

Traditions Continue...Spinning a Good Yarn

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**Baa, baa, Black Sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes, sir; yes, sir,
Three bags full.
One for my master,
And one for my dame,
And one for the little boy
Who lives down the lane.**

– Old Nursery Rhyme



Objectives

- Participants will learn the important role spinning played in early American homes.
- Participants will explore the history of spinning and the effects of the Industrial Revolution.
- Participants will study the terms; *leisure spinning* and *production spinning*.
- Participants will become knowledgeable of the parts of the spinning wheel.
- Participants will learn the names and characteristics of fibers that can be spun.
- Participants will learn the procedure for preparing fleece for spinning.

Spinning

Spinning is twisting two or more fibers together to make a continuous thread. Spinning by hand creates one-of-a-kind thread. Spinning is a relaxing activity. The spinner's whole body is in rhythm with the movement of the wheel. Hands and feet work together in coordination to produce a thread.

History of Spinning

Why do people spin? Spinners, who stand or sit while creating thread, are connected to a tradition handed down over generations. In the early days before the Industrial Revolution, the spinner provided the threads needed for survival.

After the Industrial Revolution when machines powered by water or steam produced thread for clothing at a reasonable price, there was no need for the home-based spinner.

The creativity of the hand-spinner allows the fiber artist to make thread like no other. Leisure spinning is when a fiber artist spins just for enjoyment of the creative process. Production spinning is when the goal is to produce large amounts of thread. Producing the thread is the main goal, with little importance given to enjoying the creative process.

Spinning in America

Colonists came to America about 1609. They brought with them the treadle wheel and the walking wheel. Both wheels were used into the 1800s. This was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in America. The wheels were then stored away and forgotten.

The hand-spinning process was no longer a necessity in a household. People could buy ready-made clothing. A few wheels survived the Industrial Revolution. Today, many wheels are being made by woodworkers in America and in other countries. The spinner has many choices when purchasing a wheel or fiber.



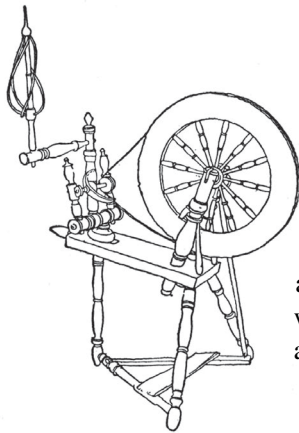
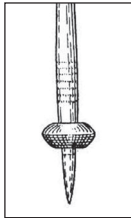
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Wheel Types and Descriptions

Drop spindles are much like the first tools that spinners used. They still are widely used today. This tool offers an inexpensive way to start spinning. It provides a pleasant, relaxing, and portable activity.

Drop Spindle

Saxony wheels feature a side-by-side arrangement of the drive wheel and the spinning head. This design allows a larger drive wheel and therefore higher spinning ratios, making them more suitable for fine spinning. The Saxony wheel is the most common wheel used in America. It is sometimes referred to as a flax wheel (with distaff.) In older wheels, the Mother-of-All is often the first thing to be lost if the wheel is not in use.

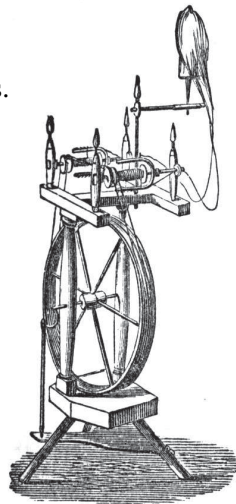


Saxony Wheel

Upright wheels have vertically stacked components. They take up less working space and storage space and are more portable. The drive wheels are typically smaller, allowing only smaller ratios.

Upright Wheel

Spindle wheels come in several forms. Two examples are the Great Wheel and the Charkha. They do not have a flyer and bobbin but rather a long pointed spike, which is used to both twist and store the spun yarn. The Great Wheel was used in this country in early times. The spinner stands to spin, with the right hand turning the wheel and the left hand drafting. The Charkha is used in India to spin cotton. The spinner will sit while spinning with the Charkha.



Vocabulary

- *Carding* – The process of straightening fiber to prepare it for spinning.
- *Distaff* – A staff that holds the flax fibers, which are drawn out for spinning.

- *Drop spindle* – The spinning device consisting of a disk or sphere attached to a shaft, turned by hand in suspension or supported in a bowl or on the ground.
- *Felting* – The undesirable matting together of fibers caused by handling the fiber too much or by changing water temperature during washing.
- *Fiber* – Any material, natural or synthetic, that can be spun into thread.
- *Fleece* – The fiber from an animal.
- *Great wheel* – A spinning device with a 4-foot drive wheel and open, pointed spindle; it's operated by a person in a standing or walking position.
- *Ply* – To twist two or more yarns together.
- *Spinning* – To draw out and twist fibers into a continuous thread.
- *Treadle wheel* – A spinning wheel with a 1- to 2-foot drive wheel and bobbin and flyer assembly; it is operated by a foot treadle by a person in the sitting position.

The Spinning Process

Preparing the fiber is the first step in spinning. Cotton and silk are examples of clean fibers that do not have to be cleaned. The fiber from animals needs to be sorted, and it often needs to be washed to remove dirt and chaff. Carding is done to align the fiber for spinning.

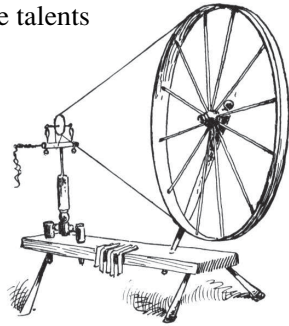
When yarn is spun on the wheel and removed, it is a single-ply yarn. The spinner may put two or more plies together to make a thicker yarn. When a spinner uses a Saxony wheel, the whole body is involved in the act. The feet control the speed at which the wheel turns. The hands guide the fiber as it becomes thread. The hands control the amount of fiber going into the twist that becomes thread. The amount of fiber determines the size of the thread. The whole body becomes involved in the rhythmic motions of the wheel.

Spinning Today

Hand-spinning is often done as a demonstration at fairs and festivals throughout America. Such demonstrations help preserve the tradition of spinning by showing how this artistic craft is done.

Hand-spinning is done by spinners who want a unique yarn to use for a particular project. Some manufacturing companies contract production spinners to produce the yarn for their garments. They then advertise their garments as being made from hand-spun yarn.

Apprentice programs provide the opportunity for a master craftsperson to share talents and experiences with interested participants. In West Virginia, the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins offers a year-round program for deserving apprentices. The Mountain State Art and Craft Fair in Ripley offers a four-day apprentice program for selected applicants.



Great Wheel

Materials Used in Spinning

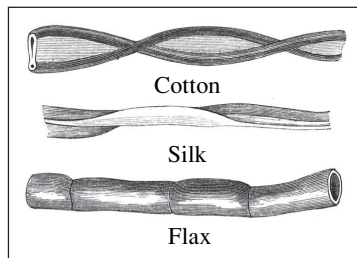
Any fiber that can be twisted and will hold together to make a thread can be spun. Some examples of these fibers are:

- Wool
- Cotton
- Silk
- Rayon
- Flax
- Qiviut
- Ramie
- Llama

Every fiber has its own traits.

Wool is very elastic and has overlapping scales. The scales help the wool hold together as it is spun. It absorbs 30 percent of its weight in water and still feels dry. Wool is used for clothing. Hundreds of sheep breeds and many other fur-bearing animals produce fleece that can be spun.

Cotton fiber grows as a protective cover for the cotton seed. Eli Whitney's cotton gin, invented in 1792, made possible large-scale production of cotton. It removed the seeds from the fiber. Cotton is very absorbent. There are many species of cotton, including Upland, Sea Island, Pima, and Egyptian. Cotton is used for clothing and bed sheets.



Magnified view of fibers.
From top: Cotton, Silk and Flax.

Silk is the lightest of all fibers. It is very elastic. Silk clothing absorbs moisture well and is very warm. Silk undergarments are a favorite of outdoor people in winter.

Rayon is a synthetic fiber made by forcing a solution of chemically treated cellulose through tiny holes. Rayon is used to make clothing.

Flax is the name of the plant and its fiber. The spun yarn and fabric is linen. Flax is the oldest known fiber. Linen absorbs moisture readily. It has no elasticity. When flax is combed, the short pieces left in the comb are called "tow." When it is spun, tow produces a fuzzy yarn. The long pieces left in your hand after combing are called "line." Line produces a very smooth yarn when spun. Wet spinning produces a very smooth yarn. Wet spinning is done by the spinner dipping fingers in a bowl of water and continuing to spin.



Qiviut is the undercoat of the musk ox. It is a very soft, fine down that is shed in the spring. The musk ox lives in the North American Arctic and Greenland. Qiviut is very light and spins into a very fine, soft yarn. It is used for making shawls and other garments.

Ramie comes from the stalk of the needle plant. It resembles a fine-quality linen. Ramie does not shrink and does not wrinkle. Its translucent luster makes it suitable for curtains. Ramie is also used for knitting sweaters.



Llamas produce a very uniform fiber in a wide range of colors. Llamas live in South America, but they have been transplanted to the United States. They are relatives of the camel but are smaller and have no hump. The fiber is used for knitting socks, sweaters, coats, and shawls.

Fleece Preparation

Wool cleaning mills are available for cleaning large amounts of fleece. It is fun to clean one or two fleeces by hand. A small amount of sheep, llama, or qiviut fleece can be washed in a colander. A washing box is more suitable for larger amounts of fleece. To make a washing box, nail four boards together to form the sides of the box and staple nonrusting screen over the bottom. This will eliminate unnecessary handling that could cause felting.

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Steps in washing fleece:

1. Shake the fleece to open the locks; place in box with shorn side up. Fill the sink with hot water and enough soap to create lots of suds.
2. Lower the box into the suds and gently push down on the fleece until it is covered with water. Allow to soak about 30 minutes or maybe overnight if the fleece is very dirty.
3. When the fleece looks clean, gently lift the box out of the water. Drain out the dirty water.
4. Run another sink full of water (the same temperature as the water you just drained out.) Rinse as many times as needed to remove all soap. Adding a dash of white vinegar to the last rinse will help to remove all soap.
5. Carry the box outside and prop it against something so air can circulate through the screen on the bottom. When fleece is thoroughly dry, it is ready for carding.

Some very important don'ts when washing fleece:

Don't run water over the fleece.

Don't squeeze, stir, or wring the fleece.

Don't handle the fleece more than needed.

Don't put the fleece in hotter or colder water than it was removed from.

Most other fibers (cotton, silk, rayon, and flax) don't need to be washed before spinning.

Follow-up Activities

- Set up a workshop to learn how to spin.
- Visit a local sheep, alpaca, or llama farm.
- Ask participants to bring in samples of hand-spun and commercial yarn to compare.
- Invite a local spinning and weaving guild member to speak to your group.
- Visit a local fair or festival to observe someone spinning.
- Sponsor a spinning day at the local library.
- Sponsor an exhibit of spinning equipment and a demonstration on spinning.

Resources

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