

# Weekend reading: Group on hunt for history held in hooked mats

COLIN HODD | Telegraph-Journal

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It is the 19th century in Bloomfield, N.B. An old feed bag is stretched over a wooden frame. A woman's hand takes hold of wooden handle. Mariah Hatfield Innis is making a rug. The handle holds a small metal rod that ends in a hook. The hand pushes it through the tiny gaps in the woven plant fibres of the burlap, and as if by magic the hook emerges trailing a short loop of red fabric. Red serge, actually, from the military uniform of James Innis, her husband's grandfather. A small turn of the wrist frees the hook, and Mariah slips it through the gap again.

Quarter-inch-high loop by quarter-inch-high loop. That's how hooked rugs like Mariah's are made, and have been made for generations on the East Coast. The idea to make coverings out of disparate materials is as old as human invention, but the specific methods seen in these pieces are thought to have been developed in what is now New England and Atlantic Canada.

One group is hoping to preserve the history of these objects and the people who made them. The New Brunswick Mat Registry, which has so far catalogued more than 400 mats, preserves the historic fabric of the province. And as the registry grows, mat by mat, its members hope to move the collection of photos and stories into an online database.

"Our goal is to capture the images of mats hooked in New Brunswick or by New Brunswick people and the stories behind them," said Judy Morison, who co-chairs the registry. "That captures both the images and the history of the people and it's really almost like the material history of the province. Our history comes alive when you talk to these people."

The idea to have a registry sprouted in social gatherings of rug hookers more than 10 years ago. Other provinces had already put together similar databases, and Morison said the topic came up a few times with different groups she hooks rugs with. At some point, the idea began to shift from idle chitchat into a real plan. And by 2005, things really got underway.

People have been hooking rugs in the New Brunswick area for centuries, so the number of existing rugs in the province is enormous, and with a project like this, you might not get a second chance. The volunteers had to ensure they asked the right questions and got the proper information the first time around.

"We started as a group of interested people with the goal to do this. Out of that group of people that already had an interest in mats, we developed a network of volunteers, of both English and French volunteers," said Morison. "And then we said, 'Well, how are we going to find the people, and then what's the process?'"

The registry made up forms that were structured with specific questions about the history of the person who hooked the mat and the history of each mat. Was the mat hooked as a special gift? Was it something that was just used in the home?

"Whatever the history is about that mat that we can find out we document that," said Morison.

The volunteers also realized early on that in order to execute something like the registry properly, they would need outside help. The group of volunteers approached the New Brunswick Museum, which agreed to a partnership. Bruce Thomson, the manager of museum services, saw it as a project directly aligned with the museum's purpose.

“When this project first came to our attention, it was something I was very interested in in terms of assisting with how to capture the information and how to preserve that for the longer term,” said Thomson. “It’s provincial in scope, it’s covering both anglophone and francophone mats and makers, we, as the provincial museum, were really a natural partner to work with the hookers and become the long-term keepers of the information.”

Once the volunteers of the New Brunswick Mat Registry had its foundation in place — a plan to collect the information, a partner who could compile and curate a collection — it was time to reach out.

“We were so excited, we said look, we’ve got it all together it’s going to be great, this is such a fantastic thing and we’ve got all these great volunteers and we’ve got a partner, we know what we’re going to do with this, we’ve put up our posters and we’re all ready to go,” said Morison. “And nobody signed up.”

The mat registry had come up against one of history’s great paradoxes. We take great pains to preserve objects considered special in their own time, but those objects have a narrow scope. Given enough time, a crown and a cap become equally valuable. But we don’t think of our everyday objects this way. We can’t. They have jobs to do.

“What we learned is that people think, ‘Oh, well they don’t want to document my old mat. The dog slept on it, maybe the cat peed on it, or you know, it’s torn in the corner or it’s not pretty enough and I’m just not sure about bringing that in.’” said Morison.

“We have one lady who just hooked mats that are absolutely stunning in the quality of them. She didn’t think they were good enough and they were covered in dog fur and she wasn’t sure she wanted to bring them in. And they were wonderful. So the mats that we have, it’s the story behind them, it’s not how perfect they are.”



▼ Hide Caption

Photo courtesy of New Brunswick Mat Registry



A rug qualifies for the registry if it is at least 25 years old and was hooked by a person in New Brunswick or from New Brunswick. The registry's process takes into account its status as a volunteer organization attempting to cover a whole province. The members divide the province into regions, and volunteers in each region compile lists of people interested in having mats registered. Once enough people in an area have expressed interest, usually around 15 minimum, they hold a registry at a central location. So far registries have been done in Caraquet, Edmundston, Rexton, Barachois, Sussex, Moncton, Saint John, Fredericton, Shediac, Sackville and Memramcook. The registry does not take possession of the mats. With the New Brunswick Museum's help, members simply try to record as much information as possible about them.

"I've done the digital photography at each of the registries," said Thomson. "To date, we have recorded about 3,000 digital images related to those 400 mats. One of the important things that the museum can provide is the expertise on how to capture and record the significant information, based on museum standards. It's what we do for a living."

Kayle Eno, who registered mats belonging to her mother and husband's grandmother this fall in Moncton, was glad to be able to enter them into a historical record.

"I do think that they are valuable. I don't think that they're monetarily valuable, but that's not the point. It's the time that was spent on it and the stories. It would have been better to have interviewed my husband's grandmother who lived to be about 98 and died in 2001, and had lots of stories and memories," said Eno.

Hooked mats have existed because the floors were cold, because the people making them couldn't afford to waste new materials on coverings. So they pulled together incoherent scraps. Old feedbags for backing. Strips of material from everywhere -- last season's underwear, old socks, defunct military uniforms, anything. Hooks were made from a bit of wood and a sliver of leftover metal. As utilitarian and unromantic an origin as you could want, there was no reason for them to be beautiful.

"They could have just hooked them through the holes and been done with it. Why take the time to design it, dye it, colour it, hook it very carefully?" asked Morison. "Where did that drive, to have that art, make those beautiful roses or make these beautiful geometric designs when they could have just had one colour and a mat on the floor that was going to get dirty anyway?"

Textile artist Pat Winans has also been involved in the registry and is a member of the well-known group Les Hookeuses de Bor'de'lo based in Shediac. The self-taught fibre artist has moved between traditional hooked rugs to projects combining old techniques with novel materials such as metal, or new forms, like sculpture. She is fascinated by the individual expression found in even "ordinary" rugs.

"The ladies were very proud of their mats and of their own designs too, and trying to get colour into them. They were trying to produce a piece of art that was utilitarian," said Winans. "There's one lady, she was a sister to one of my aunts, I can tell her mat anywhere just because of the way she did things, the way she put in the colours, the designs she chose. She took great pride in having something that was different to somebody else."

The registry emphasizes the link between the mat and the maker, by recording not only the mats themselves, but the names and stories of the people who built them. Winans uses older hooks in her own work to reinforce the connection.

"There's almost an energy in these old hooks for me from the previous owner. And it probably would have been one person's hook. I don't know who she was; I'm assuming it was a woman. But I know as I'm hooking with it that she too was trying to create a piece of art for her home, but it was at a time when ... it was more a utilitarian thing, but she was still putting the art into it. It gives me a sense of connection."

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With more than 400 mats documented, the registry is now in a position to move into its next project, creating an online database containing all the information that has been collected so far. Such a database will permit historians, professional and amateur, to not only enjoy these works but also research them, looking for patterns that can only be seen when all the data is laid out. Thomson also expects that it will compel more people to come forward with their own mats and stories.

“Once this whole database goes live on the Internet, I’m sure we’ll be inundated with requests for information, but also people will say, ‘My grandmother has one of these!’ And the stories will grow, the collection will probably grow as a result of a project like this and that’s important, because it’s one of our jobs to record and preserve these objects.”

A partial version of this database can be found on the New Brunswick Museum’s website. At present, the registry is still seeking funding to build a fully-realized version. Its members also have ambitious plans to combine some of the information they have collected into curriculum models to be taught in French and English schools.

“This will last, and be seen, and be remembered, and it’ll be there long after the person that did it or made it,” said Winans. “And the families, they are so proud of these mats. They tell you all the stories. Even in the reminiscing, it’s healthy for them to think back and talk about the story.”

Mariah Hatfield McInnis probably didn’t imagine her mat would survive through the 20th century and into the next. Or that a great-great-great grandson, Peter McReady, would marry a woman named Debbie who would bring that mat in to be documented by technologies undreamed of in McInnis’ time. Mariah McInnis is gone. But in her family, and in her works, a part of her will survive.

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