



John P. Bexell created the Cranbrook loom in the 1930s.



Barry Schacht and Bert Bexell share their love of the Cranbrook loom at Bert and Mollie's home in Gaylord, Michigan.



Building looms was Bert Bexell's passion.

The Legacy of the CRANBROOK LOOM

JANE PATRICK

Not many kids grow up aspiring to be loom makers, but Bert Bexell knew from an early age that this was what he wanted to be. In junior high school, he apprenticed in his Dad's wood shop through what we'd call today a work-study program. Eventually Bert joined his father's business, which became J. P. Bexell and Son, makers of the Cranbrook loom.

A Swedish woodworking heritage

In April 1899, Bert's father, John P. Bexell, was born in Korstrask, Sweden, to a long line of Swedish woodworkers. During the first quarter of the twentieth century Sweden's population grew rapidly, and its over-extended agricultural society suffered from not enough land, crop failures, and a recession in the lumber industry. John Bexell experienced the economic difficulties of the period, finding only temporary work at a variety of jobs: in lumber camps, in a brickyard, and as a carpenter.

Encouraged, no doubt, by his relatives already living in Minnesota, John decided to leave his beloved Sweden. In June 1923 with financing from his mother's brother, John and his wife Marie and their young son Bert set out for the month-long trip to Quebec and then to Clouquet, Minnesota. Here John found

familiar work in the lumber trade. At times he worked as a bridge builder and was even employed occasionally by Yellow Cab.

Marie, like many other Swedish immigrants, found work as a domestic in a wealthy Pontiac home. When friends urged her to leave her position to join them in the weaving studio of Loja Saarinen, Marie gratefully took her place among the Swedish weavers already working there. (For a rug inspired by Marie Bexell's weaving, see "Legacies from the Past: A Pile Rug," pages 64-66, HANDWOVEN, September/October 2002.)

The Cranbrook Community

Studio Loja Saarinen, located at Cranbrook Community in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, was founded as a result of the work of Loja's husband, Eliel Saarinen. A Chicago Tribune competition brought Eliel, a renowned Finnish architect, to the United States, where he stayed to teach at the University of Michigan. At one of his lectures he met George Booth, a wealthy newspaper baron and arts advocate who was the founder and benefactor of the emerging Cranbrook Community.

Booth and Saarinen shared the arts and crafts principles of William Morris. They both embraced the importance of striving to integrate life and art. Booth felt he could create an educational community around these principles and invited Saarinen to design the buildings and help shape Cranbrook's overall philosophy. Cranbrook Community would eventually encompass three schools, separate science and art academies, and even a church.

George Booth encouraged Loja Saarinen, who was trained as a sculptress, photographer, and model builder, to design the



Jane Patrick, of Schacht Spindle Company, thanks Bert and Mollie Bexell for their kind hospitality and for sharing Cranbrook loom history and family photos. She also thanks Robert Kidd, Ray Fleming, and Dave Johnson for additional Cranbrook lore.

textiles for the new Cranbrook buildings. At Booth's suggestion that the textiles be woven in Finland, Loja is purported to have replied, "Why not design and weave them here?"

Thus Studio Loja Saarinen was established in October 1928 with a solitary loom that would quickly become thirty. According to its brochure, Studio Loja Saarinen specialized in "hand-woven art fabrics, rugs, and window hangings by special commissions only."

Soon after Marie Bexell came to work in the weaving studio, another Scandinavian, Carl Milles, at that time resident sculptor at Cranbrook, hired John Bexell to build the shipping crates he required for the many bronzes he frequently shipped to Sweden. This connection and Marie Bexell's work in the weaving studio led John in the direction that would shape the remainder of his working life.

The birth of a loom

As the weaving studio grew, so did Loja Saarinen's dissatisfaction with the looms they were using. She wanted a loom built exactly to her specifications, and it is easy to imagine Marie offering the services of her husband John, who'd built various looms in his native Sweden.

Though Loja commissioned John to build one loom for her, he built two: one for the Studio and one to sell. The sale of the second loom led to an order from the University of Ann Arbor for six more as well as other commissions for Studio Loja Saarinen. A few years later, Loja Saarinen gave her blessing to naming the loom Cranbrook after its Cranbrook origins.

The John P. Bexell Company

Though John was working for General Motors Truck Company at that time, he began purchasing equipment for the fledgling loom business. Bert, then in the seventh grade, worked with his father through his school's vocational training program.

In the late 1930s, John was approached by the Farm Security Administration with a commission to make looms as part of an effort to find other vocations for southern sharecroppers suffering from crop failures and the aftermath of the depression.

Bert recalls traveling with his Dad to Detroit for a meeting with FSA representatives and the long time it took for an actual order to arrive: one sample loom with a promise of 2000 more. Though this number never materialized, a commitment of 200–400 45"-wide looms was security enough for John to quit work at the truck plant to devote himself full time to loom building. He hired several Swedish friends to work with him.

Bert continued helping his father in the business, but toward the end of 1942 he was called into the service. When he returned

in February 1946, Bert rejoined his dad and decided to make woodworking his life's occupation. He married Mollie on May first of the same year.

Bert joins the company

With this change, the John P. Bexell Company became J. P. Bexell and Son, and the two, along with four employees, made cabinets as well as looms. Within three years the company outgrew its location and moved to larger quarters. However, at about the same time, the loom business began to decline, and the company depended more and more on architectural millwork and cabinet making for its survival.

The evolution of the Cranbrook loom

When John retired in 1964, Bert chose to focus solely on making looms. Bert recalls that his Dad thought this was a mistake, but loom building was Bert's passion. Once he made the decision, "I was never sorry," says Bert.

In the 1970s, the traditionally Swedish Cranbrook design was enhanced through Bert's collaboration with Robert Kidd. A Cranbrook Art Academy graduate, Robert Kidd had also taught weaving at Cranbrook. He loved Cranbrook looms and used them in his production weaving business, where he employed eighteen weavers to fulfill large corporate commissions.

Because time was money and weaving was labor intensive, Robert constantly strove to find efficiencies. To this end he contacted Bert, and the two worked closely together to improve certain aspects of the Cranbrook loom. The traditional Scandinavian-style rope tie-ups were changed to chains with exact measurements to avoid having to make shed adjustments. The straight treadles were changed to tapered ones, further ensuring clean and consistent sheds with a minimum of adjustment. To facilitate keeping the shed open for weaving on wider looms, the two men developed another Cranbrook hallmark, the treadle lock, which allows a treadle to be depressed and locked into place without the necessity of holding it down with a foot.



Mollie weaving on a Cranbrook Loom in the 1950s



Bert and John in the wood shop

New owners for Cranbrook Looms

In 1977—over thirty years after Bert joined the company—Ted Johnson from Norwood Looms visited Bert's shop. According to Bert's recollection, "He went all around the place looking things over. I was spraying at the time. I didn't really pay much attention; I just thought he was inquisitive!" After a bit Ted asked, "Bert, would you be at all interested in selling this business?" Bert says he told Ted that he would.

Ted decided, however, that he needed more time to make a decision. During the interim Bert received another offer, this time from a Pontiac realtor and former classmate, Les Hudson. "For some reason," recalls Bert, "Les was entranced with the business and had all kinds of plans."

His offer appealed to Bert because the business did not have to move from its location, so in 1978 he sold it to Les and Les's nephew Jim Hudson, and the company became Heritage Woodcrafts. Bert stayed on as vice president and continued working full time in the wood shop.

However, in 1980, Bert retired and Les left the business for other ventures. A few years later Jim sold Heritage Woodcrafts to Ted and Dave Johnson of Norwood Looms, who hired the company's longtime foreman and Cranbrook loom expert, Ken Woodiwiss, to assist with the transition.

The new owners: Norwood Looms

Ted Johnson's main business was in orchard chemicals, but he became interested in loom building through his wife, Nancy. In the early 1950s, her weaving teacher, Melvina McGarr, and Melvina's husband, Wallace, were the initial developers of Norwood Looms in Baldwin, Michigan. In 1974, when they were ready to retire, Ted and Nancy bought the company and moved it into a space in one of Ted's buildings. Their son Dave, a geologist by training, joined them in the company.

The Cranbrook loom was a welcome addition to Norwood's line of jack-style looms. With its large frame and solid construction, the sturdy countermarch Cranbrook is ideal for any weaving requiring high warp tension (such as rugs), fabrics with dense warps (such as warp rep), or fabrics with sticky, fine, or mixed warp fibers. During the years at Norwood, a few more changes were made to the Cranbrook loom, including an improvement of the brake release system.

Norwood took possession of the Cranbrook at a time when handweaving in this country was enjoying strong growth. The loom filled an important niche in the large-loom market where it earned the respect of rug and production weavers. For the next twelve years, Norwood manufactured Cranbrook looms for weaving shops, individuals, and institutions.

In the mid 1990s as the market for handweaving weakened, however, Dave Johnson was ready for a change.



Bert and Mollie in
Gaylord, Michigan

Cranbrook looms are now made by Schacht Spindle Company

Over the years, Barry Schacht, founder of Schacht Spindle Company, had expressed interest in the Cranbrook loom, and in 1996 he purchased it from Dave. Barry's goal was the same as Norwood's in acquiring it: adding breadth to Schacht Spindle's line of looms. Barry points out, "I always admired the Cranbrook loom. In 1984, when I heard that Norwood had purchased it, I was disappointed, because it was a loom I felt I'd be proud to make." (Dave Johnson subsequently sold the Norwood Looms division to Webs, who formed a partnership with Toika of Finland to produce them.)


Schacht Spindle Company, Inc. was founded in Boulder, Colorado, by Barry and Dan

Schacht in 1969 during the back-to-the-earth movement and its accompanying craft resurgence. The Schacht brothers first made simple tapestry and table looms, introducing their first floor loom at Convergence 1978 in Ft. Collins, Colorado. Schacht followed their Standard floor loom with the Baby Wolf and Mighty Wolf looms in the early 1980s. They introduced the Cranbrook loom at Convergence 1996 in Portland, Oregon, where they gleaned important feedback that led to the first extensive redesign since the Bexell-Kidd collaborations.

Schacht's improvements to the Cranbrook loom

To make the shed larger and the treadling easier, the lamms were lengthened and the distance from front beam to back beam increased 18" (also making the loom roomier inside for threading). For additional leg room during treadling, loom height was increased 2". To streamline the tie-up, Texsol cords replaced the tie-up chains and are permanently installed on the treadles, eliminating the need to change cords/chains for each new tie-up. The optional worm gear was another important addition, especially for the high and consistent tension required for rug weaving. "I feel we took the best parts of the Cranbrook and made it better," remarks Barry.

Over its seventy-six years, the Cranbrook loom has established a strong legacy of solid design and superb craftsmanship. When Bert Bexell reflects on this, he does so with well-deserved pride and satisfaction. Not only did he craft a quality product and oversee its continuance, he realized his early boyhood aspirations to build looms. His legacy continues today, both in the early Cranbrooks still in use and in the new versions currently made by Schacht.

Bert Bexell and Barry Schacht finally met in June 2001. For Barry the experience brought increased respect for the loom's history; for Bert, it brought the knowledge that his life's work was valued and would endure. 

Resources

Westbrook, Adele, and Ann Yarowsky, ed. *Design in America: The Cranbrook Vision 1925–1950*. New York: Abrams, 1983.