

Wabash Weavers Guild

Greater Lafayette,
Indiana

on the banks of the Wabash



Beginnings of the Guild

It was the 1950's and American life styles were changing. The end of WWII and the Korean wars brought about a rising middle class with increased prosperity. The "ideal family" became a Dad who worked outside the home, and a Mom who stayed home to raise the children. Many women were then free to pursue social work and "hobby" interests.

In West Lafayette, Indiana, a professor in the School of Home Economics at Purdue University taught, and was passionate about, Weaving and Fiber Arts. Though we don't know the exact date she formed the Guild, it is attributed to 1954 or so. She asked women who showed an interest in weaving and the fiber arts to come together so that they could all study, learn, and encourage each other. Weaving is such solitary work. One can't pick up a loom like a pair of knitting needles and have social contact with others. Establishing monthly meetings for those interested in weaving was, and still is, the way for all of us to meet and learn from each other.

From this beginning as a small group meeting in each others' homes, the guild has always had an open door policy to welcome anyone interested in our craft. All those wanting learn to weave, to weavers already proficient have been encouraged to join.



"Baby Mac" Macomber loom. A portable, popular loom in the 1950's. This one is in our Guild Equipment Library and available to members.

Gail Margaret Redfield, 1901 - 1993, was the founder of the **Wabash Weavers Guild**. She was a Professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette, teaching in the School of Home Economics and the Department of Art and Design. She published many Bulletins for the School beginning with her first one in 1936, "*A Study of Ovens Used for Domestic Cooking*". She also taught classes in weaving, which seemed to also be her "at home" activity. Guild rosters show that she was a member through the year 1990.



In 1961, Gail was a member of a Gallery Exhibit at Purdue featuring, according to *The Exponent*, the daily school newspaper "paintings, graphics, sculptures and craft objects." One can only assume the reporter considered "weavings" to be "craft objects."

While the Guild has no written documentation prior to 1982, one of the guild members, in 2004, wrote that the guild was begun in West Lafayette "about 50 years ago". If true, that would make the founding year around 1954. This information came from Dorothy Baker who joined the guild in 1982 and would have known Gail until Gail's passing in 1993.



Dorothy was an avid weaver and spinner and, along with her husband, Ron, became very active in Wabash Weavers. It is Dorothy's collection of Guild newsletters from 1982 through 2019 that has given us this historical information.

1982 In this year there were 14 members who met to share techniques and ideas. August was considered the “first” month of the year with May being the end month and was traditionally a “Pitch-In” Picnic. No meetings were held in June or July.



1984 This year has the first mention of the ***Feast of the Hunters Moon*** and the guild’s participation. The Feast of the Hunters’ Moon is a re-creation of the annual fall gathering of the French and Native Americans which took place at Fort Ouiatenon, a fur-trading outpost in the mid 1700s. It is held annually in early autumn on the banks of the Wabash River, four miles southwest of West Lafayette, Indiana. Many different craft people take part, and the Feast draws about 20,000 people over a week-end.

Wabash Weavers was admitted as “Traditional Craftsmen”. The purpose of the Guild participation was to educate the public about weaving using yarns that were available at that time. The guild was allowed to sell woven items made of natural materials.

1985-88 To cover the cost of possible speakers and the membership in the Historical Society that was needed to be able to participate in “The Feast”, dues were begun in 1985 at \$5 per year.

A speaker, Mildred Smith, was invited from The Indiana Weavers Guild for one program to talk about “*Huck Lace*.” A comment from one of the members later was, “. . . it went above our heads.” Gail Redfield, the Guild founder, who was living at Westminster village at the time, was the hostess for this meeting.

Bea Stromberg created the “Finn Weave” double weave Guild banner which has been used at every “Feast” participation since.



Bea Stromberg

Dorothy Baker and Jean Carlson gave the guild a spinning demonstration. But it wasn't until 1995 that Dorothy had members interested in spinning meet at her home to focus on spinning. Those meetings continued until about 2012 or so.

1988 was also the year the Guild began having meetings through the summer months.

1990 The Guild begins evening meetings in addition to the usual day meetings. The newsletters show both

groups having different topics/programs so those who could, went to both.

1991 This was a very important year for the Guild: they hosted the ***Midwest Weavers Conference*** at Purdue University, Mary Burks and Dorothy Baker were the organizers. They expected 500 weavers to attend, in addition to the 40+ instructors. The fee for attending the conference was \$85. Any volunteer who put in 20 hours of work to plan and execute the conference was to have that fee waived. The work involved was tremendous, and with the help of the volunteer guild members, the Conference was considered a great success.



Mary Burks and Dorothy Baker

May 1994 The Guild, in cooperation with Purdue, hosted Cyril Lieschke, for two programs held at Purdue's Vet School . He was Australia's largest colored sheep producer and was on a world tour to talk about the care and handling of wool.

1996 This Spring was the last mention of the Guild's evening group meets.

1998 Dues were raised to \$10 per year. The guild continued meeting during the summer months, but decided to take December off.

April 2001 Having grown to 21 members, the Guild began meeting at the West Lafayette Library rather than each other's homes.

2003 The West Lafayette Library was being torn down to be rebuilt so meetings were moved to the *Tippecanoe Arts Federation*, where meetings continue to be held. The center now goes by "*The Arts Federation*." The membership in 2003 stood at 25 members.

2006 The Guild held a meeting at the Wabash & Erie Canal Park to view a newly acquired loom - a 200 year old 3-shaft, 3-treadle for display. It was considered unusual. The Guild was invited to participate in "Canal Days" that year. Canal Park, in Delphi, Indiana, has a

section of the old Indiana canal system begun in the 1840's. A number of old homes have been moved to, and rebuilt to show Indiana during that time period. A number of craftsmen take part in activities there.

In this same year, Dorothy and Ron Baker became involved in securing an old log cabin to be moved to Canal Park to establish a Loom House as part of the grounds for weaving demonstrations.

2007 The month of November meeting was established as the "First Annual Towel Exchange." Two years later, in **2009**, members decided to include a "pitch-in" lunch at the November meeting. Both these fun activities continue to this day.



2011 The guild newsletter goes “On-Line” All the information Dorothy printed after that contains lots of photographs taken at the meetings which are contained in a “Big Grey Book” in the guild library.

By 2015, a group of volunteers, under Ron’s leadership, had the cabin ready to go and they installed the 3-shaft loom, along with another 200 year old 4-shaft loom. Shortly after that, a 1920’s 2-shaft Union Rug loom was brought in and is still used to weave rag rugs. Visitors are welcome to weave a bit on the rug loom.



History of the area and weaving is discussed as relevant to the 1850’s, as well as information about the fibers that were used to create cloth at that time, and how looms have developed over time. In Spring and Fall, school

tours are hosted here during which the kids get to weave on a couple of looms, and during the summer, Saturdays are open for the general public. Occasional weaving classes are offered and those interested are told about our Guild and encouraged to join.

2023 A new website is set up with more memory to meet the growing needs of the Guild:
wabashweavers.com

2025 Members of the Guild decided to raise the annual dues to \$20 to better meet expenses.

Wabash Weavers, now in it’s 71st year [or so], still stresses the original founding idea that the focus of the Guild is to educate those interested in weaving by means of programs, guest speakers and the sharing of ideas.

Over the years the Guild has been able to attract and afford a number of nationally known weaving instructors:

Heather Winslow - “Fabric Design”

Nadine Sanders (the Singing Weaver) - “Theo Morman”

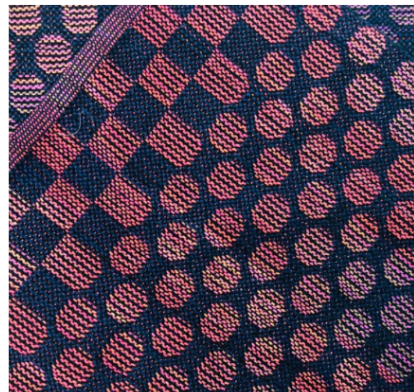
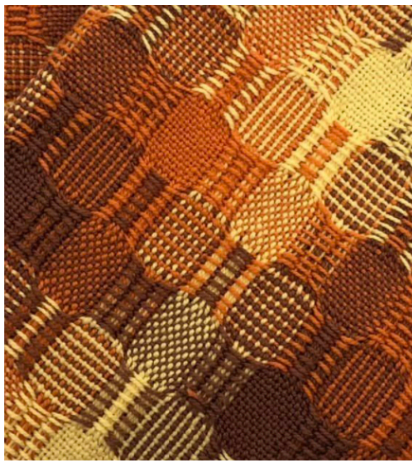
Anita Luvera Mayer - “Clothing From Simple Shapes”

Frederico Chavez, Eric Chavez, and Elsa Sanchez who traveled from Mexico to present an exhibit at Purdue - Oaxacan and Zapotec Weaving and Culture”

Robyn Spady - “Double Faced Weavings”

Natalie Drummond - “Deflected Double Weave”

The Guild maintains a large library, kept at *The Arts Federation*, for use by members, as well as a section of our web site, also for guild members only, that has many files of techniques and other information about weaving. Members also have available our Education Committee volunteers for any hands-on help they may need. The Weaving Equipment Library also continues to grow, from which members can borrow looms and other equipment to use or just try out before making their own purchases.



Volunteers from the membership actively continue our Outreach to the public by participating yearly in the Feast as well as working at Canal Park.

The Guild has, for many years, put out a year long “challenge” to it’s members. An idea is introduced in January and members have until October to weave something in line with the challenge.

During one of the summer months, the Guild has had day-long workshops in lieu of a meeting. Subjects could be dyeing, weaving or anything related to those.

