

ATHA THEN AND NOW



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The following speech was presented at the 2019 Denver Biennial. The actual history of ATHA's beginnings is of interest to every ATHA member.

How many of you know how ATHA started? To tell the story, we need to travel back 40 years ago to 1979. Let's begin by talking about the designers who were prominent in the rug hooking world back then. While Mildred Sprout and Charlotte Stratton and others certainly come to mind, no one over time contributed more to the growth of rug hooking than Pearl McGown.

So let me tell you a bit about her. She was born in 1891, of Canadian parents, and was one of eleven children. Her mother was a rug hooker and Pearl's earliest memories were sitting by her mother's side handing her strips while she hooked. By the 1920s, Pearl was divorced, a single mother raising a son while working as a secretary in a lawyer's office. She began teaching rug hooking and created her first pattern in 1930. Her reputation grew quickly and the demand for her patterns became overwhelming. She worked during the day, then worked into the wee hours of the night designing new patterns. She wrote the first of four books in 1938, **The Dreams Beneath Design**. Pearl taught some of her students to become teachers and had them come to her home where they conducted their classes. This led her to design

a series of classes for prospective teachers and a correspondence course for those who lived long distance. By 1951 experienced rug teachers would bring their proteges to the McGown Teachers' Workshop to learn the art of rug hooking in the McGown manner.

By 1966, her granddaughter, Jane Flynn, began working and traveling with Pearl. Together Jane and Pearl (at age 89) started Jane McGown Flynn Inc. to continue the Teachers' Workshop.

Jane Flynn has left her own legacy. Over a period of 20 years, Jane designed over 500 rug patterns and over 3000 small patterns. She is still Chairman of the Board of the National Guild of Pearl K. McGown Rug Hookrafters.

So what can we say is Pearl's legacy? Is it the four books she wrote on rug hooking, color and design? Or is it the 980+ rug patterns she designed as well as the thousands of smaller patterns? Or perhaps her well-designed training program for teachers that has endured for over 80 years? Or the establishment of the National Guild of Pearl K. McGown Rug Hookrafters? The answer is a resounding YES to all those achievements.

SO WHERE DID ATHA FIT INTO ALL OF THIS?

As in any well-designed teaching program, there is bound to be some criticism of the overall system. At the Teachers' Workshops, only McGown patterns could be taught or exhibited. Teachers could exhibit an

original design, but it was not encouraged. For some teachers, the program was too restrictive and inhibited their teaching style and their desire to sell their own patterns. Joan Moshimer was a McGown teacher that left the guild, started her own rug hooking studio and began publishing **Rug Hookers News and Views** in December 1972.

By 1979 Peg Hansen, an avid rug hooker, started talking with rug hookers in her area and felt strongly that there was a need for an OPEN Guild, an organization where all rug hookers and designers could share their talents and knowledge of rug hooking with each other.

So she ran an ad in **Rug Hookers News and Views**:

"OPEN GUILD, Peg Hansen of Wilmington, Conn would like to hear from readers who are interested in forming an Open Guild of Rug Hookers."

WHERE WAS I AT THE TIME?

I had just moved that year from the Boston suburbs to the cornfields of Indiana. I loved rug hooking, missed my rug hooking teacher and my frequent trips to DORR WOOLEN MILLS. I was 32 years old, and had a 3-year-old, a 2-year-old and was pregnant with my third child.

So WHY did I answer Peg's ad? I felt isolated living in an area where there were no rug hookers or teachers. I loved rug hooking, wanted to connect with other rug hookers and be part of something bigger.

I wrote Peg Hansen immediately and offered to do any printing, mailing or copying that she needed done. My father had a stamp company in town with a small printing press. He offered to print anything I wanted for no more than the cost of the paper.

Peg answered my letter on March 30th welcoming my offer to help. Of course, she wanted to see a sample of the printing as she felt it was important to have a nicely printed newsletter. She also asked me to be the representative for my region, Region 6. She wrote "I'm in desperate need of help as my health has not improved as I thought it might." Peg's energies were spent responding to the people who had answered her ad by sending out a mimeographed letter.

She set up a meeting to be held on April 22, 1979. We agreed that she would send me her report and the minutes from the meeting and that I was to send out a newsletter to everyone on the mailing list (68 names at the time.)

So what did we accomplish at the first meeting? The 15 people who attended the meeting chose ATHA's



ATHA grew from a dream of founder Peg Hansen (far left), with the first organizational meeting conducted on April 22, 1979. Pictured here with Peg are: Front row, left to right: Virginia Pioso, Celeste Schifino, Anne Johnson, Betty Kelly, Ellen Hanson. Second row from left: Florence Treadwell, Geneva Lapham, Shirley Herpich, Helen Charron, Marie Oakes. Standing from left: Michelle Martin, Barbara Hambleton, Dede DelGaudio and Eleanor Osterman. Photo from ATHA archives.

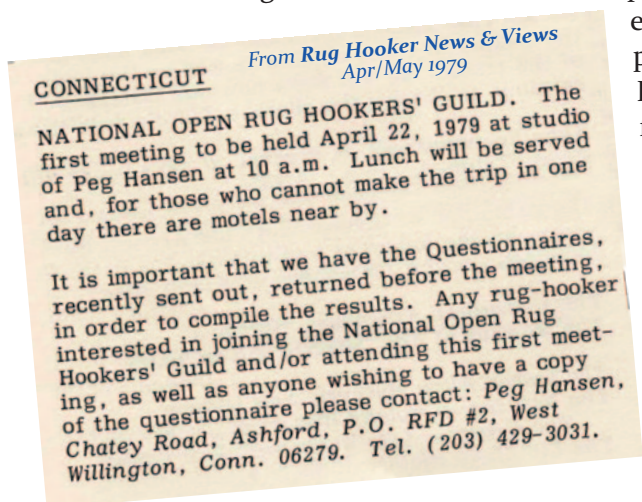
name, a list of offices to be filled, set the amount of membership dues at \$15 and planned to meet again in September 1979. But no one offered to fill any officer positions except Betty Kelly, who acted as temporary secretary and took the minutes that day. (Read more about Betty Kelly in the Feb/March 2019 issue.) Peg Hansen agreed to act as temporary

president until someone else could fill the position. I was named as Regional Representative for Region 6.

So I waited the week after the meeting for her letter to arrive. No letter came, which seemed strange. Two and a half weeks later, I heard from Peg telling me she

became ill two days after the meeting and had been in the hospital for the last two weeks. She had severe spasms in her throat and couldn't eat. After she returned home, Peg had continued pain and crippling symptoms, which left her exhausted with little energy to write or answer her mail.

In her seven-page handwritten report that I was to include in the newsletter, Peg asked for volunteers to help and offer ideas: "Let us know what you would like to do to help, to serve as officers or on various committees. My only disappointment to come out of our first meeting was that we did not have enough people to fill the basic offices, even on a temporary basis. While it is necessary to elect officers from New England to get started, we should emphasize the real desire





NEWSLETTER #1 - June, 1979

The first meeting of the Association of Traditional Hooking Artists was held at 10:00 a.m. on Sunday, April 22, 1979 in Ashford, Conn. The meeting was called to order by Peg Hanson and then turned over to Virginia Pioso as Chairperson. The purpose of this first meeting was to make some preliminary decisions regarding the new organization. The decisions that were made were based on the questionnaires mailed in and the votes taken at the meeting.

The first item on the agenda was to choose the name of the organization. The name "ASSOCIATION OF TRADITIONAL HOOKING ARTISTS" was approved by the majority. The purposes of the Association were outlined as follows:

1. To develop and promote interest in the art of hooking.
2. To improve and upgrade the art of hooking.
3. To encourage membership and the benefits thereof.

Virginia Pioso, who came up from Maryland for the meeting, volunteered to draft a copy of the Constitution and By-Laws. It is hoped that we can send the By-Laws to the members along with the voting ballot by late summer. Here are some of the points that were suggested to be included in the By-Laws:

- The Association shall be a non-profit organization. Legal help will be sought to seek that status.
- Each individual may become a member and have one vote. There will be no charter members. Votes by mail will be acceptable.
- The officers shall be: President, First Vice-President (Membership), Second Vice-President (Newsletter), Third Vice-President (Workshops, exhibits, camps, etc.) Recording/Corresponding Secretary, Treasurer, and Historian. Officers will be elected for a 2-year term, with some system developed so that the new officers will receive some guidance.
- The Board of Directors will consist of the Officers, Regional Chairpersons when they come into being, and Chairpersons of Standing Committees. The President will choose the rest of the committee.
- Annual dues of \$15.00 are suggested. This was based on the results of the questionnaires and the votes taken at the meeting. Suggestions and ways in which the dues can be used will be elaborated on further in the Newsletter. (Everyone at the April meeting prepaid their dues to re-imburse Peg Hanson for expenditures and to provide working funds for the Association.)

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to spread to all areas of the country as quickly as possible."

Peg had divided the country into 12 regions and in her report wrote "I have a list of names and addresses, one from every district, except District 8. I plan to send a letter to them soon asking them for their help in organizing their districts and if they can't, to try to find someone who can."

She talked about the next meeting planned for September and wanted to arrange a hooked exhibit along with it. She also had the idea to compile and publish a Hooked Rug Exhibition Calendar so members could take in as many exhibits as possible during a trip.

She ended her report with "Everything that we did at the first meeting can be changed.

But we have to get started in order to get off the ground.

Everyone has a vote and we want to hear from you."

By the third week of May, one month after the meeting, I was still waiting for someone to send the printed labels that were to go on the newsletters. On May 20th I received another letter from Peg telling me she had been diagnosed with a tumor

on her lungs: "I have been in the hospital for almost two weeks. It does not look very good at all. I want very much to try to find someone in this area that knows most of the hookers, to handle the mail for me. If they will just keep in contact with people and do the best they can, maybe we can keep this thing going."

Peg asked me, "Besides typing all this stuff, will you edit it and arrange it as you think best for the Newsletter? Tell them that I am ill and do not know when I will be able to become fully active again. Please include a dues application and have them send their dues to Ann Johnson. I will send you the name and address of whoever I can get to handle the mail. My hope is to find people who are willing to serve as officers and to send out a ballot to members by August before our next meeting in September."

Peg was in the hospital for most of May. Problems began cropping up. Eleven people had sent in their

applications without checks. And the newly appointed Treasurer wrote Peg a couple weeks later telling her that she didn't want to handle the job. In fact, Ann had returned several people's checks to them with a note saying she was no longer Treasurer—rather than forwarding them to Peg.)

Peg, who was still in the hospital, started receiving complaints from rug hookers about the outcome of the first meeting. They didn't like the name, the dues were too high etc. (Dues were \$15.00, which was a high amount to pay back in 1979. The dues for the Ontario Rughooking Guild in Canada were only \$5.00.) At the first meeting, we only had \$127.00 in funds. Most of that money Peg had raised by making mugs to sell for ATHA.

By then, it was five weeks after the first meeting. With Peg's report, all her letters and the minutes of that first meeting, I composed the first newsletter. The day I was to take them to the post office, I received a letter from Peg telling me that she was back in the hospital undergoing chemotherapy and radiation. She wrote "I don't know where this is going to take me, but after reading all my back mail and remembering all of the communication with most of those who attended the April meeting, I have decided we should proceed a little slower than what I have been trying to do. I have a letter almost completed which I think will take care of everything for us. I just want to work on the letter a little more."

Here is my 40-year-old confession — I sent the newsletters out anyway. I knew Peg felt so discouraged by all the negative comments she was receiving, not to mention the medical treatments she was undergoing or the side effects that she was enduring. So

what did we have to lose by mailing the newsletters out? What was the worst that could happen?

By late June, Peg, who was undergoing chemotherapy, sent out a hand-written mimeographed letter to key members to try to answer some of their concerns: "This business of complaints to me since the April meeting have been very unfortunate. It really has added a great deal of work and worry to what has become a very hard job. What worries me most is that I am well aware that these relatively minor things are what causes dissension within a group and adds to the failure before it even gets started."

By this time, Peg had received six checks for membership but hadn't been well enough to go to a bank and open an account for ATHA. By late August Peg was confined to a hospital bed in her living room but was still consumed with trying to keep ATHA afloat. Betty Kelly, who had taken the minutes at that first meeting, stepped in to help. When I heard that Betty was going to help Peg, I called her to thank her. Betty said "I'll do what I can, but I can't just let this thing die." Betty lived about an hour away from Peg and made arrangements to spend an entire day with her. As Betty remembers "Boy, did she make me work!" Peg had Betty make phone calls asking for volunteers, collecting names of people that might want to join and making a short and long list of to-dos. That day Peg dictated a letter to members that her husband wrote in long-hand and had photocopied. In it, she announced that ATHA had 33 paid members, had found members who were willing to fill four out of the six officer positions and the second meeting was set for

October 20, 1979. Looking back, I'm convinced that Betty Kelly saved ATHA from floundering at that point in time as it was clear that Peg was no longer able to take an active role. She knew her time was running out, and yet she still talked about forming "a vibrant group of people doing what they love and sharing it."

Peg died October 5th, about two weeks before the second meeting. By that October meeting, we had 45 paid members with 23 members attending. We installed the officers (I took the 2nd VP position in charge of the Newsletter.) We had a bank balance of \$442.00. I sent a newsletter out after the October meeting with a ballot to approve the slate of officers along with our newly written constitution and Bylaws, written by Virginia Pioso of Maryland. But again, what were we offering our members who were paying \$15 dues besides a newsletter and the idea of a shared open guild? We had so many details to iron out — the duties of the Regional Representatives, how chapters would be created and the responsibilities of ATHA to the chapters. Our progress was slow. By November we had gained seven more members for a total of 52 members.

Then we received a break that came from two endorsements. Jane Olson, of **Rugger's Round Table**, out in California wrote in one of her issues: "Anyone interested in information pertaining to the National Open Rug Hooker's Guild, contact Peg Hansen. The Guild is open to anyone wishing to join. No company or individual is singled out as a sole authority or director of the group. This is well worth looking into, all you hookers out there in the 'woolen rags to priceless rugs world.'"

The ONTARIO RUG HOOKERS GUILD mentioned ATHA in its newsletter that same month stating "We extend a welcome and congratulations to the newly formed *ASSOCIATION OF TRADITIONAL HOOKING ARTISTS* in the United States. Good luck and Happy Hooking to you all." We were thrilled to be acknowledged. The number of new members slowly trickled in.

We set our first official Board meeting for February 1980. I flew out to Franklin, Mass with my 7-month-old daughter, Jenny, on my back. My dear husband agreed to take care of our 4-year-old and 3-year-old back home. At this board meeting, we agreed to drop the dues back to \$7.50 instead of the contentious \$15.00 it had been and also decided on bulk mailing. I sent the 3rd newsletter out after the Board meeting announcing the reduction in dues and membership picked up considerably.

SO HOW DID EAST MEET WEST? HOW DID WE BECOME A NATIONAL ASSOCIATION?

We had heard a rumor that Emilie Tisdale, the founder of the NORTHWEST RUG AND TAPESTRY GUILD on the west coast had written Peg suggesting that our two guilds might merge. Emilie Tisdale, in her 70s, had established a strong guild, put out a newsletter, and ran a camp every year. Fran Henry was the current president of the Northwest Guild and was also our new Regional Rep for Wyoming and Montana. When I heard that Fran was traveling through the Midwest on vacation, I wrote asking if we could meet. She agreed to stop for lunch at my house so we could talk. Our lunch turned into two days and one overnight while we worked out the possible details of a merger. We both knew we could not speak for our guilds, but we could certainly lay out a plan to start with. After all,