Handloom Weaving

By John McAtasney

I'm John McAtasney — sometimes called John the Weaver. I get letters sometimes just addressed to "John the Weaver." I began handweaving at the age of 14. I left school then and of course that time you had to work your quarter — you spent three months after the age of 14. Jobs were sort of automatic in those days. I'm from Lurgan and jobs in weaving were automatic. I can remember when I started weaving in 1948 at the age of 14 — you could work out my age with a little bit of calculation! There was nothing else only weaving in Lurgan. I can't remember any other industry. The first industry that came to Lurgan outside of weaving was United Kingdom Optical Company and it's still there. Weaving was looked upon as the lowest form of a job you could possibly be put into and I was put into it alright. My father was a weaver and my grandfather was a weaver. We weren't called weavers — we were called "wavers." The very grand title of weavers was unheard of. I went to hand loom weaving or waving as it was called. It was not hard to get a job in hand loom weaving but I didn't like it. My friends were in power loom weaving and they earned more money than I did.

I started in a cottage which held six looms. A loom would take up a space 11 feet by 11 feet — some looms were wicker. The loom I was using was a table napkin loom. It wove a narrow width cloth 22 inches wide — it was a very high loom and was known as a Jacquard loom — Jacquard was the name given to the machine on top of the loom. It was named after a French man who improved the machine used to put a pattern into linen. Joseph Marie Jacquard improved on the machine in the year 1730. It's very hard to believe that this Jacquard machine was worked by punched cards and someone once remarked to me that it was an early type of computer. It enabled the pattern to be woven into the loom by a series of hooks on top of the machine which pulled up cards which in turn pulled up threads to make the pattern. There were nine foot pedals used in weaving on that loom — eight were worked with your right foot and one with your left foot. Now your right foot was going from right to left and then back again to right and your left foot was going up and down. The left foot was working the cards while the right foot was working the twill of the cloth on the cloth itself. It's hard to explain that unless you see it working to weave with the right foot working the eight pedals you had to take off your shoe because the pedals or threadles were very close together. working the threadles was very hard on socks and we had to wear two socks on the right foot — socks wore out very quick. Later on when I began weaving in public in the Ulster Folk Museum in 1968 — I worked there for 11 years a lot of people who watched me weaving would say "I see you've got odd socks on you." I had to make some comment so I would usually say, "I have got another pair the same at home."

I return to the time I started weaving at 14. I was there for three weeks before I got my first pay. Robert Crozier was the owner of the fixed loom and he said to me after three weeks, "You're doing all right John; I think I will pay you." He gave me 2/6, 1/= and 3d. 3/9 (18p.) That was my first wage. The second week I earned £1, and after that I was on "piece work." You made your own pay, starting any time you liked. That didn't mean you started at 11 o'clock in the morning and finished at dinner time, although it was possible to do that. If you wanted to make a wage you had to be on the job at a quarter to eight in the morning. I was on the job at a quarter to eight — some weavers were on the job long before that — and I wove to twenty to seven at night. We boiled our tea on a gas ring in Robert Crozier's kitchen and I, being the youngest, I had to go to make my tea in a tea drawer (an open tin with spout). You made your tea and brought it back to the loom and you sat on the loom and had your tea and sandwiches (called piece). I had five brothers and sometimes one of them would come up on a bicycle with a tin of soup for me. That was 1948 and I worked under oil lamps. The lamp hung at your left shoulder on a long wire. We used to make the lamps ourselves out of Tate & Lyle syrup tins.

Now if you got behind in your work, or something went wrong during the day, the thread broke, or the yarn just broke when you were weaving or the cards would snap, you never got paid for that. You only got paid for what you wove. When your shuttle stopped, your pay stopped. If you didn't make cloth then you didn't make money. If you got behind you had to work later, to make up for that loss of time. Some other weavers would be weaving to their usual time, maybe 7 o'clock and when they were leaving they would loan you their lamp, if you were working late. It was great to have two lamps. The light was tremendous. Poor lamp light did not seem to effect a weaver's eyes. I wear glasses, but it's not for short range. I have great

John McAtasney at work.

eyesight at short range. I wove for eleven years in Ballydougan Weavers' Cottage at the Ulster Folk Museum. There was no electricity in that cottage. It is the only building at the Ulster Folk Museum, which is a replica. All the rest was brought, stone by stone from the places where they were situated, but the weaver's cotetage from Ballydougan (a townland outside Lurgan) was made of mud. You could not take a mud cottage anywhere. It had to be built on the spot. In fact it fell twice before they got it to stand up! They had it going nicely. It was sitting well, when there came very heavy rain one night and when they arrived in the morning the house was lying in the middle of the field.

The floor in the weaver's cottage was always made of mud. This was very useful in the working of linen. You can't weave linen without moisture and an earth floor has natural moisture in it. Also in a dry spell of weather you can sprinkle water around the loom. The moisture keeps the linen threads supple — they tend to become very brittle should there be a dry spell of weather. The cards that are used in a loom tend to stretch also in very dry weather therefore they need plenty of moisture.

I'm employed now by Lisburn Museum and I work in very nice conditions in centrally heated building but it doesn't suit the loom. The loom doesn't like these conditions at all, not one bit. I have been on that loom on and off for the past ten years but I have just been full-time in the Lisburn Museum from September, 1988. I had been working a plain linen loom known as 'Cambric' cloth. It is used for handkerchiefs. I will shortly be setting up a Damask loom. It is a Damask loom I obtained for Lisburn Museum about five years ago. I was very fortunate to get it. There are some vital parts missing but I hope to get them or make them. It will take about a year to set up the loom.

The Damask loom is for making napkins. There will be 2,600 threads on the loom. Table cloths are also woven in Damask. When we wove table cloths we had to do the cloth up to 12 feet in width and they would have over 30,000 threads in the warp. We used about 3,000 cards in the making of one table cloth. It was very heavy work making a table cloth because it was still worked the same as a napkin. You worked the eight threadles with the right foot and one with the left foot but at the bottom of the cards were little lead weights which weight about 4 oz. each. Now to work a table cloth loom you have to press down the threadle with the left foot and there were some parts of the pattern where the pattern was very full and therefore you were lifting up more cards and more lead weights. On occasions you had to stand up and really jump on the threadle to get it to go down. The threadle snapped on me on a number of occasions. As I said when I started off I didn't like weaving — for the first six months — but it has grown on me. I wouldn't do anything else now, I haven't done anything else.

I have also woven tweeds. I wasn't confined to Lurgan although all my linen work was in Lurgan — it was the only place where linen was woven. Linen weaving by hand had died out in Lisburn by 1941 and so by 1948 when I entered the trade Lurgan was the last place in Ireland where linen weaving by hand was done. I decided after a time to branch out. There was a slackness in the linen trade and I was offered a job as a tweed weaver with a firm in Great Victoria Street in Belfast — just across from where the Railway Station used to be. I didn't think tweed weaving was as high grade work as linen. It was difficult for me to get started. I found the thickness of the thread very strange.

The cloth was 36'' wide and for that width 400 threads were required — some were for fine weave and some for coarse weave. The warp wove much quicker — there were as little as 10 threads to the inch, you would just go ten times across with the shuttle, and you'd have an inch of cloth woven, whereas for linen there were 160 threads to the inch — 160 movements of the shuttle, so that again was piece work. You were paid by the number of yards you wove, and like the linen you even had to wind your own bobbins by hand. These winding wheels — we made them ourselves, out of bicycle wheels. Bobbin winding could use up two hours a day (for which you didn't get paid). There were 70 yards in a length of cloth and that took ½ day to set the loom up. We used to do 2½ cuts of cloth a week, 175 yards per week.

There were two brothers with me that time in Belfast called McMinn, and they wove 5 cuts of cloth a week. They were married, and they needed the money! They worked all night on Thursday night. This also happened in the linen business too, where they worked right through the night. In fact there were two brothers in Lurgan called McAvoy, and they never started to weave until Wednesday morning at 7 o'clock and they wove right through till 7 o'clock that night. On Thursday they came in about 8 o'clock in the morning and then wove through Thursday night and Friday. They came on Saturday about 4 o'clock in the morning and they wove right through to five minutes to one. They went down to the office for their pay. Robert Crozier

had their pay made up — he used a little ready reckoner which told him what the number of yards woven at 7½d a yard amounted to. The two McAvoy brothers got their pay at five minutes to one and they went over to their "office" across the street and they weren't seen until the following Wednesday their office being S. McCann's pub in Hill Street. They were great wevers but they never wove damask. Some weavers stuck to one cloth and never wove anything else. After I was 4 years in Belfast I came back to Lurgan again to the linen. Then in 1961 I moved to Dublin where I was weaving for 5½ years. I was weaving mohair scarves each about 10 inches wide by 45 inches long. Each scarf had a woven selvedge in the middle of the scarf. This was all done with the aid of a little chain and wasted threads coming through the chain.

You can weave a cloth very well and have it destroyed in the finishing. At one time I sent off 500 yards for finishing and an apprentice on the finishing machine destroyed it. Sometimes linen wouldn't bleach white and tweed was even more risky. It was woven hard and softened up afterwards with a process of water and soap. Sometimes it doesn't get that nice softness you want so for ladies' wear it has to be soft — for gents a little bit harder.

A reed got its name from a reed that grew alongside a river and the original was one of these — 5 gaps to every inch. Some reeds had more or less gaps depending on coarse or fine cloth. You had to be very accurate with measurements for the number of threads per inch.

If the boss said he wanted 160 threads per inch per 100 yards that had to be 160 threads per inch per 100 yards, if it was less in some places you were fined ½d per yard. Now I'm going back to the '30s, '40s and '50s and ½d a yard was a lot of money. We used an old halfpenny to calculate our measurements to exactly 1 inch. Did you know the new two pence is exactly 1 inch? I have been saving these halfpennies since 1950. You always had to calculate the number of threads before you started to weave from the design end of it. A medium weight tweed cloth, it required about 12 threads to the inch going across.

A shuttle had to be very smooth to ensure it moved across — box wood shuttles were used for linen weaving — my father told me he bought a shuttle in Lurgan in 1936 for 1/6 and if it didn't suit him he could have taken it back and got it changed. When a loom broke down, a lot of times, you fixed it up "temporary" but it stayed up forever.

Weavers led a full life, went for walks and talked about weaving. In fact I learned how to tie a weaver's knot walking round the roads. Scissors were very often used in tweed — they were never used in linen weaving — small shears — the difference with weavers' shears, they could be lifted up and were instantly ready for use. We used to practise with cord. When I was a boy I never passed a bit of cord in the street. Flax was pulled by the root — it didn't bleach as white if it was cut. Flax has the stems inside and the fibre outside. A scutch mill broke up flax and left fibres.

I was only weaving about three weeks when I asked the weaver weaving with me how long would it take to learn this job — fifty years he said, and you know it's true, because there is something happens every day that never happened before.

When I was in the Folk Museum I gave a demonstration to a school party and when it was over, there was a little girl who stayed behind and asked many questions. She asked how long did it take to learn this job and when I said "fifty years," she said, "I would love a job that would take fifty years to learn." A nice remark from one so young. I'm often asked if the job is boring — every job is boring, but I often say some of the biggest discoveries would never have been made if the job had not been boring. Handweaving was not an unhealthy job.

The firm I worked for closed down in 1968 in Waringstown. The Folk Museum took over, and I being the youngest weaver, they asked me to move. At that time we had one child. There were five other weavers. The oldest was Sam Dupre. He was made redundant at 87! — a remarkable man, he walked 2½ miles to his work every day. He was there first and opened up the place and last to leave at night to lock up. He lived till he was 98 — weavers were very long lived. There was not as much dust round a hand loom as round a power loom. I was on a hand loom for 8 years and there was quite a lot of dust round the threadles. Someone said to me one day, "Why don't you clean up that dust?" I said, "It has taken me years to gather that dust." There was a weaver wove near me, Robert Coulter. He kept hens, he also had an open well and it wasn't unusual to find a hen at the bottom of the well when you went out to draw a bucket of water for your tea. The hen was taken out and we drew our water just the same and boiled it. There was a weaver to my left, he was Georgie Douglas and a hen used to come and scrape a hole in the clay floor beside his threadle and used to lay an egg there every and he had it for his tea every night. I wish it had laid it near me.

Demonstrating a small hand loom.

People have asked me looking for a loom and I have got looms from some very unusual places. I remember getting a loom for a lady in Lisburn and her husband is the curator in the Downpatrick Museum Dr. Brea Toner. She had moved into a brand new house in Lisburn about 18 years ago and she wanted to set up a tweed loom. I made a warp for her 30 yards long and got it to Lisburn — the sitting room for the brand new house. It was the full of the room. Another request from a couple in Swansea also for a tweed loom. I was able to get one for them. They collected it in Newry and were going to Rosslare. Regulations were that it be fitted into a closed van. Vital parts had to be dismantled for the journey but eventually they got it assembled over there. I finally got a letter about six months later to say they were weaving. I was delighted to hear that! A yard of tweed that Robert Crozier measured was measured with a rod. One day George Douglas and I discovered that the rod measured 37½ inches. I said to Bob that road measured 37½ inches — not 36. Bob said that was the "old measurement."

George Douglas said when we got Bob out — (Bob had a habit of going down town and always came back with a wee drop on him) we would get the saw and cut 1½ inches off the rod. We did that and rubbed the cut end in the soil of the floor. Bob never caught it on and for the next 4/5 years we got the right measurement.

Members examining a small loom during a demonstration.