



California's Living Lace Treasure: Lace Connector Gracie Larsen of Mountain View

Gracie Larsen is a lifelong teacher who has long been fascinated by laces of all types. When she hasn't been connecting her own intricate threads, Gracie has connected others who love intricate threads. She's organized classes and events, established guilds and even started the Lace Museum of Sunnyvale. What follows is a brief view of her life and how she came to be "a living lace treasure."



Grace Sterling Larsen was born on June 21st 1921, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The eldest of two children in a creative and busy household, Gracie was constantly inspired and involved with her mother's seamstress business. From age 4 Grace was sewing, by age 5 crocheting, age 14 knitting and at age 16 tatting.

With the popularity of entertainer Gracie Allen, schoolmates started calling young Grace "Gracie" and the nickname stuck. It wasn't until she was in married and on her first trip to Norway when she saw a distant aunt, Tante Lully, making Venetian needlelace. This fascinated Gracie very much and upon the death of that aunt years later, relatives sent all the needlelace materials to Gracie. Over time this form of lacemaking became her passion, in addition to creating other laces.



With World War II raging, a 22-year-old Gracie decided to enlist in the WAVES (Women's Accepted Volunteer Emergency Service). Off she went to the Bronx, New York, where she was in the first women's commissary school being offered by the Navy. There she learned baking, butchering and cooking on a grand scale over a ten week curriculum.

Her duty after that was to help feed 7,000 sailors twice a day. Throughout 26 months of service, Grace had never a dull moment. In her free time she explored New York, ice skated, and taught craft classes for the servicemen at Grand Central Station and Brooklyn Naval Hospital.

When the war ended, Gracie left the service and enrolled in the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, using her G.I. college benefits to study for two years. She learned weaving, woodcraft, oil painting and French charcoal drawing. She worked different jobs before meeting a handsome recent Norwegian immigrant, Egil Larsen, at a Sons of Norway-sponsored event. The two dated from 1947 and were married in 1949. Over the following years Gracie and Egil raised five children, Einar, Lollie, Kari, Arne, and Dave. Through the years Gracie continued her needlework interests, often teaching classes and even demonstrating at the various area fairs and Norwegian heritage activities.

In the mid-70's Gracie and her neighbor Nancy Weber were appointed co-chairs of the Bicentennial celebration for the city of Mountain View. Part of this was a month-long demonstration of the traditional skills and crafts dating back to colonial times, including blacksmithing, candlemaking, needlework and much more. That led Gracie to establish the Heritage Arts Guild, continuing promoting these traditional skills. Enough of these members were interested in lace, so Gracie and a friend then founded the Peninsula Lace Mavericks in 1979. Later she and fellow lace enthusiast Cherie Helm

started a museum dedicated to lace and lacemaking, which they and a staff of volunteers opened in 1981. Initially located in Mountain View, the Lace Museum moved to its current Sunnyvale location at 552 Murphy Street, growing steadily with members, laces and classes.

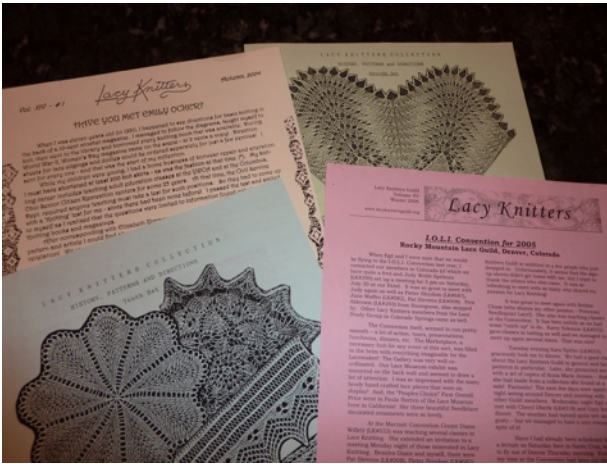


Gracie's interests also grew. She tried her hands at bobbin lace, sprang, nalbinding, hardanger and many traditional crafts.

One day a lady named Mary Schiffmann came into the Lace Museum. Mary knitted lace and



wanted to be sure this intricate art never died out. She set up and taught lace knitting classes through the museum and inspired Gracie to team up again, this time with Patricia Shannon, to found a new organization in 1991 called the Lacy Knitters Guild. Established to encourage the study and preservation of knitted lace, soon the group was having monthly meetings at Gracie's home and publishing a quarterly newsletter consisting knitting commentary, calendar, and



patterns. As the group grew to include exchanges with other lace groups and a membership of over 800, affiliate chapters of the group formed, such as the Redlands Knitters in southern California, the Sequoia Knitters in the San Francisco Bay area, the Puget Sound Lace Knitters in Washington

State, the Strait-laced Knitters of New York, and more. In 1995 the founding group was renamed the Mary Schiffmann Lacy Knitters Guild after Mary passed away.

In addition to the ever-evolving newsletter and pattern section, the Lacy Knitters continue lace knitting demonstrations; members have participated in Stitches West, the Mile High Lace Knitting Conferences in Denver, and many other functions. Through Gracie and Pat's inspired leadership, the group established exchange relationships with many other lace groups and guilds.

Other countries include Canada, Australia, the U.K., the International Old Lacers Inc., etc. The Lacy Knitters have also sponsored workshops and seminars with many of the contemporary greats in lace knitting, including Mary Walker Philips, Margaret Stove, Pat Stevens and Sandy Terp.

Over the years Gracie has nourished and encouraged many a young lace talent, and today the love of lace knitting is flourishing. Determined that treasured patterns left to the guild by Mary Schiffmann should reach the widest possible audience, Gracie and Pat Shannon worked with accomplished needlecraft author Nancy Nehring to get the book “The Lace Knitting of Mary Schiffmann”



published in 1998 by Interweave Press. The Lace Guild hosted author Melanie Falick as she was researching her book “Knitting in America,” published in 1996. Gracie encouraged Alison Jepson Hyde to get her lace shawl designs published, which happened in the book “Wrapped In Comfort” by

Martingale Press in 2007. A sequel to that book is in production.

In the last three years Gracie has worked tirelessly for recognition of Marguerite Shimmons’ lace knitting, resulting in Marguerite connecting with Lacis Museum of Lace and Textiles and donating many fine knitted pieces to the collection. Gracie also helped get Marguerite’s work into International Old Lacer study boxes which circulate internationally. Gracie Larsen continues to host Lacy Knitter Guild meetings in her home and to contribute to quarterly newsletters. Her love of lace truly has connected thousands of people within the world of fiber arts and lace.



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