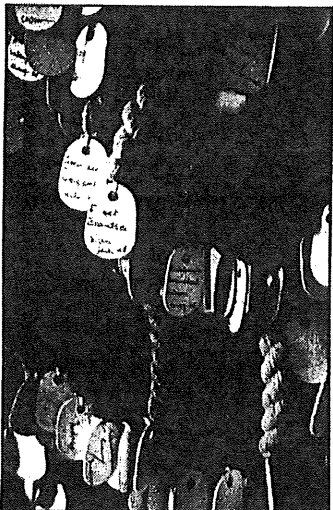


Homegrown, homespun yarn and soft colors from homemade dyes.

COLOR

A weaver: From Norway to the prairie



Tags indicate the substances used in the dyes.



Mrs. Heikes with a poncho and two tapestries she has woven; behind her, the sources of the wool.

Staff Photos by Kent Kobersteen

By Lori Sturdevant
Staff Writer

Vermillion, S.D.

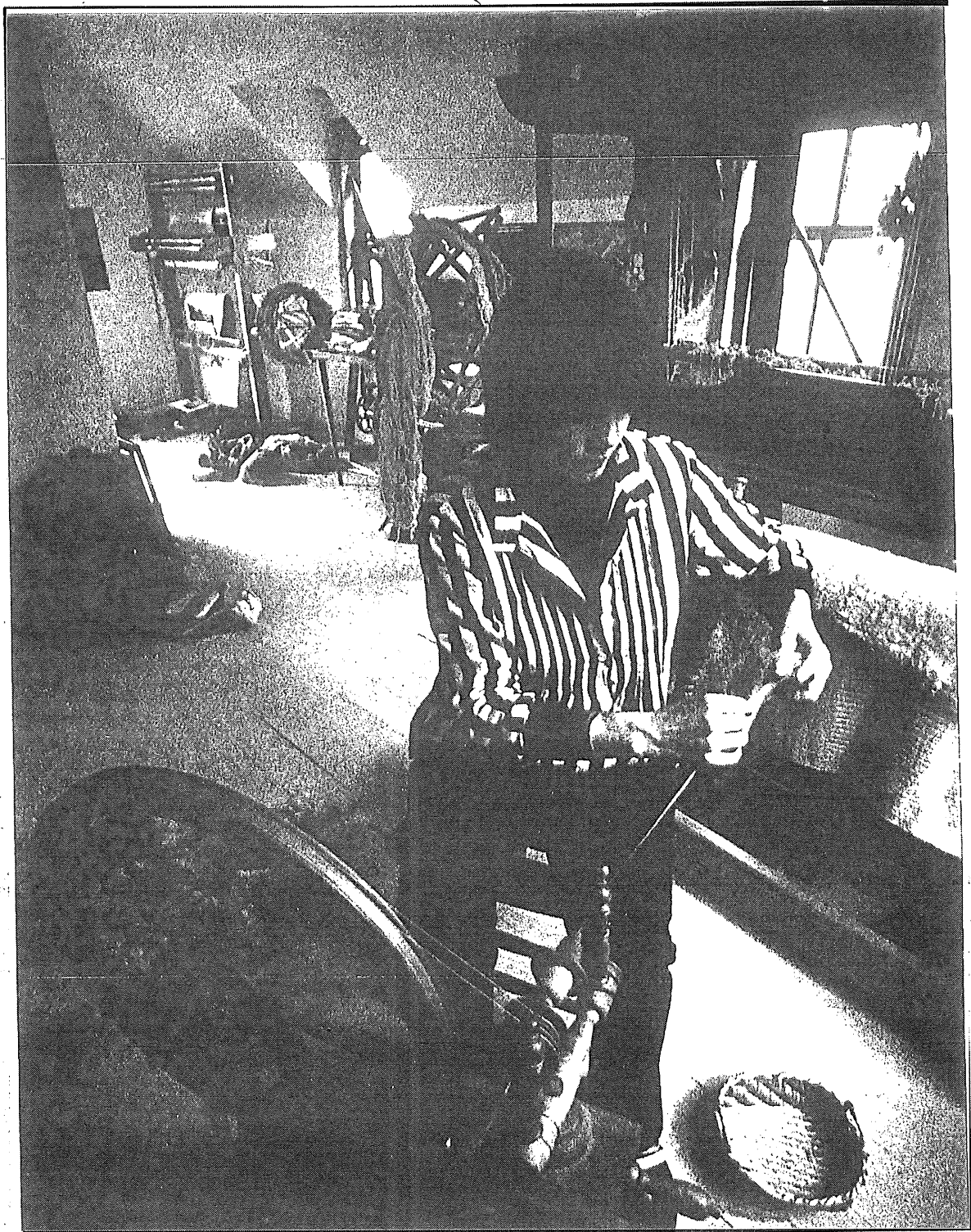
Ahhh . . . the smell of good farm cooking on the stove. Pot roast, garden vegetables — and Russian olive tree soup?

It doesn't take a guest long to appreciate that Grete Bodogaard Heikes of Vermillion, S.D., is no ordinary farm wife. She speaks with a delicate Norwegian accent that's spiced with a pinch of Limey; she has an extraordinary interest in her husband's sheep; she takes long walks in the nearby grove looking for weeds; and she always has a big enamel pot simmering on the stove, full of water, a specimen of local plant life not usually found in farm kitchens and yarn. ▶

18/Picture magazine/28 October 1975

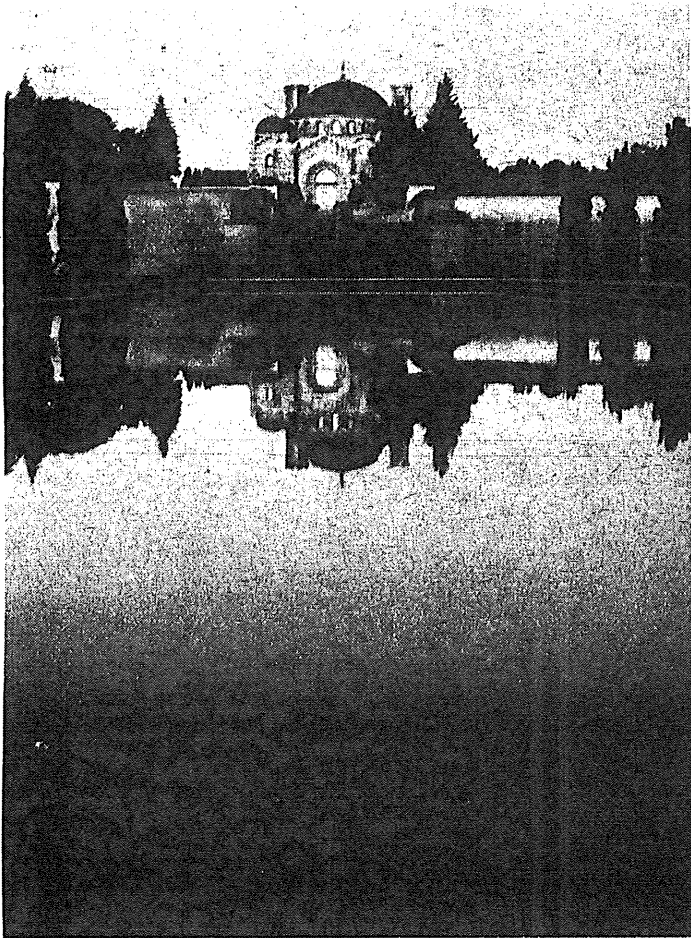
Minneapolis Tribune
10/26/75

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Mrs. Holkes at the spinning wheel in her workroom.

C O L O R



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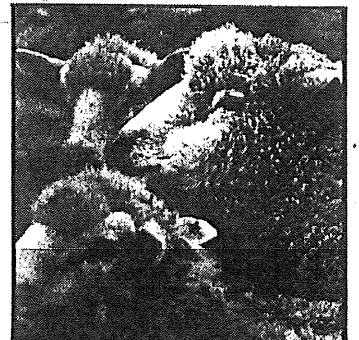
Weaver



Grete and Sam Helkes — with son Erik watching — sheared a sheep; usually they hire a commercial shearer, however.

But her real distinction is what she does with the yarn after it comes out of the pot. She is a professional weaver, trained by skilled masters in Europe, who brought her craft to America when she married a South Dakota farmer five years ago.

Her favorite spot in the old farmhouse is her workroom, which was wired for electricity for the first time in August. There she has three weaver's looms, her spinning wheel and the books she painstakingly prepared as an apprentice weaver in Copenhagen and London. ▶



Finn sheep, which give long-fibred wool.

NOT

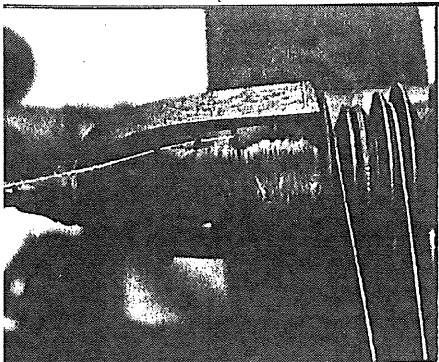


be for carding wool before spinning it.

is style seems novel to her neighbors, themselves are descendants of Norwegian immigrants of the last century. But Helkea, 29, points out that in her hometown it is common for both men and women to choose a craft for their life's work. She learned the craft as an apprentice under a master craftsman and to establish herself with a workshop in their own town.

course I had no idea I'd wind up in the ice," she said, "but I always thought I'd end up going into production with one or two others, work at home and have a little shop."

she thought that wherever she'd take her work, she wouldn't be far from other occasional weavers with whom she could share ideas, lessons and news. She hadn't counted on the scarcity of weavers, occasional and otherwise, on the South Dakota prairie. ▶



l of the spinning wheel.

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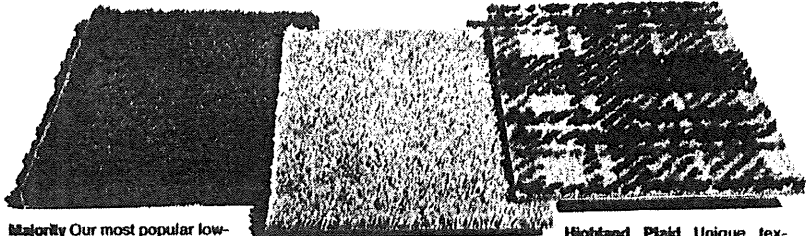


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COLOR

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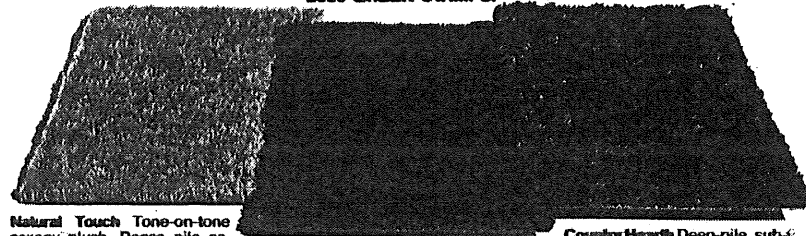


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Weaver

Not that the South Dakotans she's met aren't interested in weaving. Many men as well as women have enrolled in weaving classes Mrs. Helkes helped teach at the University of South Dakota (USD) in Vermillion and South Dakota State University (SDSU) in Brookings. She's won numerous awards at the Midwest Weavers Conference, and in July she presented a commissioned tapestry to the Northcentral Wool Marketing Co-op in Sioux Falls. She's even had a few inquiries from people who want to become apprentice weavers under her tutelage.

But for most Americans, crafts are little more than a pleasant hobby. For Mrs. Helkes, weaving is an eight-hour-a-day, money-making way of life, one in which she finds great satisfaction.

She has control over every step of the weaving process, from sheep to finished garment, tapestry or tablecloth. She has persuaded her husband, an SDSU agronomy graduate, to raise Finn sheep, noted for their long-fibered wool.

"I use wool because it seems to take the dye best," she said, though she occasionally works with the other natural fibers, cotton, linen and silk. She'll resort to a synthetic only at a customer's request.

Though the Helkeses hire a local sheep shearer, they keep the rest of the work in the family. Mrs. Helkes cards, or combs, the shorn wool and then spins it tightly on a spinning wheel. Yarn for weaving must be spun more tightly than is store-bought yarn.

The yarn is then washed in lukewarm water, with Ivory soap and ammonia to open the shell of the wool fiber and make it softer.

The next step, dyeing the yarn, is Mrs. Helkes' special joy. It is a skill she learned at the Historical Archeological Research Center in Lejre, Denmark, where she was taught to duplicate the weaving done in northern Europe during the Bronze and Iron Ages. She became acquainted with the plant dyes weavers used thousands of years ago and claimed them for herself.

Now wherever she goes she's on the lookout for plants that might surrender a still richer brown or a purer green when placed in her big dye pot. She takes her two children, Erik, 4, and Sunni Marie, eight months, with her when she forages along the Big Sioux River for new plants to test in the dye pot.

The recipe is always the same: one pound of plants to one pound of yarn; cover with water; simmer at least three hours, but do not boil dry; remove yarn, rinse and test the dye's fade-resistance by placing a swatch in the sun for several days.

"Most plants do give up some color — usually a gold tone," she said. She's come to rely on certain plants for their characteristic shades: goldenrod flowers yield yellow; beggar tick, orange; birch bark, pink; walnut meats and bark, brown; madder, red, and indigo, blue.

"But you'll never get the same exact shade twice, even if you pick two plants of the ▶

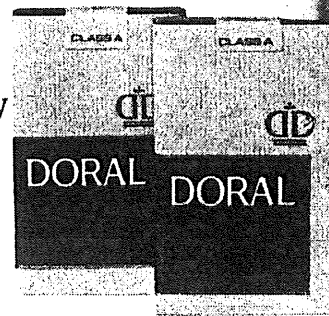
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Weaver



Mrs. Heikes gathered leaves to use in a dye.

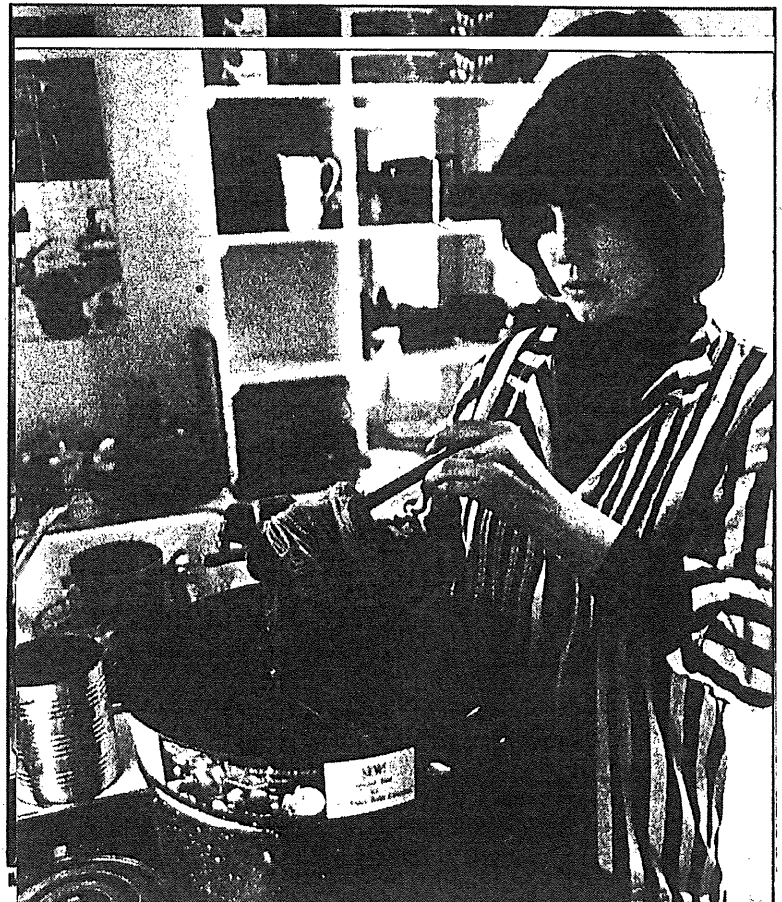
same species from the same location one day apart. Weather conditions, soil conditions—everything will affect the color you get," she explained.

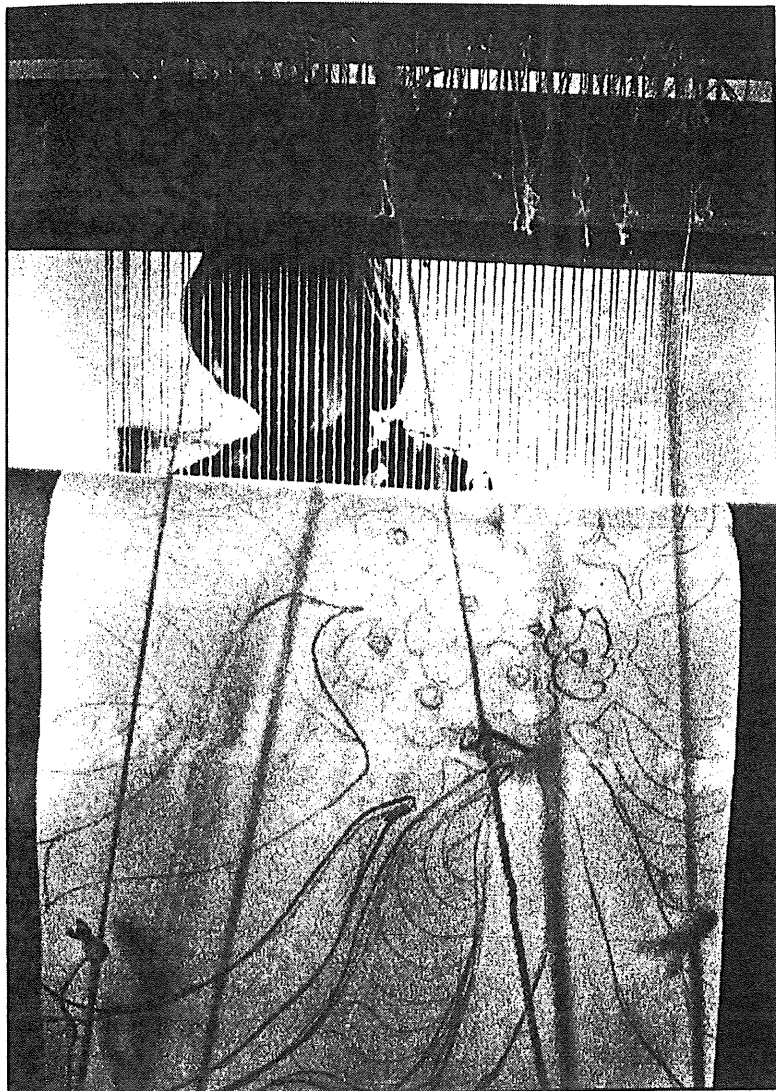
That's part of what Mrs. Heikes sees as the never-ending variety in her work. Variety is also possible in the next step, pattern design, and in weaving techniques.

"What you can do with your product is limitless," she said. "I still don't know what all is possible, and I won't know at the end of my lifetime — it's enormous."

Creating an original design can be the most difficult step, she said. Her work in Denmark and later with a textile conservator for the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum left her with a penchant for ancient designs. She's especially proud of the "bog" style shirts she patterned after European peasant garments worn 2,000 years ago that have been found in peat bogs. From sheep to finished shirt, her work takes about four full days.

Mrs. Heikes tries to work eight hours each day, despite the demands of two preschool





Mrs. Helkes at work at one of her looms.

children and a farmhouse that is being re-modeled.

"You simply have to keep at it or you go dead — you don't get any new ideas, and you don't start any new projects if you don't work," she said. Weaving for her is more than just producing woven cloth; it's creating, and "you have to keep producing to make the money that allows you to do the creating."

Sam Helkes is supportive of his wife's career; he interrupted his own to accompany her to Norway late last year so that she could be certified at the Norwegian Government Teachers College of the Applied Arts in Oslo.

Though Mrs. Helkes has completed her course work, she is still six months short of finishing her apprentice work under her Danish master, Nina Ratje. But she has no plans to return to Europe.

"Like so many other girls, I got married before I was really through with my training," Mrs. Helkes said. She met Sam at a German youth hostel in 1968—"it really

was love at first sight," she confessed, "but I didn't think I'd ever see him again" — and when he came to London six months later with a marriage proposal, she accepted.

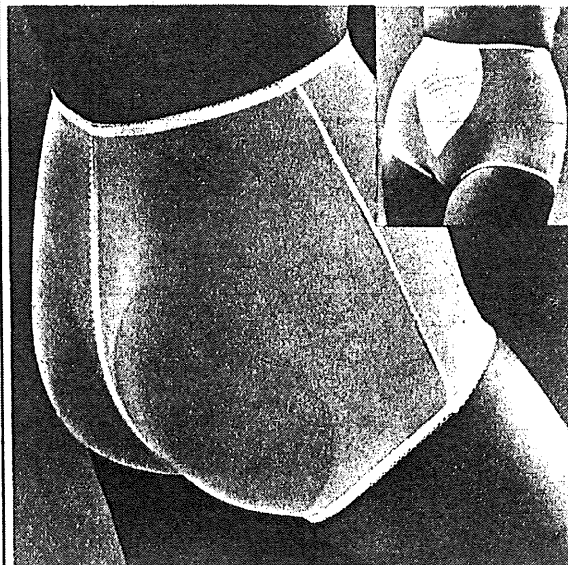
"I thought it would be kind of romantic, being on a farm, independent, doing my work — I wasn't frightened," she recalled. "And I really like to live in America — life is so easy."

But she feels professionally isolated in South Dakota and says she has to send her work out of state to get a price comparable to what her work would bring in Europe. She works both on commission and on consignment; the Grace Beckwith gallery in Wayzata is her major sales outlet, though she has also sold numerous products on the West Coast.

Her hope is to do more teaching and interest more South Dakotans in weaving. She'd like to convince women over age 40 that craft work is an ideal second career.

"The whole thing is to keep on producing, and that's hard to do by oneself," she said.

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