

# Finding Peacock Alley

*The City of Dalton chose an unusual motif to represent the humble beginnings of its flourishing carpet industry.*

The life-sized buffalos staged around West Yellowstone, Montana, provide an obvious link to the area's cultural history. The same goes for the painted horses that gracefully decorate the city of Lexington, Kentucky. On the other hand, the purpose behind the proud peacocks placed around the city of Dalton, Georgia, may not be as obvious to the curious onlooker. The alluring peacock structures pay homage to Dalton's emergence as "The Carpet Capital of the World," an achievement that had most humble beginnings.

When Dalton farm girl Catherine Evans (1881-1964) replicated a candlewick bedspread she had admired at a relative's house in 1895, the teenager had no idea she would launch one of the fastest growing industries in the New South. Evans transferred a pattern onto cotton fabric, which she then hand-sewed with thick yarn. Upon completion, she snipped the running stitches, creating "tufts" of thread that became more pronounced after she boiled the fabric to shrink the weave and tighten the stitches.<sup>1</sup> Evans's method was a simpler variation of the original candlewick technique, but her end product closely resembled the original craft.<sup>2</sup>

After Evans presented a tufted bedspread to her brother and sister-in-law for a wedding present in 1900, a sister of the bride commissioned her to make one for her Summerville home. Additional requests followed, and when Evans couldn't meet the demand for her spreads she taught the craft to her neighbors. By 1918, she had a thriving enterprise at her family farm, organizing and overseeing a group of women who worked all day to produce spreads. Many of these workers eventually branched out to do their own work.<sup>3</sup>

Evans used different patterns on her spreads, including many dish and fabric designs, such as "The Washbowl," "Wild Rose," and "Wedding Ring,"<sup>4</sup> but her most common pattern



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Catherine Evans Whitener in 1946. A peacock-motif bedspread. Chenille bedspreads on a spreadline, 1946.





was the peacock. The wasn't as much customer preference as it was a cost-savings measure. Peacocks could be crafted in any combination of colors, allowing designers to use the leftover yarn from a "variety of more disciplined designs."<sup>5</sup> In what proved to be an effective marketing practice, the network of farmwives and daughters hung the spreads on clotheslines strung in their yards along U.S. Highway 41, from Ringgold to Acworth. Travelers along this stretch of highway, delighted by the colorful patterns on the spreads, often stopped to purchase a few to take home. The span of road became known as "Peacock Alley" because of the bird motif bedspreads swaying on the lines—a practice that continued long after the industry became mechanized.<sup>6</sup>

In 1922, Evans married Will Whitener. No written accounts suggest that Whitener participated in his wife's enterprise. The couple did not have children to carry on the business, which may be why she left it by the late 1930s. Before her exit, she had shared her technique and patterns with many others.

Evans's decision to lend a few patterns to Burl J. Bandy around 1919 proved to be pivotal for the future carpet industry that would sprout up around Dalton. The Bandys, owners of several dry goods stores, had fallen on hard times following World War I. After a fruitful visit to Evans Whitener, Bandy and wife, Dicksie, started a bedspread business named Cabin Crafts, which eventually grossed more than a million dollars.<sup>7</sup> Their son, Jack, would use the family capital to invest in carpet



Catherine Evans Whitener displaying one of her handcrafted bedspreads.



manufacturing in the 1950s, contributing to the startup of Coronet Carpet. Coronet grew to be one of the mainstays in the carpet industry for years.

Although Evans wouldn't follow suit, the tufted bedspread industry entered the age of mechanization in the 1920s. Here's how a reporter for *Time Magazine* characterized the situation in a 1940 article about Evans:

"After 1921 [men] began to take over the industry. One of the first was a young Georgian named Burl Judson Bandy, now a 52-year-old, bullet-headed bedspread tycoon who flies his own cabin plane. When Real Silk bought out a Dalton hosiery mill, the displaced executives scraped together \$13,000, started a spread house called Cabin Crafts Co. which now does the industry's largest single business—about \$1,000,000 a year. These men brought professional designers into the industry, and even installed a few tufting machines—locally made out of wagon wheels. But the newcomers generally stuck to the system of sending spreads out to mountain families for tufting."<sup>8</sup>

Cabin Crafts, along with other local firms, eventually invested in bedspread tufting machines that produced patterns on a continuous stream of sheeting. This faster process soon expanded to include throw rugs and three-piece bath sets. The machine-tufted goods were called chenille (French for "caterpillar").<sup>9</sup> Then, in 1949, Cabin Crafts partnered with Cobble Brothers of Chattanooga to develop machines that produced room-sized broadloom carpeting, thus completing the transformation of Evans's initial technology to produce carpet.<sup>10</sup>

By the late 1960s, carpet manufacturing was the fourth





OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: Hand-painted fiberglass peacocks decorate downtown Dalton in tribute to the early days of the city's carpet industry.

fastest-growing industry in the country and had become increasingly centered around Dalton. Sales approached \$1 billion annually and then exceeded \$2 billion in the 1970s. The number of manufacturers mushroomed from 88 to more than 400, thus giving Dalton the "Carpet Capital" designation it still wears so proudly today.<sup>11</sup>

No wonder that when the Downtown Dalton Development Authority spearheaded a public art project in the downtown area, they turned to the peacock as a motif. According to George Woodward, interim director, the authority wanted an icon that would lend historical value as well as allow citizens and visitors to enjoy a public art display. The nine dazzling peacocks scattered about downtown were each adopted by a local organization or group. Each business hired a local artist to design and paint the bare fiberglass figures.

Not only eye-catching, the peacocks provide an important cultural and historical link to the carpet capital's modest beginnings, when handcrafted bedspreads were strung over clotheslines all along "Peacock Alley." ▀

*Candace Deal, a former teacher in Dalton and at Kennesaw State University resides in Marietta.*

## Endnotes

1. Callahan, Ashley. "Southern Stories About Chenille Garments." *Ornament*. 39:3, (2016). 40.
2. Patton, Randall L. "Catherine Evans Whitener" in *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times Vol 2*, eds. Kathleen Ann Clark and Ann Short Chirhart (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).
3. Deaton, Thomas M. *Bedspreads to Broadloom: The Story of the Tufted Carpet Industry* (Acton, Mass.: Tapestry Press, 1993).
4. Patton, Randall L. "Catherine Evans Whitener" in *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times Vol 2*, eds. Kathleen Ann Clark and Ann Short Chirhart (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Deaton, Thomas M. *Bedspreads to Broadloom: The Story of the Tufted Carpet Industry* (Acton, Mass.: Tapestry Press, 1993).
8. *Time*. Vol. 36, Database: Readers' Guide Retrospective: 1890-1982 (H.W. Wilson) (2 Sept. 1940), 57-59.
9. Callahan, Ashley. "Southern Stories About Chenille Garments." *Ornament*. 39:3, (2016) 41.
10. Patton, Randall L. "Catherine Evans Whitener" in *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times Vol 2*, eds. Kathleen Ann Clark and Ann Short Chirhart (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 86-113.
11. Patton, Robert. "Carpet Industry." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 06 June 2017.