishing, the actual finishing where you have to either stitch the binding on or turn the end, or if you're doing a whipped edge with yarn—it's always the finishing process that most rug hookers don't particularly care for. We want to get down to actually hooking, actually pulling loops, playing with colors.

MI: Is that very time-consuming, finishing?

SAK: Yeah, it can be, depending on the type of finishing that you choose. I usually go for some of the more simpler methods of finishing rugs. So I just hand stitch a binding around the outside edge, then turn the backing under, turn that binding over it, so it gives a more finished edge to it and it helps protect the loops on the edge a little bit more. But for a rug that is in a heavy wear, heavy traffic area, I would want to do a whipped edge where I'm rolling the base fabric and then covering it with yarn over it, so it's like a roll around the outside edge. And that's very time consuming. That's probably the most time consuming thing you can do to finish off a rug. Not my favorite. [laughs]

MI: I understand. Do you think you have a different relationship to rugs—you talked about earlier generations in your family that hooked rugs—are you aware of what their relationship to rugs might have been and how yours might be different?

SAK: I can tell you that probably my great-grandmother, who I didn't know, she probably had more of a utilitarian view of hooked rugs, and I believe most people of that day had a utilitarian view of it, where "we're going to use up our old scrap cloth," whether it be old clothing or sheets or blankets or something that's not useable anymore in its current form, instead of throwing it out, they would cut it into strips, find some base fabric or some backing, most likely burlap, or a grain sack from the barn, and they would hook a rug just to cover the floor, to make it a little warmer and more comfortable and utilitarian. And my mom had a bit of that utilitarian feel to her also, although she certainly didn't limit herself to hooking a rug just because she needed to cover a floor. She also did it as a creative expression. And she

also developed it into a business, a bit more of a business. Not as much as I have at this point. So I guess I'm the third progression in that, where I'm at this point, I don't care if I have a place for a rug, I don't care if it goes in a particular room or not. It has way more to do with creative expression for me. And much more business—you know, my commission piece.

MI: Did you always intend to go into this family tradition? And if not, were there other things you thought about doing?

SAK: Oh yeah, I never—you know, this was always a hobby for me. As I said, I was on hiatus for a while, there, and it was just a means for earning a few extra dollars when I was staying home raising my daughter early on. I went back to college as an adult student to get my degree in education, so I actually have two Bachelor's degrees in education, one in elementary ed and special ed, and my thought was that I would go towards a Master's in speech pathology or expand on the special ed piece. And I really didn't see the rug hooking as anything more than just a bit of a pastime, a hobby now and again.

But the rug repair really began to expand a bit more. So when I was finishing up my teaching degrees I was also doing a bit more of rug repair. That was a great way to earn extra money. And then of course my husband got sick. So I really didn't, I had decided before that not to pursue. They had offered me a job after I did my student teaching but turned them down because my children were still very young. I had my two younger children were two and four at that point, and I said, "no no no—I need to go back and be a stay-at-home mom." I thought, "Well, I can always go back into education when my children get a bit older." And I did start back when my youngest daughter got into kindergarten. And then my husband got sick. And so then—everything was kind of put aside. And after he died, I really was kind of at loose ends, and I couldn't see myself doing a full-time job out of the house. I had teenagers at that point. And you know, you just don't leave teenagers at home alone [laughs]—if you can help it! It's really when problems can happen.

So, I needed to do something that was moneymaking, you know, that was only part time, that I felt like I had some kind of control over. And that's when I began to develop the business a little bit more. I had asked. And I had asked my mom if I could take some of her inventory and expand it into a retail store. I thought, "Okay, this can be sort of my little thing for me, beyond being a stay-at-home mom." So I researched different locations in downtown Montpelier, found a small two small rooms on the third of floor of a building. And I thought, "Well, maybe I can open a small retail space just for rug hookers. And I'll only be open twenty hours a week. I think I can handle this." And you know, it's while the kids are at school, and it'll get me out of the house—and it was very successful right off the bat. Local rug hookers really supported me and were very enthusiastic. So I moved my rug repair business out of my home at that point, into the shop, and I also expanded my dye business, so I was doing a lot more custom dye business for customers.

And then as time progressed, I became more comfortable in the business, and began to expand it. I found another location a year after I had moved into this other small walk-up space. So I moved down the street level and expanded the business, hired someone else to work with me, and then a couple of years later, turned it into a forty-hour a week business. My children were quite a bit older at that point, so—that's how my business has expanded. And I'm actually at the point right now where I am thinking about decreasing my business. So anyway, I can't possibly see myself going back to education. Absolutely no way! I'm a hooker and that's it, that's who I am! [laughs]. And I hope to be a retiree at some point!

MI: And are your children also hooking rugs, and do any of them intend to continue the family business?

SAK: Good question. My oldest daughter Cecely [Conrad] is now thirty-four years old. And she helped in the business for a while. She was interested in rug hooking. And then went off to knitting. So she does a lot of knitting and a lot of spinning. She doesn't do as much at this point, her job is really occupying a lot of her time and her family commitments too. So I sort of thought that she might go in this direction, to help with the business but no—she's doing other things.

My middle daughter [Lindsay Krauss], no way, she hasn't even tried rug hooking. That's not her thing at all. She was a business major at Babson and she's in the business world now, that's where she is. And happy to be there. She has all these business suggestions for me but she doesn't really want to be involved with my business.

My youngest daughter [Mariah Krauss], who is twenty-four, now, is an amazing rug hooker. She has really taken to it and she's extremely creative. She helps in my dye kitchen and does a lot of custom dyeing. She has been working with me for the last year in the business. Unfortunately she came out of college with a lot of student loans, as most kids today are coming out of college, and my business isn't big enough to be able to support her being able to pay—to support her living away from home and paying student loans. So as far as someone taking over the business, it's probably not going to happen. I think that my youngest daughter Mariah will probably be always interested in rug hooking in one way or another. She's also a wonderful knitter. She has that craft gene. So anyway.

MI: Going back to the rugs themselves, for a moment, what do you think makes a great rug?

SAK: Hmm. Good design, obviously, right off the bat. Well-balanced colors. And then, those things are very subjective. It's kind of 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' But as far as the nuts and bolts of a good rug—you want to have really good base fabric. So it will wear. Most rug hookers today use linen as their backing, since it really will stand the test of time. Most rug hookers today use 100% wool fabric cut into strips, because the wool also will really hold up to wear.

MI: And they are using new wool, not recycled wool?

SAK: Correct. Most people today use new wool. Although there are some small, little niche businesses that are finding old wool clothing, Pendleton skirts and shirts and such, and they clean them up and then cut them apart and then resell them to rug hookers. But most people today use wool right off the bolt. And then it's the technique actually of pulling a loop that makes a good rug. How close in they are, how packed they are. Not too closely packed. And then the finishing. How well is it finished? Those are some of the things that make a good rug, I think.

MI: And what are your favorite techniques and materials? There's quite a few techniques these days, I've heard.

SAK: Well, there's the traditional style rug hooking, which for me is wool material cut into strips, pulled through a backing. That's what I mean by rug hooking. There are two other techniques of rug making that people often think of as rug hooking. And one of those is the punch-needle style, which uses yarn, typically uses yarn. And it's a different technique because you're working from the back side of your fabric, and you're pushing, a tool that pushes loops through the backing rather than pulling the loops. And of course the other technique is latch hooking, which uses short strips of yarn. And most traditional rug hookers really frown upon the latch hooking. A lot of people say, "Oh, you can get that kit up at Wal-Mart." So it's really frowned upon. But for me it's another type of craft. So I try not to be too disparaging of latch hooking.

But anyway the tradition style of rug hooking is the style that I like to use. And really it's nothing more than just pulling loops through a backing.

MI: I guess it can be like, different widths.

SAK: Right, so, if you want to get a little more detailed in talking about traditional styled rug hooking. There are fine-shaded, narrow cut strips that people use to make really detailed rugs. And that was very popular in the 1940, 1950s, 1960s, even into the 1970s where more realistic representation of things—in other words, people were hooking really finely shaded flowers, very finely detailed. And they were choosing colors that were absolutely representative of the real flowers. So it was more of an art form. And then kind of the in 1970s and eighties I think people were becoming more interested in the more 'primitive' style of rug hooking. So they would choose wider cut strips. The designs were more simple. Many times the design was more 'folky' looking. So kind of a throw-back to the late 1800s where the farm wives were just hand-drawing a simple flower, they were hand-drawing things that they saw around them, such as farm animals or simple houses, or simple-looking trees. And they were very, kind of, 'Grandma Moses' style. And I think there was more of an interest in the kind of primitive style. And that's still kind of goes today. Partly because people have less time, women have less time to hook. So they're looking for a craft or a project that they can complete in less time. And the finely detailed, finely shaded flowers take a lot of time. It's a real commitment like that, particularly in a larger-sized rug, in a 3 x 5 or you know, a 6 x 8, you know, you're talking years to finish that project.

MI: What do you think is the meaning of rug-hooking as a craft form? And in connection to that, do you feel it expresses something unique about New England or this part of the world?

SAK: What's the first part of your question?

MI: What do you think is the meaning of rug hooking? Does it have a cultural meaning in this part of the world, that people identify with?

SAK: I think perhaps it is, it has to do with the whole utilitarian feel, the kind of the origin of rug hooking. Where people were using old clothing, old blankets, old sheets. You know, whatever they had, they didn't want to throw out. And I think that's more of a Puritan, kind of a Great Britain /New England feel to it. And historically, heavier fabrics were more available in the New England area because there were simply more woolen mills. And they—people would choose to use wool because it was so durable. And when you think of creating a warm surface you would think of using wool fabric. So any time woolen mills were advertising its seconds or something, that would be a perfect place for rug hookers to go and pick up seconds if they didn't have clothing they were using. So as far as historically, historical and area of the U.S. anyway, I would say probably New England is very representative of rug hookers and—I don't know, I don't know if I hit the second part of your question.

MI: No, that was good. So who is hooking rugs these days?

SAK: I would say it is women, primarily middle-aged women—more or less their kids are raised. They've got a little more time. Also they are people who have probably tried other crafts—quilting, or knitting—and they're looking to branch out in some other area of craft and they try rug hooking. It always interests me, people who come into my shop, and again, it's like 99% women, although sometimes it is men, but not very often. And they say, "Oh yeah, I've tried—oh, I'm a quilter, or I'm a knitter, and yet I've tried rug hooking, and now I love rug hooking, I love rug hooking!—that's the thing I really want to do!" I always ask them, "So what was it about rug hooking that pulled you away from quilting or from knitting?" And a lot of the time, they say, "it's because it's so simple." It's very repetitive. It's a very forgiving

craft. You can do it and you don't have to be absolutely precise about it. Where in quilting, if you want a good, sharp corner, you have to be very careful about how you're stitching it together. You have to get your measurements just right. Knitting same thing. If you make a mistake four rows ago, you have to pull those four rows out. Whereas in rug hooking, if you make a mistake, no problem. Zip! You just pull that color out or that strip out and you replace it, no problem. You can also—your loops don't have to be exactly perfect. Because at the very end you're going to steam press it with a hot iron and a damp cloth, and that will help to level out your loops. So even a beginner can have a final product that really looks pretty good, you know, much more developed than one might think of as a beginner.

MI: Interesting. Do you think that people are making rugs more for personal use, or is there—?

SAK: Oh, it's strictly for personal use. I'd say there are very few people who are doing commission work. Because it just takes too long. I do have people occasionally coming in, saying "I think I'm going to be a rug hooker, and that's what I'm going to do to earn some money." And I usually kind of chuckle and I say, "You might want to think about going and getting a real job that pays you real money for real hours." Because more often than not when you're rug hooking you just don't realize how many hours you're putting into something and if you look at the time compared to what you actually got for pay it could be as little as five dollars an hour. My gosh, that's not even minimum wage. And it could be even less than that. So, I'd say people are doing it strictly for personal enjoyment.

MI: Now, I noticed you sell some [rugs] here. Where do those come from and who is buying them?

SAK: I do get rug hookers who are, they just are wonderful rug hookers and they just don't have any more children or grandchildren who want their hooked rugs, who have places for their hooked rugs. Or they've done something that they don't have a place for in their homes and they say, "Here, you can sell this." And I say, "Well, we'll give it a try." That's not the biggest part of my business, in fact, it's a red letter day when I've sold a hooked rug because that's not my market right now. I could find more of a market for that. I think that people who are buying hooked rugs are more in the New York area, more in urban areas or areas where they have a lot more disposable income. People who are particularly a lot more interested in American early interior decorating kinds of things. Because most of the time now if you're looking, if the average person is looking for any kind of area rug for the floor, to go with a particular décor, they can open up L.L. Bean and find a, quote, 'hand hooked-rug' and some of the other chain store are selling 'hand-hooked rugs' for about half the price or even a fraction of the price of what a traditional hand-hooked American-made rug is selling for today. So they've really—

MI: They are made overseas, perhaps?

SAK: They are absolutely made overseas. They are being made generally by women who are being paid ten cents an hour. But for them that may be a really good business for them, I don't know. I tend to think, I would prefer to see them paid a little bit more, but then again, I don't know what cultures in China, for example, or India—there are a lot of rugs made in India—so maybe this some employment for them, rather than no employment. So I try not to be too judgmental but anyway it is kind of taking the legs out of the traditional American made rugs.

MI: Interesting. Can you tell me about the community aspect of rug hooking? I did find that list of "hook-ins"—how did that contribute to it as a craft form?

SAK: Mmm hmm. I think it goes back to the old sewing circles. Women enjoyed other women's company. They were inspired by each other, they were supported by each other. And that's what these hook-ins do. Not only are women gathering together to be supported and share knowledge about rug hooking, but they are being supported through life's events, through trials and tribulations of daily living. I think women simply like to be in groups, and rug hooking is simply one aspect they share together because they're rug hookers. But I do know many groups around Vermont, same thing, they get together because it's a supportive atmosphere for rug hooking, for the craft, and for individual needs.

MI: And can you tell me more about some of the rug hooking organizations, and do you interface with any of them?

SAK: Mmm hmmm, sure. There are three rug hooking organizations that I know right off the bat. One is a local group, more local, and that's the Green Mountain Rug Hooking Guild, which I'm occasionally confused with. I'm a retail business and the guild is a not-for-profit organization for people gathering together to promote and to teach rug hooking. So the Green Mountain guild is more centered in Vermont, so that's more of a local aspect. They offer two meeting times, one in the spring and one in the fall, and they also offer a large rug hooking exhibit at the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont. And that's coming up next week as a matter of fact. So there will probably be at least 400 rugs on display there and a variety of vendors and I'm involved in that aspect. I'm a member of the guild too.

MI: What does that involve, being a member?

SAK: You pay a fee to be a member and then you get a newsletter. So it's an informational newsletter, who's doing what where and classes that are offered and just kind of a general sharing of information about rug hooking in more or less the local area. Although interestingly enough, the Green Mountain guild, the Vermonters' seems to be particularly creative and energetic about things, so people from other states have joined the Green Mountain guild. So you'll find a lot of out-of-staters, in fact people as far away as California, Arizona, Washington State, who choose to be members of the Green Mountain guild because they want to hear about the news that's going on in Vermont, they want to hear what rug hookers are doing and thinking and being involved in Vermont.

MI: So this is somewhat of a center for rug hooking?

SAK: It has definitely been a 'hotbed for hookers' [laughter] in past times. And there are other areas in the US that have their own local groups and local guilds where they're promoting rug hooking and supporting each other in rug hooking and sharing knowledge and what have you. So that's kind of the local level of rug hooking. And then the next level would be the national level. And the acronym for that is ATHA—The Association of Traditional Hooking Artists, which was formed in 1979 or so. By the way, the Green Mountain guild was also formed in about 1979, 1980. And my mom was very instrumental in both of those organizations. The national rug hooking guild publishes a very extensive newsletter, it's really a magazine. It's color pictures and stories that rug hookers from all over the country submit to ATHA for publication about what their inspiration for a rug was, or how they actually did something to create a particular design—it's full of all kinds of things. It talks a lot about local gatherings and what have you. So that's one aspect of being a member of the national guild. They also do a national gathering every two years. It's called the ATHA biennale. And that just happened in Lancaster, Pennsylvania last month in October. I was there two weeks ago I guess. And it's a three or four day event where they offer classes—they offer a lot of classes, it's very, very well attended by people from all over the country. This year they said there were about 700 attendees who were taking classes and there probably were at least

another 1000 people who came through looking at the exhibit that was hung there. And there were probably twenty vendors and I was one of the vendors. So that's the national guild. I'm trying to think of what else they do—the national guild—well, that's it, kind of in a nutshell.

And then there's the international guild. And the international guild was formed about fifteen, eighteen years ago, something like that. And that meets every three years, literally around the world. It has been here in the U.S. It has been in Canada. Next year will be the next triennial, in Australia. I don't know if I will go to that. I hope to go to it, but you know, finances, we'll have to see. It's obviously a smaller group. I think there are probably 100 members at this point. There is some talk about having a future triennial in Japan. The Japanese are very, very into rug hooking. There is quite an organization of rug hookers in Japan. I think the—we've been to England. I was in Wales several years ago—three, four. The last triennial was in Kentucky and the one before that was in Wales. So I was there for that one.

MI: Would you say it is growing as a craft form?

SAK: Yeah, yeah. All things rise and fall. All things are popular and then sort of diminish again. And I think definitely at this point rug hooking is growing in popularity, it's in that trend, sort of the cycle if you will. I think it's partly because we're in a recession. And people are looking to do things that are less expensive. The whole idea of recycle, re-use, use it up—you know that saying. People are looking to do things where they can stay at home rather than some grand vacation. Financially, it is kind of interesting, I've been in the business long enough now that I have seen some trends where when people have more disposable income they seem to be choosing other things and the craft businesses don't do quite as well. In a recession where things are a little bit harder, my business does well [laughs], it does a little bit better.

MI: Interesting. Can you tell me more about your summer school program?

SAK: Yes! Green Mountain Rug School started thirty-one years ago, by my mom, and she and a friend were talking about offering classes to other rug hookers. There were classes that were offered, but they were more localized. And there seemed to be much more of an interest in people from other areas getting together, sort of a conference kind of thing. But my mom really believed in education, she really believed strongly in passing along, teaching people how to do rug hooking in many different ways, different aspects of rug hooking.

So she and this friend contacted Vermont technical college, which was just a small local college that promoted, that offered classes for farming, some of the more rural local things that you would find here in Vermont. Now, I think they offer automotive car repair, nursing and whatever. But Vermont Technical College basically closed down in the summer and they didn't offer summer classes and they were a college that had not much going on. So my mom approached them and said, "We would like to rent some space on your college campus for a conference and offer classes." And so they decided they would hire eight teachers to come to Vermont—by the way, Vermont Technical College was totally astounded, it was an all-men's school at that point. And my mom said, it would be women who were coming, and so they were kind of surprised and said, well, okay, we'll give it a try. Because of course they had these empty buildings all summer long. So it was a way for them to make some money too and keep them going in the summer.

So my mom and her friend hired eight teachers to come in and it was for a week. So students would come in Sunday and they would leave Friday afternoon. It was so wildly popular, all of the classes were instantly filled and people were clamoring for more. So the next year, they said, well, let's offer two weeks. So they hired eight more teachers—I don't

know how many teachers they hired the second week but quite a few, quite a few—and they were full! So that was kind of the start of a tradition. There weren't that many rug hooking schools, or camps—a lot of people call them “camps” today. I shy away from that, as my mom did, because we feel that these are classes for teaching, and a camp is more of a kind of a get-away, retreat kind a thing. Although we do offer a retreat aspect to our classes now, or to our two sessions. But it has developed quite a name. Green Mountain Rug School is known for offering the cream of the crop teachers, the cream of the crop classes, and it's a place where rug hookers go where they sort of leave all the stresses and strains of their ordinary life, and they are primarily women, although, you know, we have one or two men who come, two or three men sometimes. And it's primarily they drop their political stands, they drop their, you know, their soapbox about whatever. And they are just there to support each other in creativity and in learning and in broadening the idea of this whole craft of rug hooking.

I took it over—let's see, my mom retired in 2000 and then she passed away in 2001. And along, by the way, I had helped her. I wasn't there in 1982 for the first classes because I was living on the west coast, but in 1983 I helped just a little bit, you know, greeting people and carrying bags and you know, I wasn't teaching or anything like that but I was more in the behind-the-scenes administrative thing and over the course of years I took over more and more of these administrative duties. So that when my mom was ready to retire in 2000 I had a network of teachers that I could contact. I understood the database, I understood our accounting system and all of that. And I have changed some of the things about Green Mountain Rug School based on information that I gather from the students at the end of the classes. You know, “what kind of classes would you prefer to see?” And “is five days too long for you now, is three days a better time?” you know, “do you prefer weekends” or something like that. So over the course of time I've changed things up a little bit. But we're still at Vermont Technical College. Women still come and they stay in the dorms. And sometimes they share a room. Bathroom down the hall, typical dorm life. Cafeteria—and the cafeteria food has, you know, been up and down over the years. Now it's more or less okay.

MI: And it's still popular?

SAK: And it's still very, very popular and it's still very well respected, which I feel very blessed to be part of that, to have that as part of my heritage and also as part of something that I'm involved in now. I do feel very, very proud of that, that I can continue it and that it can continue on in popularity and as one of the schools that is very well respected in the rug hooking community.

MI: That's great. I'm not going to make you talk too much more.

SAK: That's alright!

MI: but I guess I will ask you one more question. You won this award from the governor and I wanted to ask you what that felt like and what it meant for you?

SAK: I was very blessed to be, to work with a woman even now, my marketing consultant. She has put me in places that I just never would have thought of. And she's a wonderful woman to work with. And interestingly enough, she wasn't a rug hooker and now she is. She really took off on the rug hooking too, finally. So she had heard of this Governor's Heritage Award. So about three years ago she actually put my name forward for that award and we never heard anything and nothing happened with it and it was given to somebody else that year. So I didn't really think anything more about it. I'm not really huge on self-promotion, it's just not my thing—as most craftspeople are usually not very good on the business end and

especially self-promotion and advertising, which is why I work with this woman who does do advertising for me.

Totally out of the blue, not last May, but the May before that—April? I think it was in April, I was contacted by someone from the Vermont Crafts Council—no, no no no, Middlebury, the Vermont Folk Life Center. And they said, “I’m calling to let you know that you have been awarded the Governor’s Heritage Award for this year!” and I was like, “Oh my!” I mean, I was really very, very surprised, totally bowled over, not—it didn’t come out of the blue exactly, because I had known that Pam had put my name in three years before that, but I didn’t realize that they ‘keep ya in the file’ and just decide, they just reevaluate over the course of time. And I thought, “Hey! Terrific, great! Wonderful for rug hooking, hurray for rug hooking!” That this will become a little bit better known, through the Governor’s Heritage Award.

Unfortunately, they only gave me two weeks notice, two or three weeks notice for the ceremony at the State House with the governor and it was happening on the exact same day that my daughter was graduating from the University of Montana. So my sister actually accepted the award for me at the State House while I was at the graduation in Montana. But it’s a very cool honor, it’s, you know, it was very exciting to have my work recognized in that way. But really as important, and even more important, really, rug hooking is getting out there and people are understanding a little more about what it is.

MI: Great! Well that’s a great way to end. Well, thank you so much!

SAK: You’re welcome!

MI: I was just wondering if you had any thoughts about where rug hooking is heading as a craft form, if you have any sense of anything on the horizon?

SAK: Hmmm. I think that we’re going to see more people becoming interested in the artistic aspects of rug hooking. I think we’re going to see even less utilitarian. People still want to have rugs for their floors but I think that they really want to have their creative expression within that. You know, colors that are just wonderful and designs that speak more of an artistic aspect to it. You know, sometimes when we say “rugs” we don’t necessarily mean, “for the floor.” I do a lot, you know, I use the rug hooking technique but I do a lot of pictorial kinds of things, thing that are more painterly really, more on the wall. So I think we’re really going to see more of that over the course of time, this particular technique but more artistic.

MI: And do you see it being recognized as a fine art form, currently? Or, no?

SAK: No, definitely, people still think of it as “something for the floor,” “just cover the floor” kind of a thing and less as an addition to a room in an artistic form. Even if it is on the floor, less, you know, I think people don’t entirely understand what rug hooking is. And it gets back to “rug hooking—oh yeah, that’s with those short strips of yarn, and it looks like a shag rug,” and I’m like, “Mmm, nope. No, no, not like that.”

MI: So they haven’t seen one or seen one being made.

SAK: Yeah.

[End of the first session]

[Start of the second session, a tour of Green Mountain Hooked Rugs and the home of Stephanie Allen-Krauss]

SAK: And the tool I use is kind of like a crochet hook with a handle although this one is kind of shaped like a dental tool. I have tons of hooks but this one works particularly well for me. They come in different sizes and shapes, the handles can be all different, it's just whatever someone feels comfortable using.

So, I'm a right-handed person so I hold my tool in my right hand. The strip actually goes in underneath from down below. I always start off by pulling up a tail strip from the end, like that, and put my hook in. And what my left hand is doing underneath is guiding that strip onto the hook end to pull it up top. And I just keep working the strip end all along, fill in holes. I don't fill every hole, although I do want my loops fairly well packed well in there, pretty tight, because it's the pressure of the loops pressing together that keep them in. I don't use knots or glue or anything else to keep those loops in there.

MI: And when you get to the end of a strip do you finish it in any way?

SAK: I just pull it up—I'm going to do that right now because I'm at the end of the area I'm filling—so I pull up that strip. [Demonstrates.] And when I have enough loops in and around that tail I go in and I clip them level. You can see I've still got a little tail left there—they just kind of sink in between the loops. When I steam press it at the end, that kind of “felts” in the loops, it kind of locks in the loops. And when I take it off my frame it will just kind of compress slightly.

This is the kind of frame that I use. It has metal gripper strips. This is a fairly modern, fairly recent type of frame. Years ago they would use a big wooden frame and they would kind of lace their backing on, or they would thumbtack it on. But I love this because all I need to do to get it tight is pull it and—that's it! And even the places [on the rug in progress] that already hooking already—these gripper strips are great because they don't damage the loops.

MI: They are kind of Velcro-ish.

SAK: Mmm hmm, yup. But they are little metals. And be careful because if you catch them wrong you get poked. So that's the technique.

SAK: I take wool fabric and it's sort of felted a little bit so it's a little thicker. And I put it into a machine that will cut it into—well, these particular strips are 6/32nds of an inch wide, so in the rug hooking world it's the # 6 cut they are called. They did everything by hand in the past using scissors. [Shows finished strips.] And that's what you get. So much nicer than hand cutting. There are several different cutting machines on the market. I happen to have the most expensive one because of what we are doing in the shop [creating kits with pre-cut strips]. And here is a cartridge I can insert. And I can [cut strips] in different sizes. When I bought this [machine] it was about \$430. And each cartridge was \$85. And now the base model is about \$500 and the cartridges are \$140.

MI: That seems like a big investment.

SAK: It's huge! I tell people do not feel you have to buy one of these right off the bat. I've been rug hooking all my life, it's my business. This is the easiest for us to use when we make kits.

And these are color samples I dye. Many rug hookers like mottled colors. It gives more depth or interest. One of my employees has put this [demonstration rug] together to show what different fabrics look like when they're hooked up. This is a strip and that's how it hooks up. That's how we sell some of our fabrics. She is the queen of selling. She could sell snow to the Eskimos, we always say.

I do the dyeing on the stove. It's heat activated and these are the dyes that I use. I use pro-chemical dyes and I also use Cushing acid dyes. They're big pots. Dyeing to match is very time consuming. Sometimes I do spec dyeing—that's what I call it—whatever is fun and interests me in that day. For example I'll dye a batch of reds and put those in the shop. More often than not I get dye orders. Then I have a little dye left over and I'll dye a piece and that'll go to the shop. I do dye from white wool but I also over dye all kinds of things, other colors. And plaids and tweeds. A lot of people don't do dyeing. It's messy, people are worried about toxicity. That doesn't bother me. My mom was wonderful. She always said, "there are no mistakes in dyeing. You just over dye it or use it somewhere else." But if you're on a limited budget and you wanted a yellow-green but you get a blue green, it's like, you know, yes I could use it elsewhere but it's gonna cost me.

MI: Is [uniquely dyed cloth] something your shop is particularly known for?

SAK: Well yes sort of but there really aren't that many rug-hooking stores out there. Because it takes a lot. You can't—it's a business that really doesn't give somebody a living. There are a lot of different parts to my business. That's why I can maintain it as a retail store.

SAK: Some of my best pieces at the moment. I just dropped them off at the Shelburne [Museum semi-annual exhibition] to be hung so my best pieces aren't even here. I have done loads and loads of rugs. There's many I've given away. Some are sold. Some are in storage. I've made hundreds of rugs.

Remember I was telling you about that weekend with my father and the conversation about genealogy and my great-grandmother [Philena Moxley]? This is one of the blocks that he showed me and this is the one that really sparked my interest. And I made a whole rug out of it. I call these Philena's flowers and this is the rug that I made.

So I was telling you about Green Mountain Rug School—our thirtieth annual was this last June. Several of my rug hooking friends and people who had attended GM school for many years got together and hooked this rug and presented it to me at the welcome dinner for the thirtieth anniversary of Green Mountain Rug School. And that's it. I was so blown away when they gave it to me.

So on the far left, that's supposed to be me, wearing big shoes to be filled. Because my mom's right next to me. And this [center] is one of our rug hooking teachers who had been involved since day one. She has since passed away but she was notorious for wearing crazy hats. So Patsy [Becker] got put in there. And this [far right] is my youngest daughter Mariah, who has always helped. My two younger daughters grew up with Green Mountain Rug School. I have pictures of them as toddlers going to some of the classes and talking to the ladies and entertaining people.

This [stocking on left] is for my middle daughter Lindsay [Krauss]. And this is one—my husband Ted [Allen], his first wife [Cosette Allen, who passed away] was a rug hooker. And she made this [stocking on right]. That's actually how Ted and I met. He would come in my store sometimes and get gift certificates or things for her. This [right image] is what I mean by a more pictorial [rug style]. [It was made by] a rug hooking teacher that I had a great deal

of respect for, and it came up for sale and I said, "Man, I have to have that!" I think she hooked this in about 1995. She has since passed away.

That's [left image] something my youngest daughter created when she was out in Montana. She really missed being around her family. So she said, "In a perfect world all those states would be together: Montana, Vermont is the green one, Massachusetts is the yellow one and Maine is the blue one. Maine is actually upside-down but that's how it fit together. So she created that.

My mom hooked the cow in 1992. Very Vermonty. This is one of my mom's rugs [rose motif]. This is one of my particular favorites, really bright colors and details. You can almost pick those roses. [Library in background includes rug hooking books that belonged to Anne Ashworth.] I can show you a couple more rugs—

This is a rug I made for the house. When we bought the house five years ago I made this rug. This is a special rug because it's a design that was started by my husband's first wife. And I was cleaning out some of her rug-hooking things and came across it and I asked Ted, and he said, "I've never seen it before, I didn't know she was making it." So I expanded on it and decided I would use it as a welcome mat for our house. And these are her initials [left edge] and these are my initials [right edge].

This is one of her rugs. The design was from a photograph. It's of the Isles of Shoals off the coast of New Hampshire. She did that.

This is my mom did years and years ago. It's been on that table for about twenty-five years.

We bought the house five years ago in 2006. And that's when I left my downtown store. One of the criteria for buying the house was we had to have a hall big enough for the peacock rug. Ted's wife Cosette made it. She worked on it over a six year period.

I was concerned when I moved out here, that I would lose business, would people know where to find me. But I'm a "destination." Rug hookers find me from all over the country. People come here who are on vacation from California or Washington State or whatever and make a point to find me.

[End of the interview]

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