President’s Message
Jim Johnson

Happy Easter, Passover, Spring Break, and the coming of warmer weather! Hopefully our supply of wood pellets will keep our stove stoked and burning until the warmer weather is really here and your fuel of choice does not bankrupt you before then as well. The last two business meetings have run quite a bit longer than I hoped. However, so far the agenda for this meeting seems pleasurably light. In that case, happy spinning.

Agenda for the February 13 Meeting:
1. Introductions and show and tell
2. Discussion of possible workshop/program
3. Announcements
4. Interest groups that wish to meet may announce themselves
5. Spin in

Photo credit: Susan Sarabasha
Adventures in Twist
Teresa Porri

For long-story types of reasons, I've recently been getting interested in the effect of both singles and plying twist on a final knitted product. At the last Guild meeting we had a really excellent discussion about this, and I thought I'd talk a little about my own approach. I encourage you to try this, and see what you think!

I tried to get as scientific about this as I could without killing the fun. (As a scientist, though, I admit that my personal limit for "not killing the fun" is probably way farther out than a normal person's. Your mileage may vary.) I decided that, for now, I would focus on 2-ply yarns spun Z and plied S, for knitting. I spun low-twist, medium-twist, and high-twist singles, and for each of those conditions I made a balanced and an over-plied yarn: 6 samples all together. I measured the twists per inch (tpi) and twist angle after the fact, but to start with, I just made what I considered to be "low twist" or "over-plied".

I tried to eliminate as many variables as possible. I used the same fiber for all of the samples--a medium-soft commercial Corriedale top, with an occasional tuft of gray wool/silk added in so that I could see the twist more clearly as I worked. I spun the singles to a comparable thickness, about 20wpi, and washed all of the plied yarns in a little hot water.

The first thing I'd noticed, before I even started knitting the samples, was the incredible effect that a little hot water had on all the yarns. One of the over-plied yarns had so much energy before it went into the bath that I had a hard time keeping the skein organized, but after, they were all
willing to lay flat on a towel. I could tell even at this point that yarn can absorb a lot more twist than I would have originally guessed.

I knit nearly-identical swatches with each 5-10 yard sample on a size 5US needle. The swatch consisted of a small cable next to some stockinette, followed by a short piece of ribbing. The swatches were about 3x4 inches.

I think all of the yarns would be good for a certain kind of project. Here's a quick run-down of my observations.

- Low twist singles, balanced plying twist: Something soft, where a bit of a halo is okay. A scarf, a soft toy, or felted slippers.
- Low twist singles, over-balanced plying twist: I was surprised at how much I liked this one. Soft yet elastic, it'd be great for hats or mittens.
- Medium twist singles, balanced plying twist: My usual yarn. Good stitch definition for cables or knit-purl patterns.
- Medium twist singles, overplied: Elastic but slightly harsher feeling than the balanced yarn. It'd be good for the ribbing of a sweater, if the balanced medium-twist yarn composed the body of the sweater.
- High twist singles, balanced: Very elastic and bouncy. Should be good for socks or items that will see a lot of abrasion that you don't want to felt.
- High twist singles, over-plied: Another pleasant surprise. The yarn feels somewhat harsh but stockinette stitch makes a very well defined, interesting looking fabric.

Another interesting observation: No biasing of the knitted fabric in any of the overplied yarns! I'm sure it's possible to put in enough twist to cause biasing, but these yarns had a LOT of excess energy and they all looked just fine.

This was actually a lot of fun, and very interesting. I may try looking at underplied yarns to have a more complete picture, and also at 3-ply yarns, which I love to spin and work with.

If you’re interested in experimenting yourself, I’d recommend looking at the April 2008 issue of the Guild newsletter (available on the Black Sheep website). Wayne has an excellent chart for determining the amount of twist that should be in a particular yarn and some tips for determining twist.

A New Twist in the History of Handspinning

Wayne Harbert

The story of how the tools of our craft evolved is a familiar one. Our ancestors twisted fibers between their fingers or with their palms against their thighs for who knows how long--maybe centuries, maybe millennia--before the first and most significant ancient technological leap: the creation of the handspindle. I think that this must have been as close to a universal invention as there has ever been; prehistoric archaeological sites all over the world are littered with spindle.
whorls. Then, after who knows how many more centuries (or millennia), some ancient spinner in India got the idea of fixing a spindle horizontally and driving it with a bigger wheel, and the spinning wheel was born. It spread slowly but widely, reaching even the European hinterland in the wake of the crusades. There, some folks (Leonardo da Vinci had a hand in this) further embellished it with a rotating flyer, and, behold, the flyer wheel, which would in time shove all others to the side. The flyer twists the yarn by swinging it in a big circle around the axis, and the spindle is relegated to the humble role of receptacle for the twisted yarn.

All of the spinning tools that we use at our Guild meetings fit neatly along this evolutionary path. But while browsing the Internet in search of unusual wheels, I’ve happened upon pictures of tools billed as “Mayan spinners” which seem to represent a detour from this simple progression. My interest piqued, I set off to find out more about them. They consist of a flat stick with a hole drilled through it very close to one end, and a dowel which fits loosely through the hole. The short arm of the stick is notched so the fiber can be tied to it. The dowel is held horizontally, and the stick is twirled around on it like one of those New Year’s noisemakers. As the stick spins around the dowel, it imparts twist to the fiber.

Although the ones on the internet are advertised for spinning yarn, it appears that these devices weren’t used by Mayas, ancient or modern, for that purpose; Mayan archaeological sites, like all others, are chock full of spindle whorls of all sizes, shapes and materials. The fancier ones seem to have been symbols of status. And pictures of modern Guatemalan spinners show them with handspindles that we would all recognize. Up the road in Mexico, the Aztecs had a goddess of spinning (and all other things pertaining to women) named Tlazolteotl, who is depicted wearing handspindles as decorations in her hair and wielding them as staffs and weapons.1 Those ancient Mesoamericans took their handspindles seriously.

Rather, the ‘spinning’ tool pictured here is employed by the Mayas in some areas of Guatemala in a kindred craft—rope and cord making, using maguey, the fiber from various agave species, as the raw material.2 The ropemaker doesn’t work alone; an assistant holds the other end of the fiber, drafting it and feeding new strands into it while the craftsman twirls the stick around on its axis, twisting the twine as he backs away from his helper. A similar device was used elsewhere in the Americas. Crockett shows one used by the Coushatta (Koasati) Indians in Louisiana for

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making rope (or very thick yarn) out of Spanish moss.\(^3\) A WPA report from the 1940s describes one used in New Mexico to make rope from horse hair. It is called a *tarabilla*.\(^4\) Kniffen notes that a similar device was also found in isolated areas of Spain, where it was used for ropemaking, and concludes from its distribution in the Americas (for which he provides a map) that it was imported from Spain to the New World along with cattle culture.\(^5\)

What struck me particularly is that the flat stick of the *tarabilla* is nothing other than a flyer; it puts twist into the fiber by swinging it in a big circle around the axis. So the flyer, as well as the spindle, had been invented in some places before the spinning wheel. Both concepts were incorporated into handheld devices. But the handspindle was used for spinning yarn, while the *tarabilla* was employed basically, if not exclusively, for ropemaking. Why? After some experiments with prototypes I’ve built, I conclude that it was all a matter of power and orientation. The *tarabilla* is always under power. You twirl it around constantly, because if you stop, it does. This makes for a lot of torque—an advantage when twisting something like rope, which needs to be twisted tightly and which, because of its thickness, puts up a lot of resistance. And the fact that the *tarabilla* (unlike the handspindle) can be operated horizontally is also an advantage in ropemaking, since it would be highly inconvenient to be limited in that craft to the distance between you and the ground for each draft. Operated horizontally, the *tarabilla* allows you to make the rope arbitrarily long. So, can you spin yarn on them, too? Yes, if you make them small enough. I’ve been practicing on a tiny one I made of a flat piece of stone that fits in my palm. But it’s not as easy as spindle spinning. The advantages they have in ropemaking become disadvantages in spinning yarn. Spindles don’t have to be under power every second. You set them spinning and inertia will keep them moving for long enough for you to finish the draft. The need to keep twirling *tarabillas* all through the spinning process not only expends energy uselessly but keeps the twirling hand from participating in the task of drafting the yarn. Once again, those old folks seem to have had all of this pretty well sorted out.

But what if you were to fix a *tarabilla* on a frame and use a drivewheel to power it? Attached to a treadle, perhaps? What would spinning on a contraption like that be like? That experiment is still in progress. I’ll let you know what I find out.


\(^4\) Rebolledo, Tey and Maria Màrquez, eds. 2000. *Women’s Tales from the New Mexico WPA*. p. 432.

Editor's Notes
Marianne Pelletier

Minutes from the March Meeting:

- For the fall retreat, members talked about what used to be the Stella Maris retreat, now led by Carol LaBorie. The retreat can accommodate 18 people. The group voted to go to Stella Maris this year, October 1-3.
- Anne Costley introduced new members.
- Sharon Gombas mailed Marianne Pelletier the membership list for distribution with this newsletter.
- A small group helping to settle Celia's estate started a discussion on selling the remainder of her yarn. There was considerable discussion on the fairness of offering the yarn first to Guild members before opening an event up to local yarn guilds. Members mentioned several options, settling on Guild members being allowed to preview a half hour before the open sale. This event will happen at the church at 3:00 pm, following a Guild meeting. Because of programming considerations, the date was not chosen.
- April 24 is Earth Day. We are invited to go demonstrate. If you're interested, please get in touch with Ruth Allen.
- This History Center of Tompkins County is displaying Hungarian textiles at present. Hours are Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays from 11:00 to 5:00.

Other Odd Notes

Edith Cooper is looking for someone to spin some years’ worth of alpaca fiber. Jim spoke with her and tells me that she doesn't seem to understand how to get the stuff commercially spun, and doesn't seem to know how to tell the quality of the wool. If you're up for the gamble, give her a ring (or e-mail): edingbat@frontier.com or edingbat2@yahoo.com; (607)844-4563.

From one of my knitting lists, this YouTube video on how a gas company used knitting to show the movement of heat: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQ-mVJEbJpE

Susan sent me this link to an article on knitting Army men: http://www.startribune.com/local/west/86723927.html?elr=KArks:DCiU1PciUiD3aPc:_Yyc:aU
Congratulations, Kate!
For knitting up your very first handspun.
*Photo by Susan Sarabasha*

Upcoming Events
*Marianne thanks Knitter's Review for most of these listings. Oh, and for including Roc Day in their listings. Please forward events you know of to Marianne at fudger28@yahoo.com for inclusion on this list.*

**World Sheep and Wool Congress**
There has to be a sheepish pun in here somewhere. Rosehill Gardens Event Centre, Sydney, Australia, April 6-9.

**Minnesota Alpaca Expo**

**Denmark Sheepfest**
April 17. Denmark Arts Center, Denmark, ME (fooled ya'!). [http://www.denmarksheepfest.com/](http://www.denmarksheepfest.com/)

**Stitches South**
April 22-25. Renaissance Waverly Hotel & Cobb Galleria Centre, Atlanta, GA.
23rd Annual Sheep Shearing Festival  
April 24. Gore Place, Waltham, MA. http://www.goreplace.org/sheepshearing.htm

Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival  
May 1-2, Howard County Fairgrounds, West Friendship, MD. http://www.sheepandwool.org/

Focus on Fiber  
July 9-11, Madison County Fair. They are looking for exhibitors. They say, "The fairgrounds are in Brookfield, which is located about 30 minutes south of Utica." They did not leave a web page, but the note came from Pam Haendle, pamela.haendle@bnymellon.com.

North Country Spinners  
September 24-26, 2010  
Johnsonburg Presbyterian Center, Johnsonburg, NJ, Warren County.  
http://www.northcountryspinners.org/retreat.htm

Northeast Handspinners Conference  
November 5 to 7 at the Grand Summit Resort, Mt. Snow, VT. Submitted by Nancy Morey -- thanks!
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