

**Interviewee:** Nancy Merritt

**Project Title:** Haystack Mountain School of Crafts Archive

**Interviewer:** Galen Koch

**Interview Location:** Deer Isle, Maine

**Date of Interview:** August 2022

**Interview Description:** The interview with Nancy Merritt, conducted by Galen Koch, provides insights into Merritt's experiences at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. It covers her introduction to the school, her participation in various workshops, her reflections on the craft community, and the impact of Haystack on her artistic practice. Additionally, the interview delves into the influence of instructors such as Ted Hallman, Barbara Markey, Jack Lenor Larsen, and Warren Seelig, as well as the unique aspects of the workshops, including critiques and interactions with renowned artists. The interview also touches on the evolving nature of Haystack over the years and its impact on the local environment.

**Keywords:** Nancy Merritt, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Craft practice, Jack Lenor Larsen, Ted Hallman, Barbara Markey, Workshops, Instructors, Critiques, Artistic practice, Community Impact, Environmental influence, Evolution of Haystack

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**Transcribed By:** Galen Koch

Galen Koch: [0:00:00] All right, I will have you just say your first and last name. Just introduce yourself.

Nancy Merritt: [0:00:15] Okay. I'm Nancy Merritt. During the winter, we live in South Philadelphia, in a very diverse neighborhood. In the summertime, we're so lucky to be able to come up to Stonington to our little cottage that we've had for more than fifty years. It's just in the middle of Stonington. We love it. Has the same stove, the same sink, like all those years ago.

GK: [0:00:45] That's great. I didn't realize you were in the same place you've been for fifty years.

NM: [0:00:48] That's the way we live. If we like it, we stay.

GK: [0:00:51] [laughter] That's great. Can you, Nancy, tell me about your first introduction to Haystack?

NM: [0:01:01] I learned about it from my brother, Peter Bohlin, who was at Cranbrook at the time in architecture. So, I thought this sounds like a super place and, as a matter of fact, Mike Cohen was coming from Cranbrook, and probably my brother probably heard about it from him. So, I applied. I tried to apply in October or November, and I got this nice little letter from Fran Merritt, who said, "Well, we don't exactly do this so early. The catalog only comes out in January or February." So, I wrote in January, and I think I was the first person to apply. But anyway, that's how I got here.

GK: [0:01:42] What year was that?

NM: [0:01:44] '61. I know. The first year, it was on the coast.

GK: [0:01:49] And before you applied, were you already – did you have a craft practice?

NM: [0:01:56] No, I did not. [laughter] I was at Skidmore. It was after my sophomore year when I signed up for weaving at Haystack. I had only had one semester at Skidmore. I do believe I knew less than anybody else in the class. For sure.

GK: [0:02:20] When you went to Haystack at that time, was it a different structure than it is now? What was the workshop structure?

NM: [0:02:30] It wasn't that different. There was quite a range of ages, a wonderful collection of eighteen to eighty-year-olds. There were definitely more women than men. That was a very memorable experience to have so many different ages, so many different levels of skill, really, and life experiences. It wasn't at culturally diverse as it is now.

GK: [0:03:04] And the workshop was how many weeks? Can you tell me some of the logistics of it?

NM: [0:03:09] I originally signed up for a three-week session with Jack Larsen, and I think that it was a two-week session with Dan Rhodes. I was luckily able to add a third session, one with

Win Anderson. At the time, I didn't know who these people were. I did not have a clue. On the first day of Jack's session, I was wearing a little striped A-line dress with orange stripes. I bought the fabric, drew it out, and my mother made it for me. So, I walk in, and he says – this person says, "Oh, another copy." I thought, "Another copy? Okay." He said, "But it's a pretty good copy." And I thought, "Well, all right, good." Then, the next day, I walked in with some Bermudas on. And he said, "Another copy, not so good." And I thought, "Who is this guy?" [laughter] I absolutely did not know. I don't think that there was as much information in the catalog back then. There were students who had been weaving a long time. There were a lot of students in art school who would have known about Jack, but that was not my experience.

GK: [0:05:02] You didn't even know that he was a famous artist.

NM: [0:05:06] No. And that perhaps changed my relationship with him, in a way, because I was never in awe of him like some of the other students were. It did sometimes make a difference. I don't know. I learned a lot from him. And also, just like now, having access to these different teachers who came from all different environments was valuable. Some of them were in textile production. As a matter of fact, early on in textiles, most of the teachers seemed to be connected with industry and have commercial studios like Jack Larsen. Win Anderson worked with Jack, also Barbara Markey, a master of weaves, who I had the next summer, and it was looms. It was all looms. I don't know how many years it went on with that emphasis because I came for two summers, and then after that, I came off and on. In those first two years, I came to five workshops.

GK: [0:06:31] Wow. All in textiles?

NM: [0:06:34] Four. Four in textiles. And then I got credit with Dan Rhodes in clay because you could get it through, I think, the University of Delaware. I had never worked with clay. It was just a wonder of experiences, of new experiences, and I think it was the right time and the place for me. I was young, and it all came together.

GK: [0:07:04] Wow.

NM: [0:07:05] Yeah, it was a wow.

GK: [0:07:07] Yeah. Tell me what you were going to –

NM: [0:07:09] I was thinking, how is it different? How is it different? Well, of course, there were fewer buildings. The library was in the dining hall, and the lectures and the slides were also in the dining [hall]. Once we had a dance in the dining hall, and then the Goods in the Woods was down near the woodshop. So, you didn't have Gateway, you didn't have all that, and you didn't have the glass studio or the other additions. The footprint was smaller. It was more intimate as a result. There were other things. There wasn't any Internet. That was one reason that I didn't know about Jack Larsen. Nowadays, more information would be in the catalog, and one would have checked online. It was different, very different that way. And then there were just a few telephones. One telephone on the deck, and then one more in the dining room, where you could sometimes receive a call, but you didn't hear phones ringing very often. That was quite

different. I think of the sounds one heard: tools, looms, and, in specific areas, you heard people, and you heard some music. Not always. Sometimes, a studio would be silent for the day. So, that was quite different. With some trees cut down during construction and fewer buildings, the campus was more open. One was very conscious of the steps as they went right on down to the water and the sky. Now, it's all closer. That openness was quite astounding every time you walked down it. Being tall, I used to do two steps at a time, whether I was going down or coming up. It was very joyous for me. It absolutely was. And so that was different.

GK: [0:10:19] It didn't feel quite so – we're in the woods.

NM: [0:10:24] Right. Just my own personality, I like to have a view. I don't like to feel too closed in. So, it was perfect. It was so perfect.

GK: [0:10:40] Was that the summer that you and Al met?

NM: [0:10:34] Yes, it was. [laughter] It wasn't what I was looking for. I was here for something else. But we did meet the first night of the first session.

GK: [0:10:55] Oh, wow.

NM: [0:10:56] I know. Of the first year.

GK: [0:10:59] What was your impression? Did you have a friendship?

NM: [0:11:01] With him?

GK: [0:11:02] Yeah.

NM: [0:11:03] [laughter] The first night, I sat next to his brother. Al was at the other end of the table. So, I didn't really think about him much. I was so taken with everything that was going on. I wasn't looking for a relationship. He had come to put shingles on. Al had been working on the road, but his father asked him to finish the shingling on the buildings.

GK: [0:11:48] They weren't there doing a session. They were there doing grounds work? Al was here doing grounds work.

NM: [0:11:54] Al was here. He has put a lot of shingles on these buildings. And then he would pick up people in Bangor and he'd do the garbage run. He carved two feet that he was going to put on poles to push down the garbage. We still have the feet. Well, a little history.

GK: [0:12:21] He's like the original maintenance – Gene Koch. [laughter]

NM: [0:12:26] Well, could be. Yeah. They're both very creative.

GK: [0:12:31] Did you two have a friendship, or did you immediately have a romantic relationship when you –?

NM: [0:12:41] Well, I don't know. We can't agree on the movie he invited me out to. We can't. But, you see, I was in school. He was in school. We didn't get together that much, and then I came back here the next summer, and he would come up occasionally. I know I would usually have dye on my hands or something. Again, being here was my priority. We got married in '63, so something must have been moving along.

GK: [0:13:15] [laughter] You were focused on this, but somehow that happened.

NM: [0:13:17] Well, I don't know. My brother met his wife at Cranbrook, and both of us were probably not thinking about getting married. I talked to him about it. I remember he said, "Well, when a good thing comes along, sometimes you just have to leap." And I look at a lot of things in life that way. This is a good thing. Just go for it.

GK: [0:13:43] When in that timeline did you buy the place on Deer Isle or start staying on Deer Isle more regularly?

NM: [0:13:55] We were taking care of a friend's dog off of Martha's Vineyard, and the pump gave out, so we came up here. We brought Puck and the two children who were very young. Jason was less than a year old. Al's mother said, "Oh, there's this little house on the market," and we bought it. We hadn't expected to. No, we had not expected to, but it was sweet and certainly not excessive. Just a little place about our style.

GK: [0:14:36] Right in Stonington.

NM: [0:14:38] Right in Stonington. Yeah, right in the middle of things. So, we have a view of the harbor and all the lobster boats.

GK: [0:14:49] I'm sure this place has changed, and that place has changed.

NM: [0:14:56] Stonington has changed considerably, especially in the last two years. It has. But I suppose one changes with those changes, just like here.

GK: [0:15:13] Yeah. So those first workshops – you spent two summers, and you were constant – you were in five workshops over two summers.

NM: [0:15:22] Yep.

GK: [0:15:23] And then, what was the – did that have an effect on the education you were pursuing, or did it have an outside effect? How was art factoring into your life?

NM: [0:15:33] Oh, well, I was in the art department at Skidmore. I didn't start there, but I switched. So, when I came here, those first two years really were great, and I had such a variety of instructors, including Ted Hallman and Barbara Markey, in the second year. All those workshops were orientated to the loom. They were about weaves, about structure. There was talk about sources, sources of design. Jack Larsen was very into other cultures, and he had a very

different style from Win Anderson. After a few weeks of weaving samples, Jack put up a Kente cloth from Ghana. "Okay, do something." Because I was really not aware of how long anything would take, I definitely misjudged my time. So, at the crit – oh, that was different then. A lot of the school would attend Jack's crits. I wasn't finished, so he said, "You're going to have to cut it off." And I said, "No, no, I can't cut that off." And that was one thing where if I had been in awe of him, I don't know what I would have done, but I had put a lot of hours into that piece. So, when he asked what I was going to do, I told him that I was going to drag my loom out onto the deck." It was a solution, so he let me do it. Not that long ago, in the Vanguard show in Portland, there was a big photo of the deck, and there's my loom with a partially complete piece. [laughter] I didn't know that there was a photo. It was a surprise. As far as sources went, Win Anderson assigned a piece using natural materials. I don't remember if it was a two or three-week session. It was great when it was a three-week course. There was time to get into the core of things and also to get to know people better. Anyway, Win wanted us to use some natural materials. So, I went out, and I got some pieces. We didn't, of course, deplete the landscape, but by the time I got to do it, my pieces had dried, so I had to go out and get more, and it was dark. I went back to Elephant Rock, right near Picnic Rock. It was a little different back then. There was a lot more swamp up on the rock. There were irises and cranberries. And I discovered there were frogs, and I surprised them. They croaked, and I almost croaked. But it was just another thing you did. That was that wonderful connection with the studios and the natural environment. Oh, the sources. After the first two years, I did know more about people, people who I did want to study with. Olga [de] Amaral was one of them. She thought of sources as really being maybe fantastical. More fantastical. You just made bigger leaps. So, I remember doing a drawing, or whatever, that was really hanging from a cloud. That was within just three or four teachers that you had that exposure – they all thought of sources in a different way. Then, sometimes, you'd end up in a situation like with Ted Hallman, who was another master of weaves, a master. I decided after I'd done quite a lot of sampling that I wasn't so interested in small-scale weaves. I wanted it to have a more contemporary look. I happened to mention that to Barbara Markey. She suggested enlarging a weave. So, I scaled the threading of a crackle weave from an inch up to six inches. I made a design with blocks, and I made a coat. It was one piece. And then I went up to the woodshop, which was another real plus. I made buttons for the coat. That was the second year. But the first year, I had already been in the woodshop because Sandy August, another student, and I decided we were going to make a tapestry loom. So, we got blueprints, and we walked into the woodshop. They were surprised because they were all men. Here are these two young women who think they're going to make a loom. After a wee bit of resistance, they were very helpful. It all worked. It just showed another aspect of the connection between workshops, between people. That was special. I think you might have asked me what I took away from my experiences. Most important was the idea of possibilities, that one can take leaps. And then, besides learning techniques and working with the materials, I understood the energy, the essence of a single yarn, and that materials could have strong identities. All that later supported the concepts behind the work I did.

GK: [0:24:25] So you had those two summers and then what was your relationship to Haystack after that? Can you count how many workshops you've been in over your lifetime?

NM: [0:24:37] I came with Olga [de] Amaral. That was probably in the late '70s. My life was more complex then.

GK: [0:24:51] You had your children.

NM: [0:24:52] I had the children. I had to hustle on that one. It was worth it. There was a session with Bhakti Ziek and two paper workshops, one with Peggy Prentice and the other with Nance O'Banion. There was a workshop with Warren Seelig. They had different styles. They did crits very differently. I mean, I always liked Jack's crits. I did a lot of crits in that way. Oh, I did a workshop with Jack Larson on commissions because I had already done a few, and the logistics of that are pretty complex – can be. So, it was six more, eleven in all.

GK: [0:26:00] Wow. Were you working as an artist in your life? Were you doing commissions? Can you tell me a little about that?

NM: I went to Philadelphia College of Art for a year after we got back from California in 1964. Ruben Eshkanian was there. I had met him here and kept in touch. I kept in touch with a number of the people who I met in those first two years. I got to know Ruben when he was the visiting artist during the second summer. I remember him standing in front of that loom and knotting the rug that was in the Vanguard show. It's called Haystack. It went into the collection at Cranbrook, I believe. It was knotted all in one color, sort of dull grayish green. At the end of the rug was this wonder of color of a landscape. He worked on it all summer. And then occasionally, he would work on a little table loom, and he would be weaving stripes, which he was doing for the industry. There was the contrast of the little loom and the big loom, and the same person thinking in those different ways – one was for industry; one was for his studio. He was the one who taught me that colors can sing. That was another idea that came out of Haystack.

GK: [0:28:19] Did he dye the –?

NM: [0:28:22] I don't know, but it's difficult to dye large amounts of yarn, so he might have done it commercially. He probably used Paternayan yarn for the tapestry at the end of the rug. It is a very lustrous yarn. After the year with Ruben, I got a job at Moore College of Art teaching surface design and some weaving. I was doing double cloth pieces at the time and applying to shows. Eventually, I went to Tyler School of Art and Architecture for my master's. It was Temple's art school. I had to go in the area. I would have liked to have gone to Cranbrook, but you can't just leave your family. After I graduated, I taught at Philadelphia College of Art for a year because Ruben was on sabbatical. That was a good experience teaching mostly off-loom. I tried to give a wider exposure by showing slides of people's work. It was another Haystack influence. In a short time, a student could be exposed to so many ways of thinking and seeing. So, for teaching, I collected images of contemporary and historical work and did a number of weekend workshops about textile miniatures, seeing textiles matted and framed. We worked on frame looms, I showed slides, and we talked about so many things that I had been exposed to those two years. I just carried so much away with me.

GK: [0:31:57] Yeah. It sounds like it had a huge effect on the trajectory of your practice and career, really.

NM: [0:32:06] Yes, it did. My involvement changed a little when we moved to Florida. It wasn't as much of an energized environment for me. But I got involved. Eventually, I was on the board of Florida Craftsmen as a regional director. We were supportive of craftspeople and tried to create awareness of crafts in Florida. I also sold my work in a lot of different venues – in outdoor shows, in galleries, and I kept on applying to national and international shows. One year, I was part of an artist-in-the-schools program. That was a mighty fine experience to pass around actual pieces, like a thousand-year-old Nazca textile from Peru, and to show images of historical and contemporary textiles. At some schools, we created a huge net of wrapped elements, slowly moving it up and down above fifty children. That happened by going with the flow – following the material and the children's ideas. It was so reminiscent of Haystack.

GK: [0:33:38] What years were you in Florida? Do you know?

NM: [0:33:40] Oh, gosh. Ever so long. I think we were there for thirty-seven years.

GK: [0:33:49] Wow.

NM: [0:33:49] I know, I know. I thought it was going to be for two. I had three different studios there. It became more challenging getting more galleries. Sometimes, I did commissions. As a matter of fact, there was a possibility of that, with my coat, my coat from Haystack. It really suited the time. Things were more, I wouldn't say artsy, but it made a statement. We were out in California for a year. I was wearing it when I went into I. Magnin, an upscale department store. They wanted to commission me to do more. But I had already done a few and realized how hard it was to deal with lots of different bodies. I didn't know if I really wanted to get into clothing.

GK: [0:35:29] It's a whole different thing.

NM: [0:35:30] It's another thing. I was becoming more oriented to one-of-a-kind pieces. As I came to more workshops at Haystack, they were more oriented to one-of-a-kind work.

GK: [0:36:08] You've been coming to Deer Isle, the house in Stonington, since you bought that, which was – do you know the year you bought that?

NM: [0:36:14] Oh, it was probably '70. We lived in Florida, so we would come up for two weeks. Eventually, when it worked out with the children, I came up here for longer periods. There were two years when I came up for the summer, and then I could get some of my work done. That was nice. It worked out well.

GK: [0:36:56] Did you ever visit Haystack to see lectures or anything [inaudible] events?

NM: [0:37:02] Yes, we did, but the visits were limited because we came up to Deer Isle for short times. I am happy that our children did experience Haystack when they were young.

GK: [0:37:55] Those first years that you were here, did you have an impression of Deer Isle as a place when you came those first years? Did it feel like you were in this world –?

NM: [0:38:09] No, coming over the Deer Isle Bridge, brought me to another world, to an unworldly place. It was easy to be in awe of it. Haystack was a separate world for me during those early summers, and I was happy to just be there. It was so all-encompassing. I just didn't think of anything else. It might have been fun to get out more because later on, when I met people from the island, I liked the breed. [laughter]

GK: [0:38:58] [laughter] Well, it sounds like it was really, in a way, in those early days, more insular than maybe it is now.

NM: [0:39:06] Oh, I think so.

GK: [0:39:06] Just the nature of it.

NM: [0:39:08] Yes. Now, we did walk in the July Fourth parade.

GK: [0:39:12] You did?

NM: [0:39:13] Yes, I did. Yes, that was the first summer. Those are those things that you can't sustain forever, those things that we did. The picnics we went on – I mean, the whole school would not only go down to the picnic rock at the end of the trail, we went out to the point, we'd take that trail that runs through the woods along the shoreline, we went to an island, we went to a shore – I have no idea what shore that was. That's where Al asked me if I wanted to go to a movie. [laughter]

GK: [0:39:49] That's great.

NM: [0:39:53] The scale was different. As a result, things were a little bit more intimate. If you had a workshop that was three weeks long, you got to know people better. Maybe that's why I kept in touch with some of these people for a longer time. My life was also simpler then, and that's why it was such a great time. You know what else I took away from here? I just thought of it. It was so important to me. It was this connection between a man-made space and the natural environment. There were things I saw here for the first time. The Northern Lights – first time. Lying on the deck, watching the Northern Lights. The fog. I'd never seen fog like that. Fran Merritt would always say, "If you don't like the weather, wait a minute." And suddenly there would be this glow in the fog, and I'll tell you, to me, that became such a sign of possibilities, that glow. And I see it now. I see it in Stonington when it's on the lobster boats. I see the diamonds on the water, which I sometimes saw here, but I see more in Stonington. It is so positive. I became very conscious of it. It was a gift for a nineteen-year-old. The other thing that I became very conscious of was sitting. I went down to the rocks every day for a little bit of silence. Oh, gosh, you think of these granite pieces, and then you see a pebble. So, this right here, right here – monumental almost – and then just so intimate. Another thing was the shoreline. I never saw tide like that, to have it change so much. And then one of my favorite things is where the sky meets the water. I've always wondered why there isn't a word for that. Maybe there is.

GK: [0:42:38] A word that just means that.

NM: [0:42:39] Yes. Because you have a shoreline, you have a coastline, I don't know, probably other words, but that line of iridescence. I have tried to weave the glow, that glow. That came from Haystack. That line, to me, is just one of the most beautiful lines that I've ever seen. And it was always changing. Whether I stood at the bottom of the steps or if I was down at the point, it kept changing. I went away with that, too.

GK: [0:43:41] Yeah, that's amazing.

NM: [0:43:44] There were things I had never seen before, and I became very orientated to light and changing light and glow and possibility. It was like Haystack was in tandem with the natural surroundings, and it was this circulating element. I feel like it just came in on me. I know it comes in on everyone, and it's just that experience. But for a nineteen-year-old who had never been in this world, it was very rich. It was a gift.

GK: [0:44:36] Yeah. It changed your perspective, it sounds like.

NM: [0:44:39] Oh, it did. And it just stayed with me. Absolutely stayed with me. Things that people said, and I was in an environment which was very nurturing of ideas, some of my ideas. My life was also simpler then. It didn't have as many elements. It was just the right time.

GK: [0:45:02] I love that. Just a few more questions. One is just – you've talked about this, but the broader contribution of Haystack to the craft community at large. Can you talk about that?

NM: [0:45:19] Well, early on, there were international students, for one thing, and that's always important for people to be able to travel to other places and meet other craft communities. Once, there was an African session. Just think of the impact of people coming here and then us being exposed to somebody from Africa. I remember I bought an indigo tie-dyed piece from one of the teachers. It was a tied length of fabric that hadn't been untied after being dyed. It was so beautifully sculptural and made me think about always being open to other possibilities while working on a piece. I still have that piece, and it's still tied up. So, back then, and now, there are people just coming and connecting, always connecting. And connecting leads to a lot of things. I guess community and exchange. You never know how it's going to affect a person, but it's positive. I look at the writings, the monographs, that have come out of Haystack, which are very, very, I think, important for a lot of people to have access to things like that. And also, the short conferences; it's very rich. It's just sharing. Then, of course, the Fab Lab, just being one of the first schools to have it. Also, offering it to the island, to the community. So, on a close scale and an international scale, it has had an amazing impact. It's rich.

GK: [0:47:50] What's your relationship to the school now and in this current stage of your life?

NM: [0:47:56] We are supportive a wee bit financially, and then we try to attend the school's benefit and that sort of thing, seeing faculty work, the workshop walkarounds at the end of the session. We don't come to the evening programs very much anymore. I think it's partially because family and friends visit, and there are so many events going on all of the time on Deer Isle. There are also numerous wonderful trails that we enjoy.

GK: [0:48:26] The pace of a Maine summer is very –

NM: [0:48:29] It's very –

GK: [0:48:31] – intense.

NM: [0:48:31] It's quite intense.

GK: [0:49:35] Oh, what was I just going to ask you? It was my final thing, and it's gone. It flitted away.

NM: [0:49:46] Well, that's what's supposed to happen to me.

GK: [0:49:53] I wanted to ask you if there were any periods of time here or memories that stand out that you haven't shared that have come up as we've talked.

NM: [0:50:06] The food, the wonderful food. It was the only time in my life I've gained weight.

GK: [0:53:53] Well, thank you so much for sharing. All these stories are really amazing.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 3/14/2024

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