



• *Businesswoman*

Catherine Evans Whitener

1880–1964

Inducted 2001

Born in a Whitfield County farmhouse in 1880, Catherine Evans Whitener was a shy girl, the second of six children. While she only earned a fifth grade education, not uncommon for girls in rural Georgia at the time, her intelligence and curiosity far exceeded her formal education.

Catherine would grow up to become an important figure in the carpet industry in northwest Georgia. By the end of her career, this quiet, curious woman had brought the state untold wealth. Countless women entering the business world found their own success in manufacturing, sales and support industries because of Catherine Evans Whitener.

This fascinating woman's career began in 1892 when she was twelve. Visiting a cousin in McCuthey, Georgia, Catherine saw an old tufted bedspread that was considered a family heirloom. She admired the craftsmanship of the spread and vowed to replicate it so she could have one of her own. The spread had been produced using a technique called "candlewicking." Catherine discovered that the time-consuming skill had fallen from fashion and was almost a totally lost art. At fifteen she began experimenting in earnest during her spare hours off from chores on the farm and in the household. After much trial and error, she mastered the process and completed two quilts.

As family and friends saw the quilts, they began to ask Catherine to make more which they were quite willing to purchase. Soon, the fledgling entrepreneur found it necessary to teach her craft to young people who could help her prepare them for sale. She expanded her line to include mats and bathrobes. In 1917, she and her brother formed the Evans Manufacturing Company. The next year, Rich's Department Store in Atlanta placed an initial order for 24 spreads.

As the business grew, Catherine's helpers often served as their families' primary source of revenue when crops failed. Even during the Great Depression, bedspreads offered not only a source of income, but also a source of hope for the people of northwest Georgia. Still, without

funds to enlarge her business, Catherine's bedspread operation remained just a successful cottage industry.

When men recognized the merits of Catherine's system

"When I was a girl I wished that I had been a boy. Because a boy could find work to make money, and there was nothing a girl could do to earn money. I feel now that God knew best, and I am glad that I was a girl."

– Catherine Evans Whitener

of contracted labor and saw the possibility to gain fortune, they infused the business with the capital necessary for it to truly thrive. At that time, other families,

such as the Bandys grew small ventures into major businesses. Catherine gave the Bandys patterns and support and helped them launch a tufting business. Dicksie Bradley Bandy's success led to her induction into Georgia Women of Achievement in 1993. In 1933, the New Deal moved the bedspread business from cottages into factories. In 1941, America's bedspread industry, still centered in Dalton, employed 10,000 workers and yielded sales of over 25 million dollars.

Over time, the tufted textile industry expanded to include bath mats, accent rugs and carpets. Today, more than 90 percent of the carpet produced in the U.S. is tufted, a development directly linked to Catherine's early experiments with bedspreads. While she never made millions with her ingenuity, she made millionaires out of many Georgia men and women. Before the Silicon Valley boom, Dalton, Georgia had more millionaires per capita than any city in the U.S. They are all part of Catherine Evans Whitener's legacy.

Additional Resources

Whitfield-Murray Historical Society

Dalton, GA
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