When I was a kid, I would weave warm and fuzzy miniature blankets for my Barbie dolls using a tiny loom. Maybe it's no wonder, then, that years later my husband and I covet decorative, traditionally woven bedspreads, including the one now on our bed - a Bates blue-and-white-fringed cotton “Spirit of America” by family-owned Maine Heritage Weavers. For decades, family-owned businesses across the country have produced bedspreads and coverlets created with mechanical looms at their own mills. Made out of natural cotton or wool, in muted hues, these bedspreads and blankets are modern-day heirlooms passed down over generations. “It takes three to four weeks to make a bedspread, from getting the yarn, to weaving, finishing and washing,” said Bianca Cloutier, 29, vice president of sales and marketing for Maine Heritage Weavers. “We get emails to this day from couples who've had their Bates bedspread since the '50s, when they got married. A woman told me, ‘My bedspread lasted longer than my marriage.’”

First established in 1850, Bates Manufacturing Company became one of the largest textile manufacturers in New England. After the company closed in 2000, Cloutier’s grandfather - former Bates Manufacturing president Fred Lebel - and her mother, Linda Cloutier, founded Maine Heritage Weavers in 2002, which obtained the Bates trademark and carries on that company’s tradition.

Weaving communities

The company’s $100 to $180 woven bedspreads and coverlets have old-school names such as “Cape Cod,” featuring a ‘70s coastal shell theme, and “Martha Washington’s Choice,” in colors including maroon and sage green. That popular intricate design - with loops of chenille cotton pulled upward from the fabric to make raised flower patterns - is based on a 1940s Bates design recreated from a bedspread that George Washington chose for his wife when they married.

“The history behind the Martha Washington’s Choice is a big contributor to its quality and the uniqueness of the bedspread,” said Bianca Cloutier, who grew up using yarn cones from the looms for art projects and collages. Those wanting to learn how to weave a blanket or bedspread might connect with the Handweavers Guild of America, an organization of weavers, spinners, dyers, basket makers and other artists, Cloutier suggested.

Also, search for online weaving communities and classes, and invest in a small and simple hand loom. “We also welcome people coming in and seeing the factories themselves,” observing the company’s mechanical looms, she said. “While a loom is a machine, it takes a craftsperson to use it,” added Bob Christnacht, vice president of global sales for the 153-year-old Portland, Oregon-based Pendleton, a blanket, bedding and clothing company that boasts six generations of family ownership. Pendleton, with woolen weaving mills in Oregon and Washington, offers classes on how to make blankets, and the company’s mill store in Portland sells more than 500 different types of Pendleton fabrics, plus blanket binding and trim, said Christnacht. “Weaving is very visceral and emotional, and part of our human heritage,” Christnacht said. “Your bed, too, is a very personal place, and there’s an emotional and personal obligation to it.” Known for geometrically patterned wool “top of the bed” blankets, Pendleton mainly draws inspiration from nature and Native American culture. As Pendleton Woolen Mills, the company wove traditional blankets and robes for Native Americans in the early 1900s. To this day, in many Native American communities, Pendleton blankets are given as ceremonial gifts.

Water bug motifs

One of the company’s oldest designs, the silver, white and rust patterned “Harding” blanket, has been around since 1923. That was the year President Warren G. Harding and his wife, Florence, attended a dedication ceremony for part of the old Oregon Trail, according to Pendleton. There, Native American chiefs presented the first lady with a Pendleton shawl.

The Harding blanket ranges in price from $249 for a twin size to $399 for a king size. The “Silver Bark” blanket collection - also an early design - features arrow, star, diamond and water bug motifs, and muted blue, white and silver colors inspired by aspen trees and sky. “People think a wool blanket will be warm, but it breathes more than a down comforter and regulates temperature,” said Christnacht.

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