

The Loom

By Alicia Robinson Geilen

For the last twenty-five years, I have carted around the pieces of a barn loom that has been in my family for at least six generations. And until recently, the idea of putting it back together again had begun to seem like a pipe dream. The story of how a 100 plus year-old loom got from a chicken house in Oklahoma to a basement in New Hampshire, with the help of a stranger from Connecticut, is one of true serendipity.

The loom, when set up, is a five-foot cube of thirty or so hand-hewn oak timbers. God only knows what it weighs. My Granddaddy was taught to weave on it by his grandmother, who was born in 1863. Sadly, nothing woven by his mother or grandmother survives. But each of his eight grandchildren received a small piece that he wove out of dime-store-quality string and yarn. Next, he wove a small piece for each of the eleven greatgrandchildren who had been born by that time. Eventually he had to stop weaving as his health declined, and the loom sat abandoned in the old chicken house at the back of the garden, which he had used as his workspace. Then in the late 1990s, my grandparents were moved into a nursing home, and the contents of their house divided among family. No one wanted the old loom. It was slated to be thrown out, so I offered to take it. Problem solved! Except that it was in Tulsa, and I lived in Massachusetts.

My dad gamely offered to bring the loom home to Kansas City, and then on to Massachusetts later. I videotaped the disassembly, naively hoping that I would be able to reverse the process and put it back together again someday. And so, the loom traveled from Oklahoma, to Kansas, to Massachusetts. There it sat in my barn, still in pieces, until I moved to New Hampshire, where it sat in the basement until I got divorced and moved again. The timbers languished in the basement of my new house,

until I remarried; the pile of wood then moved with me to the garage of my home in Newton, NH.

Nine years later, my husband, John, read an article about a young man from Connecticut, named Nevan Carling, who had reassembled someone's centuries-old loom. The piece also mentioned the Vermont School of Weaving. I reached out to them, and they were kind enough to put us in touch. Nevan, who hails from Hartford, CT, is an undergrad at the University of York. In his spare time, he surveys 18th and 19th century American looms. It was hard to tell who was more excited about my loom, Nevan or me. When he—a stranger—generously offered to drive up in the midst of a pandemic and set up my loom for free, I was flabbergasted. In anticipation of Nevan's visit, my husband and I carried the loom parts into the house and awaited the appointed day.

Nevan arrived, double-masked, and we escorted him to the basement. He took one look at the jumble of timbers and said, "I think this is a Dutch loom." I have no Dutch heritage, but I am married to a Dutchman, and I had to laugh. Nevan donned a tatty old pair of overalls and set to work. At first, he was unsure how it all fit together; he had never seen this particular design before. He began by putting together the pieces he was sure about. After a strenuous hour and a half of chiseling mortises and beating tenons with a rubber mallet, he fit the last few pieces together. Triumphant, he installed wooden pegs to hold it fast, some of which had just been made for the occasion by John.



At my request, John took a photo of Nevan and I, masks off, socially distant across the loom's bulk. I looked at this young man with whom I'd just spent the morning, and saw his face uncovered for the first time. I felt a thump in my heart. His smile was warm and infectious as

we beamed at each other over my reconstructed treasure. I was reminded of what a strange and wonderful world this can be. The photo is a visual testament to his joy in giving, and my joy in receiving.

It may seem absurd that I dragged around thirty heavy timbers from pillar to post for twenty-five years. I am an irrational optimist. I was absolutely confident that someday I'd put that loom back together and weave on it like Granddaddy did. But equally important, this loom is a tangible link to my family's past. Although my people have pretty much been in this country since the 1600's, they were poor farmers and miners who migrated west over the centuries, looking always for a better life, until they reached the Ozarks of Missouri. They had no jewelry, art, or furniture to pass down, and I have no photographs of my family beyond my grandparent's generation. What is worse, their stories have been lost. Yet, when I place my hands on the loom's beater bar, worn smooth from generations of my family's hands, I am immediately connected to



them. I am grounded in a line that stretches back beyond remembrance, and continues forward through my daughters into the unknowable future.

Alicia Robinson Geilen is a wetland scientist for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. She holds a Master's Degree in Urban and Environmental Policy from Tufts University, and a Bachelor's Degree in Environmental Studies from the University of Kansas. She lives on a lake in rural New Hampshire with her husband and black cat, which possesses ninja-worthy stealth, but no mousing skills. In her spare time, Alicia writes poetry and prose (fiction and nonfiction), plays in a ukulele band, and volunteers for several environmental organizations.