

There'll Always Be An England! The Brixton Tapestry

By Barbara Steager Malone

(This month, "Britons in Texas" offers a guest column by Barbara Steager Malone, who was born in London of a British mother and an American father, and now lives in Houston, where she is a professional writer. For the past six years, the British and their American allies have looked back at the era 50 years ago when the generations of that day were challenged by global war. In the next few months, as the 50th anniversary of the end of that War approaches, it is appropriate to look back at the sacrifices and deprivations of those days, and the courage and heroism too, and how one British woman met that patriotic challenge, and how she left a reminder of what for most Britons that struggle was all about.)

THERE HANGS on my wall in Houston a constant reminder of the long ago and far away. It is a large map of Great Britain embroidered in multi-colored stitching and bearing the inscription: "Florence W Hutson, 1940-41."

That map hung in my sight throughout my Pennsylvania childhood — nothing there was so rich and strange that evoked scenes of people and places I did not know ... England. There is a certain magic to the tapestry, and it is only recently that I discovered its source.

For the two decades before I left home, the map served as a focal point for the lore of the clan on the other side of the Atlantic. I loved the big purple thistle growing in the south of Scotland. I loved the golden daffodil and the little lady in the tall black hat in Wales.

I loved the Oxford don on his bicycle, the factories in Birmingham, the cottage by the seaside, the dome of St Paul's. I loved the French flag across the Channel.

But most of all I loved the ships at sea.

The ships surround the island. They come and go, dinghies and freighters, ketches and liners.

In January 1946, one of those ships, the Queen Mary, carried my mother and I to the New World to live with my father. He had been sent home to America on the same Queen in September 1945 when the GIs were repatriated.

Then the Queen circled the Statue of Liberty and came back to get me and mum. I was born in November, so my father had yet to see me. Speed, bonny boat, like a bird on the wing! "Onward!" the sailors cry.

So I was raised an American, but the magic of the map kept pulling me back. It served to illustrate all of the tales of the Motherland.

How lucky we were to be raised in two cultures! Our schoolmates would shake their heads in wonder listening to my siblings and I belting out a chorus of "Where the bee sucks, there suck I," while doing the dishes of an

a close-in suburb of London. She had started work years earlier at age 14 at Woolland's, a big department store in Hyde Park. But Grandmum wanted her closer to home with the war looming close, and Hyde Park was too far away to suit her. Mum found a job in the accounting room of Freeman's, a catalogue mail-order company that shipped from Stockwell to homes all over the British Isles.

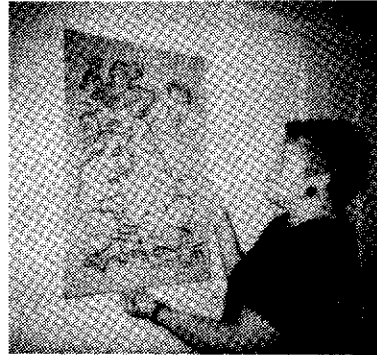
As luck would have it, one of the very first German bombs to hit London fell into the basement bomb shelter of Freeman's. My mother and the other workers had gathered there at the first sound of the air-raid sirens. The bomb came right through a sandbagged entry, broke water mains, and collapsed a large part of the building. Many people were killed ... some by drowning. To this day Mum has no idea how she got out of the rubble and home on her bicycle. She only remembers Grandad slapping her to break the shock.

And then there were the night bombings. Grandad was Caretaker of the Effra Parade School in Brixton. The family lived in the house where I was born on Barnwell Road adjoining the school grounds. Underneath the school was a bomb shelter and it was there that most of the work on the tapestry was done.

Life in the shelters was nerve-racking and people looked for ways to keep calm through the bombardment and constant threat of death and destruction. Some people smoked cigarettes. Some played cards.

Mum stitched. Often by candlelight she stitched, straining to see the pattern on the fabric. And such critical imagines! Mum says that in her young imaginings, she felt that if she could only complete the map and secure it with careful stitches, There Would Always Be An England! And she did it. And England is secure.

The high magic hangs in my house now. My mother strikes the stitch, I spin the yarns, and there will always be an England!



evening. To all of us, it was an inside joke. Something we shared core-deep.

The map came into my hands several years ago at my wedding. Then it made yet another voyage ... this time halfway across America from Pennsylvania to Texas. And with it came another tale of the clan — one I had never heard before, of how the tapestry itself had come to be.

My mother was 17 in 1939 at the time she saw the map pattern in an embroidery book. There was a gathering storm around England then. The map pattern appealed to my patriot mother, so she wrote away for it. The pattern arrived, but the war did not.

For most of 1939 it was still "over there," and the tapestry materials lay tucked in a drawer. Then came that fateful day, September 3, 1939, and the words "We are at War!"

During the Blitz years, my mother was working in Stockwell, a 15-minute bicycle ride from her home in Brixton,