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This interview was conducted with Mary Ann Ford on June 19, 2009, at her home in Wenatchee, Washington. Her husband, Paul Ford, is present. The interviewer is Tamara Belts.

**TB:** Today is Friday, June 19, 2009, and I'm here with Paul and Mary Ann Ford. We're going to start with Mary Ann and do an oral history about her needlework and then we will interview them both about their book collecting and maybe we'll get to some of Paul's fly fishing. Our first question is: how did you first become interested or start doing your needlework? The library subject heading I think is fancy work actually.

**MAF:** Right, well actually I, if you would believe it, I started embroidering when I was three years old. My mother drew out my name and a block, you know that you play with, on some fabric and had me do the outline stitch around them. Unfortunately, I don't have that anymore. But that's what she told me. I wouldn't remember I was three, but she told me that's what I was. In my early life you never just sat without doing something. My mother was a good seamstress, she knitted, she embroidered, so you learned very early to embroider. We used flour sack material, made dish towels and embroidered those, did appliqué, and then during the early years of the war, we knit afghans. So I've always done handwork. And when Paul and I were first married, how many sweaters did I knit for him?

**PF:** Lots.

**MAF:** Numerous, numerous sweaters. I think he still has some of them, and hats. Yes, I knit hats for him every once in a while. He'd say, "I need another fishing hat." So I would knit him one. The seriousness of the embroidery: we did pillowcases. I can remember selling pillowcases in Mt. Vernon at a garage sale and I really didn't want to put them in, but we weren't using them. This woman came along and she said, "I only want one of these." She said, "I'll give you twenty-five cents." I have thought about that so often because I wish I hadn't put them in the garage sale. But those were the kinds of things we did—embroidery.

The biggest part of my themes when I was in grade school and would have a project would be to make a cover that was embroidered. I would get checkered material and cross stitch the title and my name on it and fancy it all up. I think that's why I got A's all the time because the covers of my projects looked better than anybody else's.

But anyway, my seriousness on embroidery came, I would say, probably the last year I was a principal. One morning I walked in through the kitchen to work at about 6:30 in the morning and there sat my head cook. She looked up, sort of startled and said, "Is it okay if I'm here?" And I said, "Sure, what are you doing?" And I walked over and looked and she had this most beautiful embroidery which turned out to be Hardanger. She was taking a class. She said, "I had to come in here because I have to count and my husband keeps wanting to talk to me and I need peace and quiet."

It was so beautiful. It was a Scandinavian embroidery and since my grandparents came from Denmark, that added to my interest. I said, "Where's the class?" She told me and said "It's at one o'clock, change your lunch hour and come take the class." And I said, "No," I didn't think I better do that. At the end of the day I

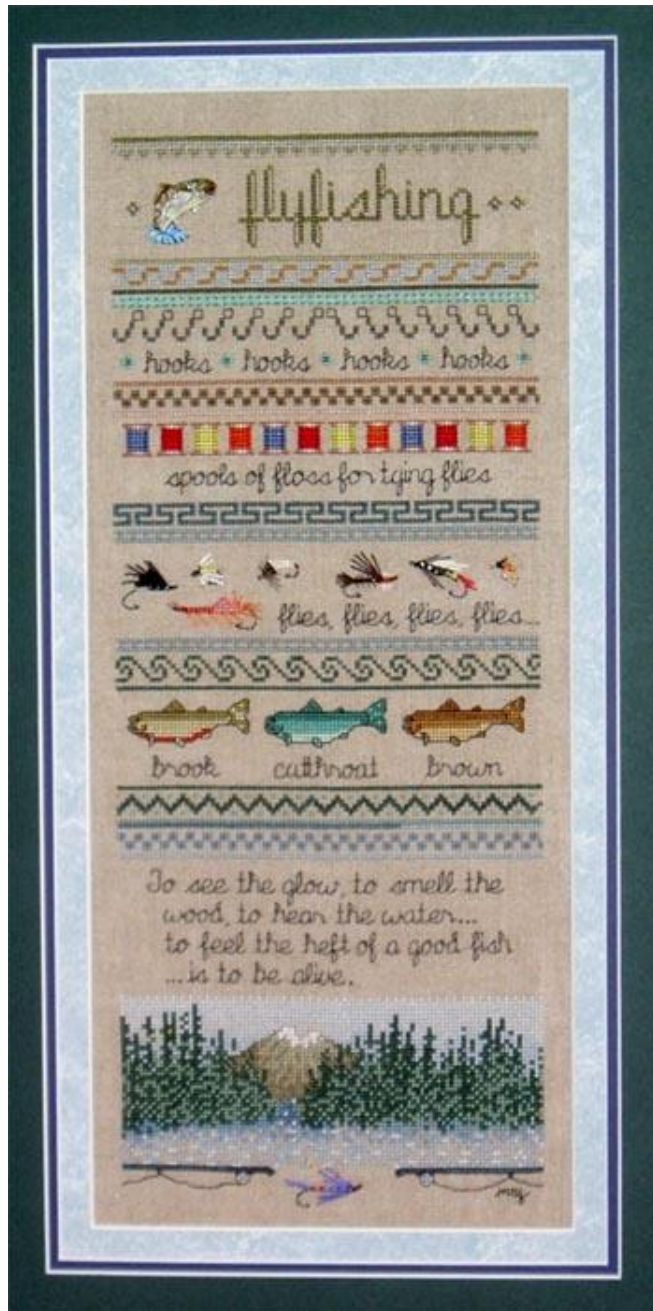
went down to the shop and asked the owner about it and she explained all about this technique of embroidery which is a form of white work. I said, “Do you have a learn-how book?” And she said, “Yes I do. Have you done any embroidery?” And I said, “Yes, I have.” So she said, “Well here, take it and try it. Bring it in and I’ll critique it to see how your tension is and so forth.”

I did, and I still have that piece that sits on the piano. I took it in and she looked at it and said, “I don’t have anything bad to say about it.” So I started doing Hardanger the rest of that school year. When school was out and I retired, then I joined a group of ladies in Stanwood who stitched together. We had classes, we had people from all over the United States that would come in and teach. I learned a lot about other kinds of white work, pulled thread, and lots of other types of needlework. I guess I would say my two favorites, still, are Hardanger and Counted Cross Stitch.

I think Counted Cross Stitch is my most favorite form because growing up I had always wanted to paint. I did a lot of art work in school and made posters for everybody in town. But I had to copy something. I had an aunt who could paint, just by sitting and watching a scene or whatever and paint it. My mother did China painting, beautifully, but I never was able to. It was very frustrating to me. When I do Counted Cross Stitch I feel like I’m painting a picture as I work from the top to the bottom on the picture. I did a cat for my cousin not too long ago and it’s just like he comes alive. I’m doing a lady now. Once you get her eyes in, she’s alive. So I get a real sense of satisfaction because I feel in my own way, that’s the way that I’m able to paint.

As far as picking out the kinds of pictures that I do, with respect to the fly fishing collection, Paul and I discuss this: he helps pick out. I have a whole room full of patterns. Every time I see a pattern I think I might like to do, I buy it. I would never live long enough to do them all. But we sort of decide together what my next project is going to be. I tend to prefer patterns from the European countries, specifically the Scandinavian countries, Netherlands, and Canada, more than I do what’s done by designers here.

I think that probably the reason for that is that many of those countries create patterns from paintings that have already been done. For example, *The Spirit of the Sockeye* was done by Blaine Billman and he was an artist, a painter, who studied the culture of the northwest people. Then there was a company in Canada that asked permission to reproduce that in Counted Cross Stitch. When you look at that picture and then see his painting, they look identical.



The picture behind me, the one of the creel and the fish and the rod, is a pattern from Denmark. The fabric I ordered from Denmark, the linen. I only will work on linen, I do not work on anything else. But that pattern has so many colors in it which you would never know because there is just a slight variation in each one. You might have only two stitches of one color, but that's what makes it look like a painting when it's done.

Look at the fly fishing sampler I did. When we were back at Plymouth, Massachusetts, one year, I was very fortunate because there was an exhibit of samplers from the 1800's, probably to maybe the 1920's. During that time period they taught embroidery in school. Everything used was raw linen. The fibers then were linen and dyed with berries.

But the girls were taught that they had to do their own designing and so ended up with alphabets, lines with different patterns, eyelet stitch and aegean work, and lots of different types of stitches to practice and cross stitch.

I was able to see that and I was fascinated because I marveled at the fact that an eight-year old girl had done that. The work was all labeled with the girl's name and the age. I thought it's wonderful for them to do that and be able to make a lot of houses, a lot of pretty good looking figures, not stick figures like kids draw with a pencil, but things that meant something to them: ships, small boats, whatever, that they thought about as they were stitching. So when we came home (I picked up a couple of patterns on Cape Cod) I did those.

Then one day Paul said, "Why don't you do a sampler? Why don't you do one yourself?" Well I didn't know whether I could do that or not. But the fish on that sampler over there (she points) is a leather fish that I bought over in Montana, on one of our trips, I don't remember exactly where. I always liked that but I just put it in a drawer. I thought, "Ahah! That's a good place to start." So I took that fish and picked out colors to start with that went with the fish. Then I decided that the fly fishing, to me, means the hooks, the threads, and all the things that go with making flies. So I just started. I rolled up my fabric and started stitching.

When I finished one section, I'd roll it up and start to do the next one. I remember I had to graph everything out. I said to Paul, "Pick out some flies that are you favorites and I'll see if I can duplicate them in stitches." So that's what I did. He said I did a good job. I said, "Okay tell me what their names are? And he did. So I guess they must have been well done. Then the part down below with the writing was something I found in one of Paul's books that I thought gave a sense of being outdoors. Because, at that time, I think we still lived on the coast, I know we did. We were with mountains and trees and everything, not like here, so that became the bottom part of the sampler you see over there.

When I got all done I had been rolling this up all along—oh yes, the spools of thread, the colors that he used, and then the kinds of fish that he fished for at that time. I said I'd be interested to see what this looks like when I get done. I don't remember where we were, I don't think we were at home, we were on a trip as I remember. So I just took it off of my frame and unrolled it. And actually, he said, "Oh wow!" And I was surprised, I'm sure my eyes got big, because I was surprised how it all fit together when it was completed.

**TB:** That's very lovely, it's very lovely.

**MAF:** So anyway, those are the three, the only three fishing that I—well *Spike, Spike* (a King fisher) I did, we picked him out. *Spike* was supposed to be large, 14 inches by 25 inches. I don't like big things like that because I have enough things to put on my walls. So you can always make it smaller by using finer fabric.

I put *Spike* on congress cloth, which is 23 squares per inch and I did one cross over one thread, so that pulled it down to a reasonable size. Oh I forgot about that one [Ed. note: *Paul Ford pointed to another art piece*]. That one is a good picture for the kind of northwest [flavor] again, similar to what Blaine Billman did. It's the Indian representation of the salmon and then how the salmon really looks to us. That incidentally, is a needlepoint piece. Those are different types of needlepoint stitches. The way they're done creates the flow of the pattern. So there are a lot of different types of stitches on that one.

**TB:** It's beautiful. You're doing great here. Let's go back a little bit. When you were young was it a social experience too? Did your mother get together with other women to do this kind of work?

**MAF:** No, she got together with her sisters to quilt. I tried to quilt and did not like it. I just do about everything else except quilt, but no. I was an only child therefore I had a lot of time that I had to entertain myself. To begin with, coloring books, lying on my stomach listening to the old Philco radio and coloring while Lorenzo Jones and his wife Belle was on or Inner Sanctum, or whatever. I spent hours doing that. But again, that was the painting part. I could take colored pencils and I could make beautiful pictures out of coloring books. But I was always frustrated because I could not take a paintbrush and do it myself. So I feel like even though I still can't do that, I feel like I do it with my Counted Cross Stitch.

**TB:** It sounds like most of the materials that you used when you were young were materials that were around [the house].

**MAF:** Yes, oh yes, because it was during the Depression, you didn't have anything. You used what you could find. Flour sacking was great; it was sort of like muslin. You could hardly wait to get the sack empty so you could pull the string and rip it and then you would hem it. Sometimes we even hemmed it on the machine or by hand. Then you would get a decal at the five-and-dime that you liked and you would iron it on the corner and then embroider it. You chose your own colors, your own stitch, whether you used a leaf stitch or a lazy daisy stitch or a bullion knot, or whatever. But you did the creating yourself with the type of stitch that you used. Most of the towels, I still have some, are Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Monday was "~~w~~ash", Tuesday was "~~i~~ron", Wednesday was "~~e~~an your house," and so forth through the week. Sunday was "~~g~~o to church" and it said that. You'd cross stitch those words in. That took a long time to do seven days of the week.

**TB:** In terms of what you do now, you said that you always like to use linen. Then it sounds like you can get a finer linen and that brings the print down.

**MAF:** Well linen comes in a variety of sizes. The very smallest is forty threads per inch. So if you're doing it over two threads, which you would on that size, you end up with twenty little x's per inch. I do not use that all that often. I tend to use 36. That's my favorite, which would be 18 little x's per inch. Then you have canvas, called congress cloth, which is used for needlepoint primarily, but you can use it for Counted Cross Stitch. That is 23 threads per inch. You use that over one, so you'll end up with 23 stitches, or x's per inch. I prefer the finer because then the detail comes out more than when you do it bigger. Many people will use what's called Aida cloth. I shudder when I think of wasting my eye-sight on that kind of fabric. It's blocky, and you can't do half stitches and quarter stitches at all with that. It just doesn't give the definition and the fineness to it that the linen does.

**TB:** So what about threads? When you buy these patterns, do they tell you then all the colors that you're supposed to use?

**MAF:** Yes. It will tell you the colors and some of the pictures I've done have had as many as 387 different colors, so you have to buy that many skeins of thread. There are different kinds of threads. I prefer Anchor. There's DMC, which I use a lot too. There are also fibers. There's a company called Caron that dyes fibers. There's metallics, I have done some pictures where I use metallics.

I have done pictures that I used beads on. You cross stitch using beads as an accent. Mill Hill, Paul uses Mill Hill beads when he ties flies and that's the kind of beads I use on my needlework. Mill Hill also makes spools of fibers, which he uses some. For example they make gold, and they make it in different weights. They make a cord, they make an 8 and a 16 and I think there's one other that I don't believe I've used. But you use those and because they're thicker, you get a three-dimensional effect in your embroidery. So there are other things besides—and there's silk.

I have done some work with silk and metallics. In fact, on the coast I taught a class on silks and metallics and needlepoint. In the old days, needlepoint, the word itself always meant a canvas which had a design on it and you did what's called the tent stitch, and it's very boring needlepoint. I have a footstool that I did and a couple of pictures that I have done with tent stitch. But I found out later on there's a lot of different kinds

of stitches used in needlepoint. You can do it on fabric; you can do it on congress cloth. There are a number of examples of that around here. But as far as fibers are concerned, there's a variety of fibers out there to use.

**TB:** Well you answered all my questions.

**MAF:** Okay, that's good.

**TB:** And so you've never, other than doing the sampler, you've never made your own patterns?

**MAF:** No.

**TB:** Well you did a great job on your sampler. Is there anything else about the thread? I mean, you talked quite a bit about the different texture in the material. The threads would make a big difference too, right? Or do you know that you have to get a certain size thread to go with a smaller, finer cloth? Would you need a smaller--?

**MAF:** I use the same thread.

**TB:** Really?

**MAF:** It's the same thread no matter what you do, the difference is how many strands of it you use.

**TB:** Oh, you can put multi-threads on.

**MAF:** Right, so when you buy the thread—let's say you buy a skein of Anchor thread and its wound around, and I don't recall how many yards is in the skein. You cut off an 18-inch section. There are six strands to what you pulled out. You separate the strands, pull them out one at a time and lay them next to each other. When you use something like congress cloth, 23-count, then you use one strand of that thread, and go over one thread on the congress cloth. If you're using say 28-count linen, then you use two strands of thread. On my 36-count, I use sometimes one, sometimes two, I prefer only one on 36, but it depends. If you want some things to have a really raised look, well then you just use more strands. That would be the difference on that.

**TB:** Now one thing I brought along, because you gave these to Special Collections and I wanted you to tell me just a little bit more about how you as a child—

**MAF:** Oh! Yes, I forgot that I did. This was sort of like, as I recall, the thread was on like a shoelace, so it had a hard end to it. And what you did was to come up, and we put knots in. In embroidery, you never make a knot, ever. You won't find any knots on any of the work. But you made a little knot and then you came up here and went down in the next one and up and back and that is called backstitching. Of course when I did this, I did not know that was the name for it but that's what it is. You go all the way around and backstitch so that when you get done, you have an outline, in color, of what this pattern is. Yes, I had forgotten that and that was fun. Then you pull it out and you get to do it over again as many times as you wanted to.

**TB:** Excellent.

**MAF:** It wasn't anything that was mounted and framed, that's for sure. But it was good because it helped you be able to learn to back stitch, to cover everything without making crosses around the back. It's like Blackwork, [which] is another technique of embroidery. Your front, when you start your Blackwork pattern, you have to go up one, down in another thread, and then up and you just skip every other one. But you've got to plan your path. When you come back, you go back and fill in what you left out. When you're done, the front and the back are identical, there's no difference. You have to think, you have to plan.

I think that's one other thing that I like about Counted Cross Stitch. You do have to think and plan there and the same way with Hardanger. You cannot have threads travel more than 3 threads on the back side of

your fabric. That's not allowed. The back of your work is supposed to be neat. No knots, and with Counted Cross Stitch you travel no more with the thread than the equivalent of three stitches, because if you do, then the slant of your work is distorted. So you want all of your threads to slant the same way going and the same way coming back. You don't want to have to reach. If you went say 10 stitches over, you'd see that right away. Because the angle of your thread crossing in the back would distort the one you left and the one you were making.

**TB:** So you must make [no more than] three stitches then, and then you're cutting it—

**MAF:** Sometimes you do. Sometimes you can only do one little x and you have to run your thread back behind and cut it off. I think I like Counted Cross Stitch so because of the mathematical part of it. You know that's my background and that's what I like. To be able to do it, to me, it's relaxing and I thoroughly enjoy it. I have tried to teach other people to do Counted Cross Stitch and they get it, but they say, "Oh my gosh! This drives me nuts! This isn't restful!" But it is to me. It's probably the most restful thing I can think of doing.

**TB:** So the difference with like embroidery, you keep going with the thread, right?

**MAF:** Yes.

**TB:** At least until you want to change your color or do something different, you keep going on.

**MAF:** Yes.

**TB:** Okay. I never realized that you cut so much. Sometimes do you put like a little stitch or do you put some little marker in some place to know where you're going?

**MAF:** Oh no, I have a pattern that I do and I use a felt pen to mark where I've been. Otherwise, because when you set it down, to try to find where you are again is difficult. So that's how I do it. Some people do handle that differently. But I prefer to mark out each stitch as I do it.

**TB:** What about when you frame them: I guess I'm asking kind of two questions because I can see why you wouldn't put glass over them because you couldn't see them as well, but then how do you really clean these?

**MAF:** Technically when you frame needlework, you really shouldn't put glass over it. However, in later years, I have been doing that. If somebody uses the fireplace all the time or smokes, they need to put glass on it, there's no question about it. Recently I have been putting glass on because, for example, if I'm giving them to Western for Special Collections, it's to help preserve them. The glass is different now than it used to be. There is a museum glass, which is what I use. So it has different qualities than earlier framing glass.

### ***END OF SIDE ONE***

**MAF:** Years and years and years ago I did a needlepoint piece, and not knowing what I was doing, took it to be framed and they put non-glare glass on. Because when you have light coming in and you have glass on, it's hard to see the picture, that's the drawback. So this gentleman that was framing it said, "We'll put non-glare glass on this and this'll be fine."

For some reason, years later, I thought, I really don't like that frame, and so I took it to change the frame. When I took the glass off, the pattern was on the glass. You could see, when I held it up, you could see what was on there. I said, "How did this happen?" It wasn't in color but you could see the design. And the lady said, "Well this was non-glare glass." And I said, "So?" and she said, "What did you have it on?" And I said, "Well I had it on wool for a needlepoint piece." She said that it was the oils from the wool then, because it had been on there so long. They hadn't put a spacer in to hold the glass away from the piece. It had absorbed all the oils out of the wool, which then, of course, makes the piece susceptible to disintegrating.

But I have been putting glass on; it's museum quality glass. And there are spacers and I always try to use three mats, and they're acid-free. That all protects the fibers and the fabric both, because that's where the damage would be, it would be to them. Also it keeps the sun and the dust off. I think since we've moved over here and it's so dusty, I decided maybe I was better off to have things with glass on them, but they're appropriately done.

**TB:** How long did it take you to do that piece (a leaping salmon created by a Native Northwest coastal designer on black background)?

**MAF:** Oh, I don't recall. I used to keep track and then I was so shocked at how long it took. I think I worked on that (pointing to *Spirit of the Salmon*), probably ten months I would say. Part of that was due to the fact that that's black fabric and black fabric is very hard to see when its small threads. So you have to do it when the light is exactly right and you have to have something, a light cloth sitting on your lap so that if you can see the holes, you know you're seeing light come up behind. That helps. But I would say it was about that long.

That Counted Cross Stitch salmon is an interesting piece because placed within it is a human, a raven, and another salmon. This is typical of Northwest Native art. But even now, after making the piece, I sometimes have trouble seeing the figures within the main figure. What splendid art!

**TB:** Now do you keep a record of—

**MAF:** No. I started to and I thought this is too time consuming and keeping me from my work, so no. There are some times when I wish I would have. In the dining room, I have a picture called *Fairy Grandmother*. That one was done by an American or a United States designer, and I love her. I did keep track of her and it was 837 hours, I think.

**TB:** Wow.

**MAF:** Then I thought, —Good that was a long time.” But I guess I just don't care to know how long it takes on the rest of them.

**TB:** Do you keep a picture? Because I know you give some away. Do you take a picture of what you've done?

**MAF:** As a rule, Paul has been doing that; he has been taking pictures of them. For a long time I didn't do that and I've given so many away to people. I did pictures for the granddaughters in France. I've given pictures to friends and relatives. I wish I would have kept a notebook of the work that I've done, because they weren't all Counted Cross Stitch. But it would be kind of fun now, at my age, to look back and see. I used to put the year on and I always put my initials on. I used to put the year it was done and that becomes surprising after a while, too. You think, —Way back in 1982?” But I don't put the year on anymore. Sometimes I put it on the back on a piece of paper and stick it on: when it was done.

**TB:** Also, I know you have to keep count, so does that take all of your attention? Or is it time also that you can think about other things?

**MAF:** No, I think about what I'm doing.

**TB:** Totally focused on that.

**MAF:** That's why it's relaxing. You don't think about what you should be doing, you think about what you are doing.

**TB:** That's good. I know you gave a piece to your church. Have you given other pieces to other institutions? Or I guess what I'm getting at—have you ever done something [like an] exhibit or show?

**MAF:** No, no.

**TB:** You don't have any others on display somewhere else?

**MAF:** No

**TB:** But we'll have them on display at Special Collections!

**MAF:** Paul has always gotten after me for that. We have fairs; we have a fair in my home town. We have a fair in Cashmere for Chelan County. I have never entered any of my work for the simple reason that I don't feel that they're careful enough with displaying their work. People get up and say, —OhLook at this!" Now if you've got glass on it that's okay, you just have fingerprints to clean up. But you have to be very careful with the fibers and the fabric. People's hands are oily, there's no question about it. Some people's hands are even dirty. If you're at the fair, I think of dirt, around here. You don't want someone getting right up and getting too close to the work. That's probably selfishness on my part.

**TB:** I guess my only other question is: do you ever have two things going on at once or you're always just doing one?

**MAF:** Well I only have one Counted Cross Stitch at one time, but I'm also knitting a prayer shawl right now. I belong to the prayer shawl ministry at church so I'm now knitting a prayer shawl, plus I have a piece of Hardanger that I am working on. It depends on when we travel. When Paul goes fishing, I like to go with him, and I need something to take with me to do. To take a piece of Counted Cross Stitch, I have done that, but I find the light in a motel or a cabin is not quite what I need. Plus it's a lot of thread and all of this stuff to take. They're bigger projects. So I prefer to take the Hardanger, which is something I can hold in my hand, or knitting, same thing.

**TB:** And so the prayer shawls are knit?

**MAF:** Prayer shawls are knit, or crocheted. I do not crochet.

**TB:** Now why don't you like to crochet?

**MAF:** Well, my mother crocheted beautifully and at one point, she said, —I'll teach you to crochet." I knit a sweater and she said, —Crochet around the edge of it." I said, —No Mom, you can do that." And she said, —Well you need to know how to do this." So she handed me the crochet hook, and showed me how to do it, and made some nice stitches down and handed the hook to me. And she said, —Okay, now you do it." So I took the hook and started in and she sat there and she giggled. My mother was a giggler, if you fell and skinned your knee, she giggled, and when I was doing this crochet, she giggled. I stopped and I looked at her and I said, —What's so funny?" And she said, —The way you hold your needle." I said, —How am I supposed to hold it?" So she showed me and I started in. It was very awkward, very uncomfortable. My stitches weren't nice and neat like hers. So I went back to holding it like the knitting needle and that isn't the way you crochet. I really was insulted that she laughed at me, I guess, so I said, —Yo crochet around it for me, I'd appreciate it." And set it down.

**TB:** So this was actually when you were a little bit older, not when you were a child.

**MAF:** This was when I was in high school. The first year that I taught school, it always bothered me that I hadn't been able to crochet. I thought surely I could do this, if she isn't sitting there giggling at me. So I went down to the store and I bought some crochet thread, and a hook, and a pattern for what was called the —pineapple pattern" and I thought, —I'll make a doily for her."

I came back and worked really hard to hold that crochet hook the right way, and made this pineapple doily. I thought it looked pretty good. So I folded it in half, stuck it in an envelope and addressed the envelope to my mother and sent it--no note, no nothing. She said, —Who did this?" And I said, —I did." She called up and she wanted to know and I said, —I did, I did it especially for you. And I promise I held the hook right." But I had taken almost a year to do this. Well it turns out that the pineapple stitch isn't the easiest of crochet



patterns, and I didn't know that. But I had worked hard to get that. Someplace around this house, that pineapple pattern doily sits, I don't know where now.

That was it, no more crocheting, until one of the classes in Stanwood, after I retired. The lady wanted to teach us all to crochet. None of us knew how. She said, "We'll just make nut baskets." None of us liked to crochet. We did her project, we starched it with sugar. I have it sitting in my office to this day. But that was the end of crocheting for all of us. We all really basically liked to do the same kinds of things. So I don't know what the hang up is with crochet. But it's not anything that interests me.

**TB:** That's fascinating actually.

**MAF:** A mental block, are you saying?

**TB:** Well is there anything else about this kind of work that I haven't asked you that I should have asked you?

**MAF:** No, I don't think so. I think I've probably covered it.

**TB:** And so your mother did approve of the pineapple pattern?

**MAF:** Yes, oh yes.

**TB:** Excellent.

**MAF:** She thought it was fine. I'm not sure—I often wonder if she believed that I did it.

***END OF INTERVIEW***

