

Square-Knot Skill Is Recalled

By RON REEVES

William J. Schmelz of Boulder Creek is reviving the nearly lost art of decorative square-knotting, a hobby of seamen for centuries, and one which he nearly forgot he had mastered.

Schmelz was introduced to the hobby of square-knotting in 1916 when he joined the coast guard at the age of 17 years and was assigned to the cutter, "Manning."

"I just watched the old-timers, and when they would see you were interested, they would be willing to teach you," Schmelz explained. At that time the "manning," which was a 300-foot ship equipped both for sail and steam, was manned mainly by Scandinavians. These men knew the art of square-knotting which was passed from man to man through the centuries.

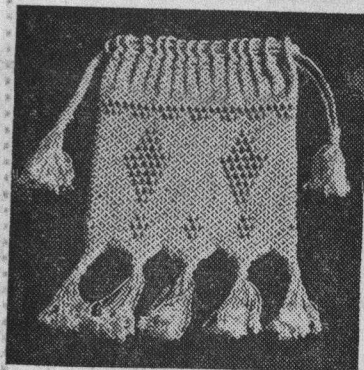
Schmelz said boats using sail had a slow pace allowing time for the unusual activity. An extensive knowledge of rigging knots and rope work was a necessity for all hands.

After about six months on the "Manning" he was transferred to an oil burner, the "Algonquin," and the first



STRINGS ATTACHED — William J. Schmelz demonstrates his hobby of ornamental square-knotting, a fast-dying skill which was a favorite pastime aboard sailing ships for centuries. The item being knotted, such as the belt above, is held by

a wooden vice outfit designed by Schmelz. Two of the strings are pulled taut during the knotting by a crochet-type hook secured to the waist by a string band. The knotting itself is all done by hand without the use of tools.



LACY HANDBAG
... fashioned from
1400 feet of string

world war broke out. The faster, more modern pace left little time for square-knotting and Schmelz forgot all about it until about a year ago.

Now retired after 26 years of sea duty, Schmelz is reverting to the salty hobby.

By hand-knotting the strong white seine twine, Schmelz fashions sturdy belts, handbags, window-shade pulls and even a form-fitting harness for the family alley cat, "Smoky."

The number of strings knotted at a time depends upon the width of the article being made. For a belt, as pictured, he uses 20 strings, holding the belt taut with a wooden vice outfit he designed and a small tool looking much like a squatty crochet hook which is secured to his middle with a string band. The work goes fairly fast. A handbag contains about 1400 feet of string and takes approximately a week of eight-hour days to complete.

Schmelz admits he has a unique ability. "I don't think there are a dozen men in the United States who can do it.

"It's been dying out since the steam came in. They don't have time any more; they're living too fast," he added.

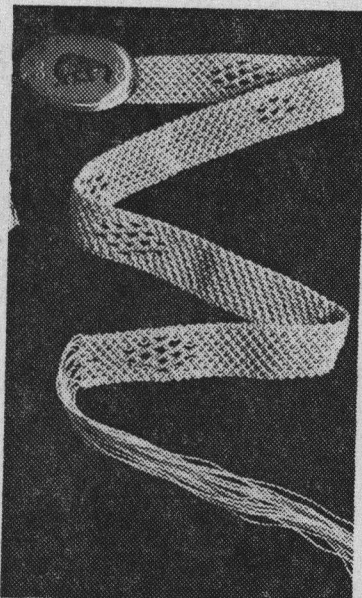
Schmelz declares that his hobby is "fascinating" and now takes up much of his spare time. Not only that, but by keeping his hands and mind busy on the knotting, he has broken a 35-year smoking habit.

As to history of square-knotting, Schmelz says it originally was introduced into France from Arabia during the 14th century. By the 15th century, square-knotting was in favor with sailors, who found they could barter their handiwork with natives of India, China and later North American Indians.

Ability at square-knotting became a highly competitive

thing among seamen, who went to great lengths in creating fancy seat and rail covers and other decorations for their ships.

Schmelz is now working with variations on his original designs. Until Friday he had a special project in mind, a square-knotted frame to hold a picture of PT-109 which he wanted to give to President Kennedy, its former skipper.



STURDY BELT

... only a foot more to knot