Black Sheep Handspinners Guild Newsletter
October 2008
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http://www.blacksheephandspinnersguild.org

The Black Sheep meet from 11am-3pm on the second Saturday of the month at the Varna Community Center Route 366 in Varna, New York. Exceptions are the months of December, June, July, and August when we meet in member’s homes.

Roc Day Committee Meeting
9/24/08 5pm at Wegman’s
Attending: Sarah Mehta, Jim Johnson, Ruth Allen, Carol LaBorie, Susan Sarabasha

Recorder: Susan Sarabasha
Chair: Jim Johnson

The following positions were identified. Many have chairs but a few still need someone to take charge. Also if you are interested in a job that already has a chair, please contact that person to offer your assistance.

Vendors: Carol LaBorie tusweca_winan@yahoo.com
Ad/Media: Wayne Harbert weh2@cornell.edu
Susan will see about getting us listings in the Interweave Press publications.
Event Contacts: Ruth Allen for email - ruthmumsie@wildblue.net
Sarah at 387-5550 for snail mail
Kitchen Manager: Vickie Marsted george@odyssey.net
Set-up and Clean-up: Jim Johnson hilltoppaddles@earthlink.net
Volunteer Coordinator: setting up half hour slots and getting sign-ups for event day door and other jobs.
Raffles: Ellie May mmay1@twcny.rr.com
Games: Anne Furman and Jane North
Workshops/Programs: We have 2 classrooms for our use. We need someone to oversee and coordinate this area.

Origins of Spinning (debuted at Hemlock) –Ruth Allen
We discussed a dish-to-pass versus catered food. The Kitchen at the First Congregational Church is about the same size as the one at Varna and the eating area can be kept fairly separate from the rest of the events. Carol and Susan were asked at Hemlock if the dish-to-pass was going to be continued in the new location. The person asking said it was her favorite part of the day. By a unanimous vote the dish-to-pass was sustained.

Vendor letters to last year’s vendors will go out in early October. We have a max of 15 vendor slots. The deadline for vendor applications will be Nov 15th. We will keep a waiting list for possible openings.

Next meeting: Saturday, October 18 at 2pm, upstairs at Wegmans. All members are welcome to participate.

From Sheep to Shifu  Wayne Harbert
I’ll start off by confessing that I’m addicted to spindle wheels. My obsession began just over a year ago, when I happened upon my first great wheel at a garage sale. I had no idea how it worked, but it was too intriguing to pass up. One thing led to another and I now own five spindle wheels. I cobbled together the most recent one, pictured below, out of a weathered old drive wheel that I had bought at another sale and assorted odds and ends. (The maidens are handles from an old pair of grass shears. The legs are from an old mop handle. The wheel post is a pine table leg that I bought at Lowes and reshaped in my lathe. I reshaped a smaller table leg to make the axle. The bench is an old piece of 2” x 8” from the barn).
Another of my spindle wheels is a very old one from Japan, dating, as nearly as I can determine, from sometime in the Edo period, before extensive contact with the West. While researching this wheel, I discovered that in those days Japan was a seriously fiber-deprived country. Wool was not cultivated due to lack of grazing land and religious restrictions on eating meat. Flax was unknown, cotton was introduced relatively late and was difficult to cultivate in that climate, and silk, though widely used, was costly. Perhaps because of this they took advantage of more unusual source of fiber for spinning—paper. Papermaking was highly developed, and starting in medieval times the Japanese practiced the art of spinning it into yarn, called shifu—literally, ‘paper yarn’, for clothing, carpets and other purposes. The curious notion that a usable yarn could be spun from something as fragile as paper sounded like something that I would have to try, so my first year of spinning has taken me from sheep to shifu. Although I have only been experimenting with it for a few weeks, without any instructions, I have made both sufficient yarn and sufficient mistakes to venture this little report of lessons learned about an interesting, novel, and relatively easy material for spinning.

Japanese kozo paper, made from the inner bark of mulberry trees, works well for this, making a smooth yarn like cotton. Unryu (‘cloud dragon’), another variety of mulberry paper with long strands of unbeaten fiber in it, makes a coarser, more textured yarn. These can be purchased from art supply stores in 24” x 36” sheets. Most of the work involves the chore of cutting the paper into strips, whose width determines the diameter of the yarn. It is in this area that I have learned the most important lessons. 3/8” strips make a relatively fine yarn, and are a good size to work with. I have found the easiest way to cut a piece of 24” x 36 inch paper into a single continuous strip for spinning into shifu of this size is to fold it roughly into thirds across the 24” width, but subtract 3/4” from the middle section (3/4” being twice the desired width of the strips) and add half of that 3/4” to each of the end sections (Figure A). Fold the top third away from you and the bottom third toward you. This will leave you with a three-layered piece, with single-layered 3/8” strips at top and bottom (figure B).

| 24” x 12 3/8” |
| 24” x 11 1/4” |
| 24 x 12 3/8” |

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The overall idea is to cut the folded paper into a single ribbon of the desired width. The first cut starts at the top edge and goes all the way down through the bottom fold, but does not cut through the single strip at the bottom of the sheet. The next cut then starts at the very bottom edge, and goes all the way up through the top fold, but does not cut through the single strip at the top. The next cut then starts at the very top edge again and so on, all the way across the sheet, so that the parallel cuts start alternating at the top and the bottom, as in Figure B. There are various ways to accomplish this, but my experiments have shown that the easiest way is to make the first cut starting at the top edge, rotate the mat, make the next cut starting at the new top edge, and so on. A good small-diameter rotary cutter is indispensible for this. Try to keep the cut ribbon in its original position throughout, since this will help avoid the problem of tangling. When done, you should have a continuous ribbon 3/8" wide and roughly 64 yards long. Carefully cover the whole mat with one end of a large, dampened towel, carefully turn the mat/paper ribbon/towel sandwich over so that the towel is on the bottom, remove the mat, and fold the bottom half of the damp towel over the top of the cut paper. The object is again to keep from disturbing the position of the paper. Let it sit until the paper is uniformly damp. This may take a while, since it is in layers. It is then ready for spinning. It tends to cling to itself, and the wet ribbon is fragile until spun and will break frequently. This is not as great a problem as it might be, since damp paper joins more readily than any other fiber I have spun. Spin slowly, directly from the towel, gradually folding the towel back to expose more of the ribbon as needed. This will keep the ribbon from tangling and make it possible to locate the end easily when it breaks. When the ribbon breaks, simply overlap the two ends (untwisting the one on the spindle for an inch or two if necessary) to make a join. This paper spins pleasingly well on a spindle wheel (I haven’t tried spinning it in other ways), and, once twisted, yields a surprisingly supple, strong yarn.

Anne and Jean’s Excellent Adventures
Out in the middle of nowhere, the 69 year old grandmother set up a large pot with fermented mare’s milk on the ger stove, hung a metal pot inside the large pot, covered it all with a lid and stuffed all the edges with cloth strips to keep the steam in. Then she stoked the fire. Just twenty minutes later, we were tasting the alcohol she had made! We were a small group of five along with our guide Asem and driver Suur on a trip to the Gobi Desert in Mongolia sponsored by the Snow Leopard Trust (www.snowleopard.org). While we waited for the drink, we talked with the woman about her camel hair spinning and the community-based efforts to help preserve snow leopards and their prey. Snow leopards are endangered and illegal to kill in Mongolia, but nomadic herders will do so if they believe their sheep or cashmere goats are threatened. The Snow Leopard Trust in conjunction with the Mongolian-based Snow Leopard Enterprises has 400 families in 29 communities working on various enterprises that will provide additional guaranteed income AND, if the community has not killed a snow leopard or any of their prey such as ibex or arguli sheep, the community receives an annual bonus. One key enterprise is using the camel wool (as opposed to the hair which is used for making ropes for animal tethers and ger construction) for spinning and knitting.

This grandmother learned to spin on a treadle wheel and produced beautiful evenly spun and plied yarn which was collected by her local coordinator. Jean had taken a drop spindle, and everyone but the grandmother could manage to get a few inches with it – she could only spin on her wheel!

We later visited the building in nearby Gurvantes where the local coordinators taught spinning and managed the community efforts. Adult women are taught to spin in 10 days. They can borrow a carder as needed and also a spinning wheel. All the equipment is locally made. Their main product is skeins of yarn, but some also knit socks and lovely scarves. All proceeds go to the spinner and the bonuses go to the enterprise community. Other enterprises include vegetables where irrigation is established, coal briquettes to replace the wood that herders must collect with great effort, dairy products, and clothing. We asked how an enterprise community might get started – it is wonderful example of democracy at work! Several families just talk and agree to
work together, to invest money, and provide low interest loans. They meet four times a year to discuss new ideas and how things are going. The coordinators that we met from the Snow Leopard Enterprises get a per diem but are not paid. The community leaders are often women. Mongolia has been developing as a democracy since 1990. Nomadic herders had to adjust to a cash economy and a very different approach to rural development. The guaranteed salaries they used to get from the centralized government have gone, so herd sizes have increased to the detriment of the Gobi Desert. This is a unique transition period, and these new enterprises both diversify the economy and support a fledgling democracy.

The grandmother’s ger was typical of many that we visited. It is a felt building we would commonly call a yurt. Her possessions were fairly simple: containers for milk (sheep, goat, camel, and horse), cooking pots, chests for food, clothing and so forth, low table and stools, bedding folded up out of the way, and a Buddhist shrine. And of course, her spinning wheel. A small solar panel powered a tv with rabbit ears, a radio, and charged her cell phone. Her goats and sheep were out grazing and the camel wool probably came from a member of her family. Water would be delivered from a nearby well, and her latrine – well, we never did find it! She would move her ger 3-4 times a year so that the animals would have access to new grazing. The Gobi Desert has more vegetation and people than we expected, but it is a fragile environment that is extremely dry and very, very cold in the winter. A weather phenomenon called a zud, when a more than usually dry summer is followed by a worse than usual winter so that there is no fodder for the animals in the winter, has killed millions of animals in the last few years.

Nomadic herders still have a traditional way of life but they have incorporated many modern conveniences: motorbikes along with their horses, western style clothing under their traditional dels, cell phones which worked almost everywhere in Mongolia, although the cell towers were not obvious, solar panels and windmills to provide small amounts of power. The felt for the gers is made commercially as are the wooden parts but the gers are still constructed in the old way. Spring cleaning means taking the ger apart and washing everything, and then putting it back together!

The story of the Snow Leopard Trust and the research they are doing in Mongolia and other countries will be in an upcoming newsletter.
**Guild meetings:**

October 11, 2008, 11 AM to 3 PM  
Varna Community Center, Route 366  
November 8, 2008

**New York State Sheep and Wool Festival** Rheinbeck,  
New York  
October 18th and 19th  
[http://www.sheepandwool.com](http://www.sheepandwool.com)

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**To place an ad**

A check for $5.00 made to BSHG for an ad to run three times (a year is $15) should be sent to the current treasurer, Eleanor May, 1360 Slaterville Road, Ithaca, NY. 14850. Send the ad to the newsletter editor, Anne Furman at: ahf@ftlg.net. If you have a question for her or others, you can email us through the links at the top of the newsletter.

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The newsletter editor is indebted to the Roc Day Committee for their work and their notes, to Wayne Harbert for his fascinating, ongoing research, and to Jean Currie for her adventurous spirit and her astonishing ability to ask the right person the right question at the right time. Thank you all.

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