

Black Sheep Handspinners Guild Newsletter

March 2010

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<http://www.blacksheephandspinnersguild.org>

The Black Sheep meet from 11am-3pm on the second Saturday of the month at the All Saints Church, Route 34b in Lansing.

We are meeting at the All Saint's Church in Lansing, across from the Lansing Schools, from 11AM to 3PM, March 13, 2010 .

Dues for 2010 are \$20.00 Either cash or checks are good – Sharon Gombas will collect dues.

Congratulations to Synnove Heggoy who won the afghan! She bought her raffle ticket at Roc Day.



Marianne thanks Susan Sarabasha for sharing these photos from the Fiber Tasting event at our February meeting.

President's Message

Jim Johnson

Don't forget, this month is the inauguration of MEMBER MADE. This is open to all members of the guild and is a time to share some of the things we do besides spin. Bring things that you have made, grown or processed and wish to share with or sell to others in the guild. This is a chance to get to know something more about all of us. Tables will be available for use.

Agenda for the February 13 Meeting:

1. Greetings and show and tell table
2. Membership committee
3. E-mail list questions, for discussion
4. Announcement of April sale
 General announcements
5. Program

Guild Programs

From Teresa Porri:



Next month I will be leading a discussion group on the effect of singles and plying twist on a project. Is it better to use a low-twist yarn for cables or lace? How do you make a hard-wearing yarn without it feeling like twine? And how important is a balanced yarn, anyways?

I've been spinning and knitting a variety of samples for the last month or two and I thought that this might provoke some interesting discussion. I encourage you to bring in yarns you like and yarns you don't that you're willing to dissect a few inches of. They can be commercially spun or handspun. And of course, bring lots of opinions!

We'll meet after the business meeting, either in the main room or one of the classrooms, depending on the number of people that are interested. All skill levels are invited.

Knitting/Crocheting for the Community

We started meeting a year ago when Michelle Obama wrote to Susan Sarabasha asking her to do something continuing for her community. Of course, about a million people received the same letter but still... This encouragement sparked Susan into starting this group.

We knit and/or crochet with wool or other fibers (including acrylic) for the outlying Food Pantries and School Back Pack groups of Tompkins County. Each month we select one or two areas from our list and send on whatever we have finished.

We have made hats, gloves, mittens, fingerless mitts, scarves, baby items, small afghans, small shawls, slippers - whatever the maker desires to make in any color and any size with whatever yarn the maker chooses. Last summer we concentrated on cotton toiletry bags and washcloths which were given to a local women's shelter as the women and children sheltered often arrive with little to nothing of their own.

Our offerings have been incredibly appreciated as not only needed warmth and useful but also as well made and interesting to choose from by the recipients.

If you would like to join us:

5-8 pm, the second Monday of every month. Next meeting March 22 (different this month because of room availability).

St John's Episcopal Church (red door on Cayuga St, then down the steps to your right) to share ideas, work time and socializing.

Optional - bring a snack or a sandwich and a cup. Tea is available as are yarn and patterns but bring your own hooks or needles.

If you can't make the work meeting but still want to donate an item, you can drop it off at St John's (make sure you label your item contents and that it is for our group) or give it to Susan S or Charlotte at one of our guild meetings.

To be placed on the email reminder list please email Susan at sarabasha@earthlink.net.

Spinning Cotton As a Political Act

Marianne Pelletier

I was at a festival and rode the trolley around the grounds often. A black woman with gorgeous, colorful clothing and a beautiful walking stick joined me a few times, since we were camping near each other. We got to talking.

She lives in Florida and a friend from Georgia had some time ago given her some cotton seeds, taking them to remember her own family's heritage. My trolley companion planted one and now has a cotton tree. I mentioned my spinning hobby and she offered to send me cotton bolls. She also told me that sending me seeds with the bolls would be a protest against the control of cotton growing in the United States. Startled that any crop beside marijuana and its ilk would be

controlled, I asked for more information. Since I am a researcher by profession, I also looked it up.

Cotton originated in India, where according to Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cotton>), the British controlled its processing in the 18th and early 19th centuries by forcing Indians to buy manufactured textiles from Britain after supplying raw cotton. Cheaper and better cotton was produced in the 19th century in the United States because it was produced by slaves. During the Civil War, Indian cotton production increased again to replace the blockaded American goods.

At the start of the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi propagated the use of the charkha in India to defy British rule. In his autobiography, he confesses, "I do not remember to have seen a handloom or a spinning wheel when in 1908 I described it in *Hind Swaraj* as the panacea for the growing pauperism in India."¹ He later confessed that his group of protestors could not find someone to help them learn how to spin, because only women in remote corners of India still spun by hand. They found a teacher in 1917 in Lady Majmundar.² Our widespread use of charkhas to spin cotton is because of Gandhi's desire to make spinning cotton accessible to everyone -- he wanted a portable spinning device.

The movement of handspinning and hand weaving one's own clothes gave rise to India's khadi, a simple handspun, handwoven garment that became the symbol of Indian patriotism for years to come. A friend of mine described it as the garment that she and her friends wore to express their national pride. "Hand spun cotton is so much thicker than machine spun cotton," she told me. "So the khadis were hot, but we wore them all the way through college," she said, waving away the memory of wearing such a hot garment in a very hot country. She told me later, "My relatives (and everyone else) made large bonfires of all their expensive machine-made cloth. Very public 'civil disobedience' and 'non-cooperation' acts." According to Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kh%C4%81d%C4%AB>), most politicians wear only khadis, and the flag of India is made with khadi cloth.

My friend also told me about other parts of the movement. "People all went to jail," she explained. "Everyone went out and broke the law all on one day. They didn't have enough room to jail all of them. My uncle went to jail. They were all very proud to do so." Spinning cotton was the Indian people's first form of protest, and was followed up by these other acts of peaceful disobedience to British rule.

Today, the National Cotton Council notes that China grows the most cotton, followed by India. The U.S. is third, with Texas leading our production (<http://www.cotton.org/edu/faq/>). What happened to the south, where the slaves grew so much cotton?

Here's some more from Wikipedia, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_the_United_States#Sharecropping), describing how 78% of the nation's cotton was grown in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana in 1859.

¹ Gandhi, Mahatma. *Gandhi*. (1993: Boston. Beacon Press), p. 489. I borrowed my copy from the Tompkins library.

² *Ibid* p. 491

Following emancipation, landholders turned to sharecropping to keep growing cotton. Read the story here: http://www.english.illinois.edu/Maps/poets/a_f/brown/sharecropping.htm. The issue was that the landowners charged such high interest rates on the equipment and supplies that the sharecroppers could not get out of debt, thereby tying them to the land, despite that they were free people. This arrangement swallowed both freed black slaves and disenfranchised white farmers.

In the 1930s, these tenant farmers protested by forming unions. According to Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharecropping>), "landlords responded with a wave of terror." Strikes continued into the 1940s, when mechanization of the cotton growing process forced tenant farmers off the land. They went north to work in industry.³

The next U.S. protest against the establishment actually started in 1853, when Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis invented a process to add rivets to pants to support the gold miners.⁴ Typical American ingenuity story, right?

Except that blue jeans have become a protest vehicle for Americans. Think about all the hippies in the 1960s whose uniforms included faded blue jeans, a denim jacket decorated wildly (or a fringed leather jacket), and a lot of hair on the head. From fiftiesweb.com (<http://www.fiftiesweb.com/fashion/hippie-clothes.htm>), "The new hippie clothes style wasn't great for retailers either. Shopping at the Army Surplus tends to undercut major department stores. Handmade and natural were sacred words. We crafted by doing macramé, beading, all sorts of homespun things that kids today wouldn't be caught dead doing." Or, to be more specific from Love To Know (http://womens-fashion.lovetoknow.com/1960s_Hippie_Fashion): "As such, hippie clothing was often loose and made of natural fibers like cotton and hemp."

The Casual Friday movement came out of the west coast in the 1990s, where programmers worked exorbitant hours and therefore dressed comfortably to be able to keep at it. Now, Casual Friday has permeated most organizations, bringing jeans into the office where only suits would formerly dare to tread.

Let's bring back that thought about movements affecting retailers to wrap up our story: now, in the new millennium, we are becoming locavores, preferring to buy local foods. In addition, more retailers are cropping up following the example of Bath and Body Works and Ten Thousand Villages, bringing imports from the farmers themselves to our markets so we can participate in fair trade. I am reminded of the time that I visited the incredibly impoverished country, Guatemala, as part of a cruise. The nation's most famous architect was our guide for the ruins tour, and she educated us -- a household is wealthy according to its number of women because women weave, and that is how a household gets its wealth in Guatemala. While there, I bought two woven items from a proud woman, who wore hers folded and hanging off of one shoulder. She told me that the items could be good table runners. I have not yet had the courage to wear

³ I have recently been fascinated by the story of the rise of blacks to the middle class through the railroads.

⁴ Go to levistrauss.com for the whole timeline.

my gorgeous handmade shoulder garment, since I tend to mute my dress to help balance my loud personality.

Here in the U.S., the cotton that we grow is seeded mostly by the larger manufacturers, including Monsanto, who sold its Pedigreed Seed Company to a German firm in 2007⁵. The protest against this practice, according to my festival trolley friend, is that seed companies are producing seeds that are sterile. Monsanto is certainly not the only seed producer who creates sterile seeds; it has become such a common practice that the heritage seed movement arose recently to combat this practice.

Farmers who used to extract the seeds from cotton bolls for their next crop now have to buy new seed from the seed company. So, not only is there a movement to buy local and to buy organic, but now there is a movement to buy heritage seeds as well. And my friend is trying to extend that movement to cotton.

A quick search using Google reveals a few heritage seed companies offering open pollinated cotton seeds.

There are laws, however, around which states allow cotton to be grown outside of commercial farming. My friend asserts that it's the big companies who are insisting on restricting small farmers from growing cotton, but our local cooperative extension, and a few people on my charkha spinning listserv, remind me that cotton growing is limited in order to control the boll weevil and protect the crops grown by commercial operations.

In New York State, it is not only legal to grow cotton (if you can in this climate), it is also legal to grow tobacco, which my research tells me would discourage deer from my fields.

Leaving aside the ethical dilemma over growing tobacco, my journey brings me back to this: the bolls my friend sent me include seeds, which I can plant to grow my own cotton. Since I'll most likely have to grow the plant indoors for it to stay alive up on my cold hill, I would get very little home grown cotton, but I'll feel like I'm participating in a time-honored tradition of using this staple as a means of protest against some big establishment hell bent on controlling me for the sake of profit.

I own two charkhas: one hand made in India and difficult to use, one made by Jonathon Bosworth and gorgeous to touch and to operate. So, here I sit all fat and happy playing around with my (okay, a little expensive) toy, with a stash of cotton that includes punis from India, hand processed cotton from a pile of ginned cotton that I bought a long time ago, slivers that I bought at fairs from a mom and pop booth, and a few bolls given to me by a woman who asked me to carry on the protest with her.

Will I get caught up in some movement? I'm not sure. My cotton spinning is clumsy since I learned on wool first, and I hold the cotton too tightly. But whatever I do, spinning cotton will

⁵ I picked this up from <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-164279286.html>

remind me of all the spinners before me, most who did it either to clothe their families or to make social change, or both.

Editor's Notes

Marianne Pelletier

From Sarosh Olpadwala, off our web page: "I am looking for assistance in spinning my dog's very soft undercoat fur into dog-wool. Are there Guild members that do this regularly or otherwise would be interested in doing it for me? I am happy to pay them or share the wool, whatever they wish.

I have asked around the community and your Guild comes highly recommended. Any assistance you can provide is greatly appreciated."

Sarosh Olpadwala

so20@cornell.edu | (202) 329-4139



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.

Alaska Fiber Festival

March 5-14, all over Anchorage, AK. <http://www.alaskafiberfestival.org/>

Knitting, Yoga & Meditation

Ohm, you only get to do it for one day. March 12, Burlington, VT, which will be almost as cold as Anchorage. <http://www.coolmoonyoga.com/Workshops.html>

Fiber Retreat 2010

George Washington Multipurpose Building, Jefferson City, MO, March 12-13.
<http://extension.missouri.edu/fiber/2010/>

Public Grand Opening of New Contemporary & Traditional Fiber Gallery

Some Things Looming Gallery & Studio, Reading, PA, March 13-14.
<http://www.somethingslooming.com/>

Camp Pluckyfluff England

Count me first in line to watch the YouTube videos from this one. March 13-14, Long Ashton Community Centre, Bristol, England, UK. <http://www.pluckyfluff.com/camp.html>

East Side/West Side-Uptown/Downtown: SusanSez NYC Knitting Crawl Walkabout

New York City, March 18. East Side/West Side-Uptown/Downtown: SusanSez NYC Knitting Crawl Walkabout

Orenburg Russian Knitted Lace Workshop with Galina Khmeleva

March 22-23, Italian Alps & Venice -- not Russia.

<http://www.alpineadventureagency.com/dream-vacations/fiber-workshops/galina-orenburg-lace.html#Top>

Fibreswest

AgRec Building, Abbotsford Exhibition Park Grounds, Abbotsford, BC, March 26-27.
<http://www.fibreswest.com/>

Textiles & Folk Art Tour: The Mexican Rebozo, Techniques and Heritage

Mexico City, Mexico. April 2-11. Textiles & Folk Art Tour: The Mexican Rebozo, Techniques and Heritage

World Sheep and Wool Congress

Rosehill Gardens Event Centre, Sydney, Australia, April 6-9.
<http://www.worldsheepandwoolcongress.com/>

North Country Spinners

September 24-26, 2010

Johnsonburg Presbyterian Center, Johnsonburg, NJ, Warren County.

Located in the northwestern corner of NJ. To locate please click **here**
<http://www.northcountryspinners.org/retreat.htm>

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Finger Lakes Fiber Arts Festival
Hemlock, N.Y.

Christine Johnson
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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, Sharon Gombas, 177 Salmon Creek Rd. Lansing, NY 14882. Send the ad to the newsletter editor, Marianne Pelletier, at: fudger28@yahoo.com. 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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