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NORWEGIAN BREAKFAST CLUB NEWSLETTER

Vol. I No. 3

June, 1995

*This two-coated breed, which sheds each spring, provides
handspinners with desirable wool.*

Primitive Norwegian Sheep

by Amy Lightfoot

WHEN I FIRST started spinning about six years ago, I hardly believed I could ever make all those clumps and bumps into something which slightly resembled yarn. Since that early struggle, I have mastered the drop spindle, restored (and used) a 150-year-old spinning wheel, and finally bought a new spinning wheel. I spin by the light of a kerosene lamp in a room where the silence is disturbed only by the crackling fire in the woodstove. This is relaxing, to say the least, and encourages the journeying of my thoughts into the past. On several occasions, I have found myself thinking of times when the ability to use one's hands well was a praised asset.

In rural Norway, complete dependence on the products of the land for both food and clothing was common well into the second half of this century. Most country women over sixty remember vividly all the steps in producing yarn, although they are reluctant to practice their art now that machine-spun yarn is readily available. Everyday clothing was made almost exclusively from handspun wool. Knowledge of such traditional methods of spinning, knitting, weaving, and feltmaking has been handed down from mother to daughter over centuries, probably since pre-historic times.

Sheep are versatile livestock, and ancient farmers, as well as nomads, utilized their meat, milk, skins, and (of course) wool. The primitive Norwegian sheep is a race belonging to the species *Ovis brachyura borealis* Pall., which was once found throughout most of northern Europe.¹ These animals were carried across the North Sea by Viking colonists, and became the mainstay of many remote areas, including the Orkney, Shetland, and Faeroe Islands, as well as Iceland and Greenland. Textiles woven from this breed's wool were discovered among the contents of the Oseberg Ship, a Viking burial site. During excavations of the ruins of a Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland in 1964, a soapstone spindle whorl was found—indisputable evidence of Norse activity. This tiny artifact confirmed that there were women among the Viking explorers of the New World; this fact is also mentioned in the Icelandic sagas. Considering the Viking reputation for violence, it seems almost ironic that the most convincing evidence of a Norse presence in America is a tool as innocent as a spindle whorl. It may also be reasonable to assume that the Vikings transported the sheep themselves, for the sake of milk and wool.

Descendants of these Norwegian sheep are still

found in Norway and in the areas once colonized by the Vikings. Modern Icelandic sheep, renowned for the quality of their wool, were developed by cross-breeding wild sheep the Vikings carried to Iceland with Celtic breeds.

Before 1860, the primitive sheep predominated in Norway, although other breeds began to be introduced in the early 1800s. The few remaining flocks of primitive sheep are found mostly in coastal areas. The animals are small but exceptionally hardy, and the ewes are especially good mothers. On snow-free islands in western Norway, flocks may graze on heather throughout the winter and do not need additional fodder. The flock shown in the photographs lives on Frøya, an island in the coastal county of Trøndelag. Recently the number of flocks in this county has increased to more than twenty-five.

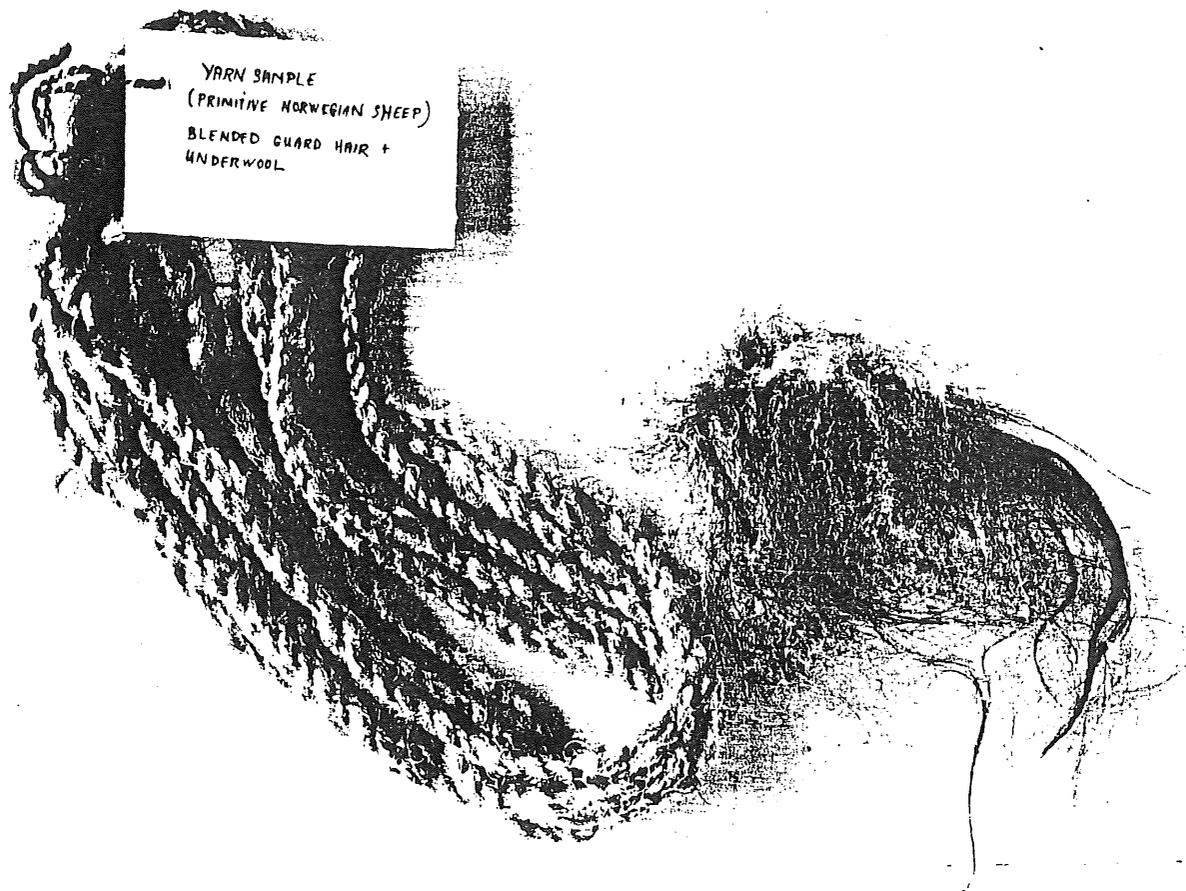
Breeding has also affected the presence of horns in these sheep. Formerly, both males and females had horns, although those of the rams were much larger. Today, few females are horned.

Fleeces range from multicolored to shades of bluish gray, brown, and white. Wool quality in Norway today is judged in terms of suitability for machine spinning, not length of fiber or lanolin content.

Most Norwegian commercial spinning factories wash out the natural oils and then add artificial lubricants. The wool of the primitive sheep is not suitable for commercial spinning, and this fact is reflected in the price I was quoted by the wool market when I asked what they paid farmers. Government subsidies averaged less than half those offered for other breeds.

Fortunately, handspinners appreciate both aesthetics and the more important qualities of wool, such as elasticity, softness, lanolin content, and durability, all of which are renowned characteristics of the wool of this primitive breed. My introduction to their fleece was through a friend who, in 1984, completed weaving a woolen sail for a replica of a Viking ship commissioned by the Viking Ship Museum in Denmark. Primitive wool was the obvious choice of fiber. The fleeces contain coarse guard hairs and a layer of inner wool. About one-quarter of the inner wool was removed before the warp was spun, and the result was a yarn of extreme strength. Formerly, the Faeroese used guard hairs exclusively in spinning rope for ships' rigging.

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News from Vesterheim Museum

Lichen Dye Lecture

Vesterheim is pleased to sponsor a lecture by lichen dye expert Karen Casselman on Monday, June 12. You may be familiar with Karen's research from her article "Historical and Modern Lichen Dyes: Some Ethical Considerations" which appeared in the first issue of the Norwegian Breakfast Club Newsletter (Nov. 1994). Karen will be in Decorah to identify the presence of lichen dyes in our textile collection. We invited her to present a lecture while she was here and she will speak on Norse and Celtic Dye Traditions. Beginning with Norse and Celtic traditions, she will focus on the use of lichens (particularly korkje) in Norway, describing dye ingredients, techniques, and methods. She will also discuss the ethics of collecting and using lichens today. The free lecture will be held in Vesterheim's Bethania Church (located immediately west of the Main Museum building) at 7 p.m.

Weaving Exhibition

I would like to invite all of you to enter our National Exhibition of Weaving in the Norwegian Tradition. The exhibition is the only one of such scope in the United States dedicated solely to Norwegian weaving styles. It provides an unparalleled opportunity, not only for your work to be exhibited with that of some of the finest textile artists practicing in the tradition, but also to be viewed by thousands of Nordic Fest visitors and commented on by the highest caliber Norwegian and American judges.

Rosemary Roehl of St. Cloud, MN is an NBC member and, as of 1992, one of the exhibition's Gold Medalists in Weaving. Other Medal of Honor winners are Åse Blake, Julie Brende, Liv Bugge, Ruth Duker, Nancy Jackson, and John Skare. Rosemary is a strong and enthusiastic supporter of our exhibition. She began to weave after traveling in Norway to visit relatives in the early '80s. Largely self-taught, her only goal was to weave in the Norwegian tradition. She began to submit weavings for the exhibition and found that the judges' comments and scores were very helpful. She also learned from studying the other exhibited weavings. Rosemary became an "exhibition addict" after a monk's belt runner won a white ribbon. Another monk's belt runner won a blue ribbon and was purchased for Vesterheim's collection. Last year her runner in åklævev, lynhild, and rosepath won the Best of Show/Handweavers Guild of America Award. Rosemary draws heavily on her Norwegian heritage as inspiration for her pieces. She wove the apron and band trim for her Nordfjord bunad and wears it to the exhibition with her Medal of Honor pinned proudly to it.

This will be our fourteenth exhibition. Held during Decorah's Nordic Fest in July, it helps to educate the general public about Norwegian weaving as well as provides weavers with a national competition for their artistic and technical development. The exhibition is judged and ribbon winners receive points toward a Medal of Honor. The visitors to Nordic Fest greatly enjoy the exhibition and the weavers who participate benefit too. I hope to see your weavings this year. If you have not already received the entry information, please give our office a call and we will send it right out.

Laurann Figg, Curator of Textiles

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, 502 W. Water, Decorah, IA 52101 - (319)382-9681

MIDWEST WEAVERS CONFERENCE - I will be attending the conference in Milwaukee, WI, June 22-24 and would enjoy meeting with any members of NBC who are in attendance. Perhaps we could have coffee and an exchange of ideas. If you are interested, please contact me.
Betty Johannesen

FOR THE LOOM

The Scandinavian weaves have always been my chief area of interest. Over the years I have used many of the techniques. Perhaps the most unusual is a wallcovering. Long ago, I read about a woman in a particular area of Norway who had become noted for her hand-woven wheat wall covering. Her formula was given, I tried it but didn't like the results; after much sampling I found combinations I liked. My first big endeavor was called "Dill Road Grass cloth" because I picked tall grasses from the side of Dill Road on Lopez Island. I used a 16/2 cotton for warp, raffia for weft, and the grass for the monk's belt pattern. I flattened each piece of straw before I laid it on the warp. The finished product covers part of the walls in my weaving room. We liked it so much we decided to put it in our entry way.....I need to weave eleven more yards of grass cloth.

SUZANNE NICHOLSON

NORWEGIAN FOLK ART:

THE MIGRATION OF A TRADITION

the exhibition of 210 objects documenting the journey of Norwegian folk art as it followed the immigrants and influenced folk art in its adopted home, is scheduled to open this fall on September 13 at the Museum of American Folk Art in New York. While its schedule is not completely established, it will remain at MAFA until January 6, 1996. Subsequently it is expected to be at the Minnesota Museum of Art in St. Paul, MN, in Bismarck, ND, and at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, WA. Its opening this fall is part of a series of events marking the first official visit of King Harald and Queen Sonja to this country. An ambitious catalogue is being planned to accompany the exhibit as well as various events of which we'll keep you informed as we learn of them.

LILA'S VISION FOR NBC

I envision the NBC as a group of people interested in the subject of Norwegian textiles who would like to use the group as a vehicle to help in developing that interest. Since this group is scattered over the entire country plus Canada, our newsletter becomes the best means at present for conversing with each other. Through it, we can ask questions on matters of concern; share information we consider pertinent; call attention to books, classes, exhibits, tools, etc. which we feel are of interest, and generally air what is on our minds. Betty and I have made requests of some members to write about their activities, but we hope you will not wait to be asked. While we want to include one article of substance in each issue, it is our ongoing "conversations" via the newsletter which will make it a meaningful publication. Are you puzzled by instructions in a Norwegian weaving book? Have you seen exhibitions you feel are worth knowing about? (For example, has anyone seen Grete Bodogaard's tapestries at the Dahl Center in Rapid City?) Do you have translations of material from Norwegian which you would share, or are you looking for translations you consider would be valuable?

Personally, I am progressing at a snail's pace with my registration of traditional Norwegian coverlets in private possession. At present I am hoping for results from an article made available for Sons of Norway lodges in Minneapolis/St. Paul and surrounding areas. If any NBC members in the Twin Cities and nearby have or know of such coverlets, I would much appreciate knowing about them.

So, let us begin our dialogue. We look forward to hearing from you!

FUTURE PLANS

Several members of the Norwegian Breakfast Club have suggested that we have a working conference in Decorah. As we perceive such a conference, it would include the opportunity to become acquainted with the museum resources. We also would hope to have a series of twenty minute presentations in which individuals would report on work they have done or are doing. A committee would choose the presenters.

This would be a two day working conference - day one devoted to the museum and the second day would be for presentations.

Let us know what you think about this. Is it premature to be considering such a conference? Are you interested in the possibilities such a conference would offer?

Send a note to Lila Nelson or Betty Johannesen. We are waiting to hear from you.

FRONTIERS OF FIBRE, HERE WE COME

NBC members attending the Frontiers of Fibre conference at Prince George, British Columbia, July 13-16 are invited to get together 7:30-8:30 a.m. Friday the 14th in a seminar room which will be reserved for us (location to be given us later). Coffee and muffins will be available for purchase. Please come laden with ideas, information to share, objects or books if you can manage to carry them around, or report on your current Norwegian-related activities. The conference program sounds excellent; I look forward to seeing whomever attends.

Lila Nelson

PIECEWORK FEATURES

VESTERHEIM

"WHAT TO BRING, WHAT TO WEAR? Will we find what we seek? For an immigrant, life is full of questions." Sue Lenthe begins her column, A PLACE TO COME TO. Vesterheim Norwegian

American Museum is the subject of her column in the May/June, 1995 issue of PIECEWORK. Lenthe describes some of the textiles owned by the museum and points out that only about 10% of the collection is on display. There are quotes by Curator of Textiles, Laurann Figg. The article is beautifully illustrated with photographs of items from the textile collection. Special events in the Vesterheim calendar are also listed.

INFO!!! NORWAVES, NORWEAVES

There are two free e-mail services for Norwegian interest groups. The services are accessible via international e-mail services such as Interred, Binned, Combustive, and America On-line.

NORWAY'S - has weekly news about Norway, in English. You may subscribe by e-mailing the following commands to:

Listserv@NKL.no:

SUBSCRIBE NORWAVES *Your Name*

Back issues can be retrieved by sending an "INDEX NORWAVES" command to listserv@nki.no, followed by a "GET NORWAVES *file*" command. NorWaves has a growing database about Norway which may be queried by e-mail. The command "SEARCH NORWAVES *searchword*" is issued to listserv@nki.no.

NORWEAVES - is a moderated forum for Norwegians, and friends of Norway. It was initiated as a supplemental service to NORWAVES. The network is meant to provide help, and share information of interest to the Norwegian community of friends. NORWEAVES may be subscribed to by e-mailing the following command to:

Listserve@NKL.no:

SUBSCRIBE NORWEAVE *Your Name*

Have any NBC members accessed this service? What is your opinion of its value?

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

NANCY JACKSON - From my beginnings in tapestry 15 years ago, I have been fascinated with the use of space in Norwegian billedvev (picture weaving) tapestries. I believe these Norwegian tapestries have not been studied sufficiently and have much to teach us about the similarities between our modern understanding of the picture plane and the understanding of early Scandinavian weavers.

My own visual search focuses on humanity at a spiritual level, particularly the Sacred in the Ordinary. I pursue images of human transformation (and a sense of being guarded and nurtured in the transformation process) within the mid-20th Century understanding of the shallow picture plane. The flatness of this vision is particularly well suited to shapes and methods that are natural to tapestry, as Norwegian billedvev demonstrates so clearly.

In addition to making tapestries, I paint and draw, exhibit extensively, and teach all levels of Aubusson tapestry methods.

EVA HOVDE DOUHIIT - I am a weaver (amateur) and a Norwegian. I came to the states in 1963 but learned to weave here. I am certainly interested in exploring Norwegian weaving further, having kept up with the printed material available from Norwegian presses.

KAREN DIADICK CASSELMAN - A Research Associate at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, Karen is a lichenologist who specializes in the ethical use of lichen dyes. Her first book, Craft of the Dyer, will soon be followed by Magic, Mystery and Mayhem: Ancient and Modern Lichen Dyes. Due out in 1996, this book will include Norse lichen dyes and Scandinavian dye history. Karen also co-edited the American edition of Eileen Bolton's Lichens For Vegetable Dyeing.

Look for Karen in the midst of all that purple at her FRONTIERS OF FIBRE workshop and seminars.

LYNN HEGLAR - Consider me one of those interested in Norwegian textiles and weaving techniques! I have four looms. Three table looms, 2 with four shafts and 1 with eight shafts. The other loom is a 48", 6 shaft, countermarch (Cranbrook). Beyond learning more about the textile part of my heritage (great grandparents Norwegian), my interest is pretty general right now. Winnie Poulson's work in VAV Magasinet always gets me stimulated to do many things. I admire the Scandinavian's ability with stripes a lot. This is something that does not come easy for me and I'm interested in developing my "eye" for stripes. I have lots of fun weaving bands. I'm just starting to do some pick-up techniques and really like it. Double weave is a definite favorite.

MEMBERSHIP

NEW MEMBERS:

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Left: The flock owned by Bjørn and Maja Reppe on the coastal island of Frøya, illustrating the state of natural shedding before shearing. Photo: Johan G. Foss, 1987

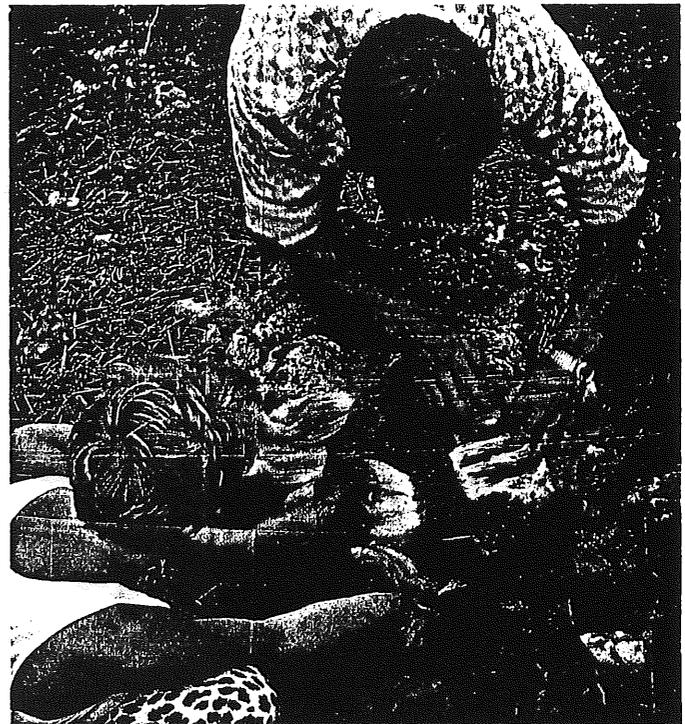
Below: The Reppes shearing their flock in June. Note that they pluck much of the wool with their hands. Photo: Johan G. Foss, 1987

Continued from pg. 2

My experiences with this wool confirm its value to the handspinner. Part of my fascination with the fiber is due to its extraordinary warmth, which is especially important here on the coast of Norway, where long underwear is worn year round and annual precipitation is high. The Norwegian sheep's constant subjection to the elements affects the insulating quality of its wool: the wool along the back is often felt-like.

Lanolin content is higher than for other breeds, and, in general, the fibers are soft and fine. Shearing takes place relatively late, usually by the end of June; only the thigh and leg wool is shorn. The rest of the fleece is shed, and can be easily plucked from the skin. Because they are not cut, the fibers are sealed at both ends, softer, less itchy, and more water-repellent than other types of wool. In some respects, the wool resembles that of musk oxen, whose *qiviut* is famous for warmth and softness.

Amy Lightfoot is a native New Englander who has lived in Norway since 1979. She and her husband have a small farm on Hitra, one of the outer islands off western central Norway, and make their living through a combination of fishing, forestry, and translation. Amy is an active member of the local Husflidslag (Handcraft Society). She is concerned that people learn to appreciate and use the wool of the "primitive" sheep, since fewer than 2,000 remain and the breed is in danger of vanishing. She says, "As far as I know, this type of wool is available only in Norway. However, perhaps increased demand from abroad might inspire greater appreciation for this unusual raw material . . . and might influence existing agricultural policies. You might inquire about the wool at the nearest Norwegian embassy or consulate." She also suggests that interested spinners write to a project which is compiling a list of owners of "primitive" sheep and may be able to help: Sjøvottprosjektet, 7230 Kvenvær, Norway.



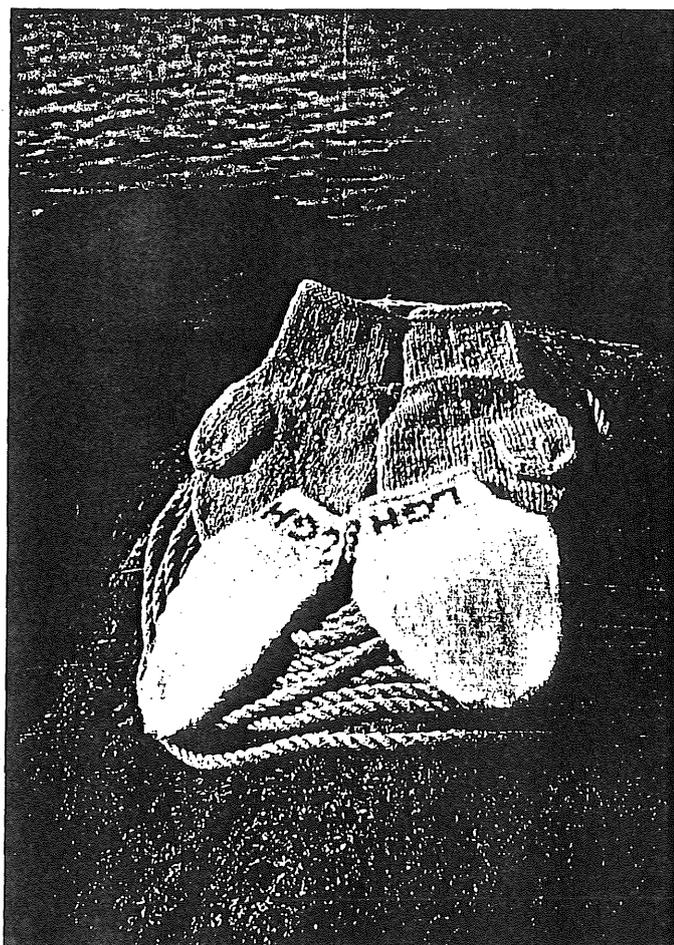
¹There is considerable debate about whether the primitive Norwegian sheep is a separate breed from the Spælsau. All of the arguments calling for a distinction between these types of sheep relate to husbandry methods which have unintentionally prevented crossbreeding. The sheep are normally kept on snow-free islands in the winter, and go out on rough pasture throughout the year. Ewes are relatively small. If hybridization with larger breeds is attempted, the primitive ewe usually dies giving birth. Since lambing takes place unattended on the islands in early spring, the lamb in this case also has minimal chances of surviving. In addition, crossbred sheep do not have the same quality of wool and find it difficult to withstand the harsh winter.

Spælsau sheep are kept with more intensive human intervention. They have been hybridized and crossbred with Icelandic sheep, and are provided with shelter in the winter. Their wool has a lower lanolin content, and frequently less underwool, than the primitive sheep.

*Rugged garments that
technology can't improve*

Fishermen's Mittens

by Amy Lightfoot



Two pairs of fishermen's mittens. The larger, cream-colored pair is unwashed and unshrunk. The smaller pair has been finished by washing and scrubbing on the shrinking board. Photo: Amy Lightfoot, 1987

EACH AUTUMN, MY husband, our preschool-aged son, and I fish for herring. Although these fish can be caught at any time of year, they are best, folklore says, "after the birch leaves have fallen and when the moon is full." The temperature in the sea is close to freezing, and we must work with bare hands while pulling in our nets and removing the fish. When the catch is good, we forget about how cold our hands are. After an hour or two, we plunge our hands into our *sjøvotter* (sea mittens), which always stand up to expectations, and then clap them together to get the blood flowing. Even when the mittens are wet, my hands are warm as toast.

My search for a wool which could stand up to rigorous life in coastal Norway began after I saw a pair of fishermen's mittens of a type still commonly used. Modern technology has replaced most traditional fishing equipment, but *sjøvotter* have not been improved upon. The pattern and design of the mittens predate the introduction of so-called modern sheep breeds, and the use of wild sheep wool has been documented.

The fishing season was long, and fishermen spent the late winter and early spring away from home. Wear and tear on their mittens shrank them, and when mittens became so small that they chafed the fingertips they were no longer usable. As a result, there were obvious advantages to mittens which didn't need to be darned often and which retained their size in spite of hard use.

The guard hairs of the primitive wool provide essential durability for sea mittens, and the softer inner wool offers warmth. The people I have interviewed tell me that at least one-third of the wool traditionally used in sea mittens was ram wool from the legs and thighs, which shrinks less readily than does other wool. Usually, this was spun with a considerable amount of S twist, then loosely plied Z, to produce a thick two-ply yarn.

All the patterns I have seen and all the mittens I have reconstructed were knitted oversize. Yarn was seldom washed before it was knitted, because the finished mittens were scrubbed on a wooden shrinking or felting board (*tove brett*) until they reached a usable size and were nearly water-repellent. The felting boards resemble old-fashioned American washboards, and even today they are commonly found in farmhouse attics on the island where I live. Many are decorated with lovely carvings.

There are several varieties of fishermen's mittens, but the variation usually occurs in the thumb, the length of the cuff, and the decoration on the cuff. In

“Technological advancement is rapidly displacing most of the traditional elements of country life in Norway at an alarming rate. I feel that it is essential to record these before they disappear completely.”

Trondelag, fishermen differentiate between two kinds of mittens (*vott* means mitten). The *vavott*, knitted with a very short cuff, were used when drawing up hand lines and nets; they inevitably became wet, and the short cuff made them easier to pull off. The *tørrvott*, or dry mittens, were worn after they were finished with the day's fishing and started to row home; they have longer cuffs. I have read of mittens with two thumbs, which could be worn on either hand, thus distributing the wear evenly.

The patterns here are intended for adult-sized mittens. By decreasing a couple of stitches on each knitting needle (we usually use four), you can make hard-wearing children's mittens. Different sizes can also be obtained by shrinking the finished mitten more or less. If you are using a washboard, use *hot* water and soap which gives you a pH value between 4 and 10 (use pH paper to check). This makes the shrinking go a little faster, but don't expect miracles. You may have to scrub 20 minutes before you notice any change.² If you don't have a washboard, you can *carefully* wash the finished product in a washing machine, using relatively hot water (60° C or 140° F). Check the progress frequently to avoid shrinking the mittens too much (I run the machine for 15 minutes, then check every 10 minutes).

As anyone who works with wool a lot is aware, wool has an almost unbelievable capacity for shrinkage. I once demonstrated this for a class at our local school by knitting a pair of mittens on large needles, so that the result was 24 inches long. When everyone in the class had taken a turn at the felting board, the mittens were just right for an adult hand.

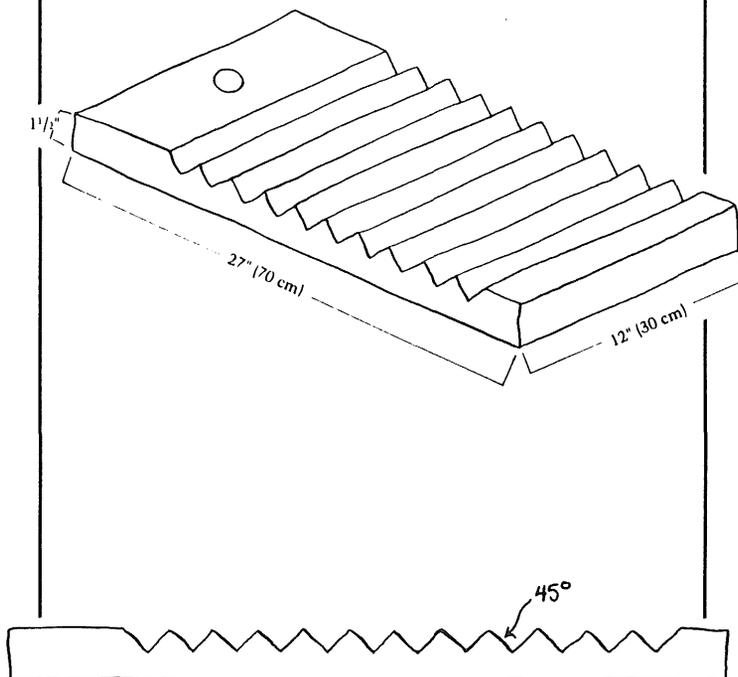
The quality of garments knitted from handspun wool of the Norwegian primitive sheep is best revealed by hard wear and extreme climate. These are only seldom experienced by the modern urban dweller, unless he or she is an avid outdoorsperson. However, in these days of exorbitant fuel bills warmth earns the respect of everyone, and in my opinion (which is prejudiced by experience), few other wool sources can compete.

Each of these patterns requires about 7 ounces (200 grams) of thick, two-ply, handspun yarn. When making the yarn, use a considerable amount of S twist, and a looser Z ply. I measured washed wool.

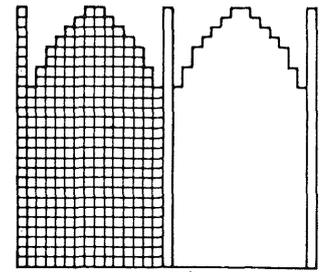
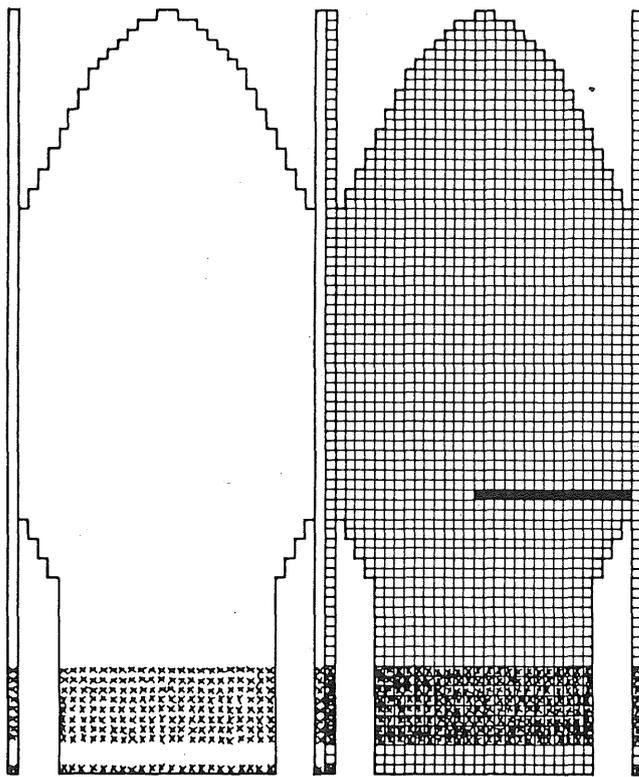
Don't be dismayed if the finished mittens seem enormous. Shrinking should give you the proper size for an adult. Decrease the number of stitches by 10 or 12 for a large child's mitten.

²I think that the tactile pleasure of working with wool is worth dishpan hands. You may want to use rubber gloves.

How to Make an Old-Fashioned Wooden Shrinking Board

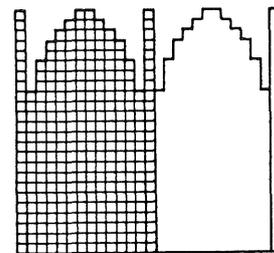
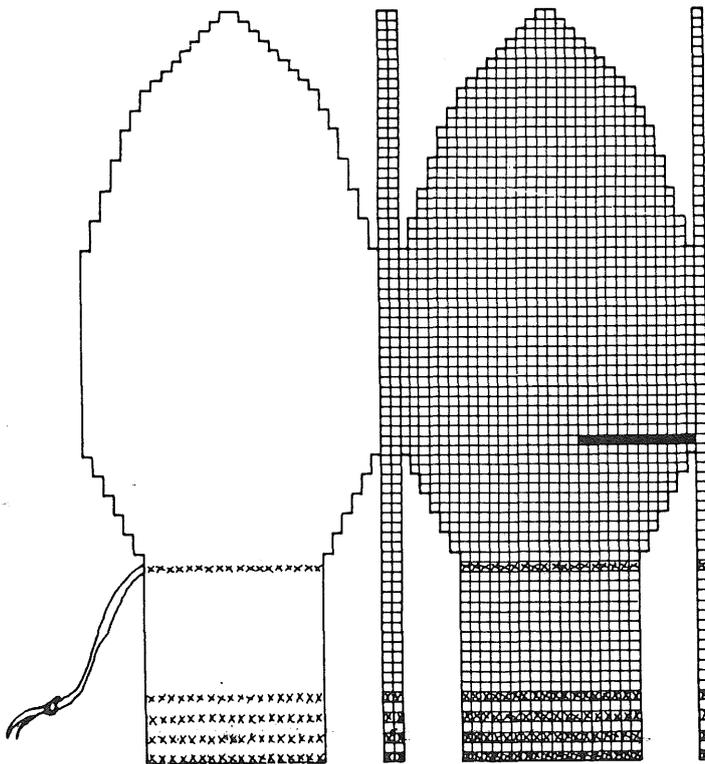


1. Draw parallel lines at 1 1/2" (40 mm) intervals across the piece of wood.
2. Using a handsaw or circular power saw, cut along the lines at a 45° angle to the surface, to a depth of about 3/4" (20mm).
3. Repeat the process in the opposite direction. If you are accurate, a triangular piece of wood should fall out between each pair of lines. If not, use a wood chisel and tap gently from the side to loosen the cut-out piece.



Petter Grønning's Sea Mittens
 Using a set of four or five 7- or 8-inch double-pointed knitting needles in size 2 (3 mm), cast on 52 stitches evenly distributed over the needles. (If your set has four needles, cast onto three; if it has five, cast onto four.) Follow the diagram; each square is one stitch.

□ =knit
 X =purl
 ■ =stitches for thumb



Alfild Hofstad's Birch-Leaf-Shaped Sea Mittens
This pattern is slightly smaller than Petter Grønning's, and is better suited to a woman's hand. These were reconstructed from an old mitten owned by Mrs. Alfild Hofstad.
 Using 7- or 8-inch double-pointed knitting needles in size 4 (3.5 mm), cast on 40 stitches evenly distributed over the needles. Follow the diagram.

□ =knit
 X =purl
 ■ =stitches for thumb

These articles first appeared in SPIN-OFF 13, no.3 (Fall 1989), pages 55-57 and 58-61. Reprinted by permission