Home Grown Knits in Red Cliffe, From Sheep to Socks

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While most people in Newfoundland and Labrador might be familiar with traditional knitting styles and patterns, knitting heritage in the province goes beyond simply making mitts, socks, and sweaters, beginning instead with sheep, farms, and meadows. As Hilda Quinton told us, in the past "You couldn't buy yarn, had to keep the sheep to get the wool, to spin into-into yarn, you know?..to knit socks and mitts and that [kind of thing] for the men, for the people" (Quinton & Quinton 2021a).

In this context historical knitting was, without a doubt, a far more involved process than knitting today - centered around raising sheep in order to make the yarn that would be used to make the clothes everyone needed to stay warm year round during the island's long, harsh winters. In fact, at its peak in the 1930s the island of Newfoundland was home to as many as 130,000 sheep, making for quite a bit of home grown wool (Land and Sea 2013).

This article, based on information gathered from Hilda and Dorothy Quinton and their recollections of life on the Quinton Premises, explores the process of knitting from raising lambs to shearing sheep, to eventually knitting socks, mitts, hats, and sweaters!

Fig #1 . An image of the Red Cliffe, NL, on the right some of the Quinton Premises is visible (Shhewitt 2014)

Fig #2. A flock of sheep in Frenchman's cove (Decks Awash 1989)

Newfoundland Sheep

Sheep have been a staple across the island of Newfoundland as early as the 17th century, having made up part of the early Ferryland settlement's collection of livestock - among others (Hodgetts 2006). While not officially recognised as a breed, throughout the centuries the continuity of the sheep population in Newfoundland has made them distinct enough to be categorised as an isolated and unique population (Kelsey N.D.; Farid et.al N.D.).

Compared to other farm animals like cows and pigs, sheep are far more versatile because they can be used for a wide variety of purposes. Beyond wool, for example, sheep could be eaten as mutton or lamb. Additionally, because of their hardiness, sheep don't need lush pastures making them relatively 'easy' to raise and maintain compared to other livestock (Flint N.D.: Murphy 1983). Speaking to this, Dorothy Quinton told us that the animals 'were let go in the summers, they'd be out browsing around everywhere" (Quinton & Quinton 2021b).

Elsewhere, many Newfoundlanders even developed a tradition of simply floating their sheep out to a nearby island during where they could graze freely and safely from predators, and later cars, with minimal oversight (Smellie 2020; Murphy 1983) - a practice which some sheep farms still do today (Smellie 2020; Flint). The ease with which sheep could be raised, combined with their versatility were driving factors in the spread of sheep herding throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries when sheep herding was at

Fig #3. Steve Coady, Howie Morry, and David Hayes bring sheep to Isle aux Bois for the summer. Photo credit Lisa B Sells.

its peak. Throughout and following WW2, however, the sheep population on the island experienced a very steep decline, with the total population of sheep in NL reduced to approximately 30,000 by 1960 (*Land and Sea* 2013).

As an outport community, the early residents of Red Cliffe needed to be as self-sufficient as possible because of how time intensive and difficult it was to import anything into the community. Within the community the Quinton Premises emerged as a very large, and community defining, operation in 1872 when John Quiton (1841-1893) founded his company, John Quinton Ltd. By this time the family owned a large plot of land, which continued to develop into an exceptionally big operation throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Philpott 2021). The size and prosperity of the operation allowed them to keep a wide variety and large number of animals on the property including cows, hens, ducks, and sheep (Quinton and Quinton 2021a). Each of these animals played different roles in outport life, and with the sheep being centrally important in keeping everyone warm each winter.

On the Quinton Premises, the very first sheep recorded date to 1845 when two animals were listed in Red Cliff (Osborne 2003). Over the years, more and more sheep would make their way to Red Cliffe, likely reaching a peak in the 1930s with the rest of the island. By 1956, however, when Dorothy Quinton moved to the premises after marrying the only animals still being kept by the family were hens. In the decade or so prior to Dorothy's arrival however, Hilda Quinton recalls there being around 4-5 sheep kept on the premises (Quinton & Quinton 2021b). While the Quintons stopped caring for sheep directly they continued to produce and sell hay to local people who kept sheep, horses, and cows as feed for the winter time for many years.

Fig #3. An image of a man shearing a ship with traditional shears, which look like large scissors. (Cape Sable 1930)

Shearing Wool, Spinning Yarn

The first step in making yarn is, of course, getting wool off of the sheep. Wool is typically harvested from sheep in the early spring once warm weather begins to settle in so that the sheep are able to have short, comfortable coats throughout the summer with enough time to grow their winter coats back before fall. There is very little information on sheep and local wool production in Red Cliffe, making it difficult to know how much wool was produced on the premises annually.

While the exact amount of sheep and wool available is unclear, some wool facts we do know is that Newfoundland sheep are typically comparable to North County Cheviot sheep, which produce something between 2.2-5kg (4.8-11lb) of wool each year (Canadian Co-operative N.D.). Assuming a typical sweater weighs in at .5kg that means one sheep could provide you with the materials to make between 4.4-10 sweaters. This means that the approximately 5 sheep kept on the Premises in the 1940s to early 50s could have produced 11-25kg of wool, or 22-50 sweaters, in a single year! It is possible that the sheep in Red Cliffe were normally less productive than this, however, given that in 1952 44 sheep in the town were reported to produce 135lb of wool - about 3lb (1.4kg) of wool, 2.8 sweaters worth, per sheep (Muggridge 1976).

Sheep can be shorn a number of ways today, with plenty of different electric clippers to choose from. On the Quinton Premises though (as was the case in much of rural Newfoundland), electric clippers wouldn't have been available until around 1965 when electricity was installed on the premises, meaning that for the vast majority of its history shearing sheep on the premises would have had to happen the good old fashioned way with shears, big scissor-like tools with thick blades (follow this link for a sheep shearing demonstration: https://collections.mun.ca/digital/collection/extension/id/38). While men may have typically taken the lead in shepherding and shearing, the remainder of yarn processing was carried out by the women of the property.

Fig #4. A woman carding wool using large paddles. (Decks Awash 1975)

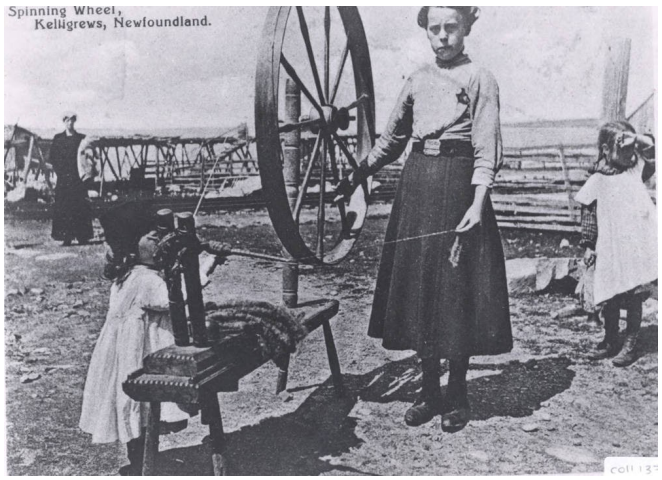

Fig #5. A woman standing next to an 'old-fashioned big spinning wheel.' ('Spinning Wheel.' c.1930-1940).

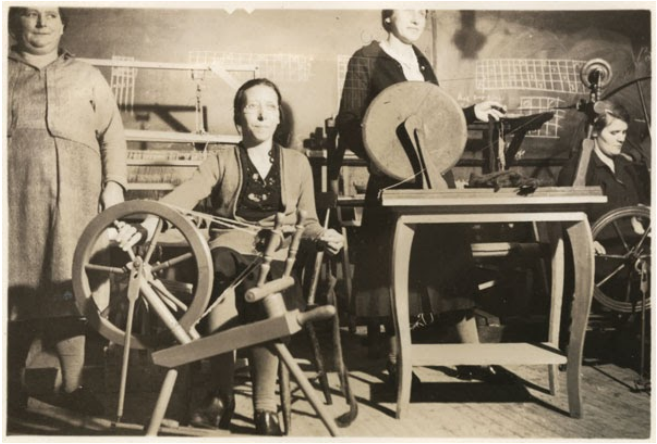

Fig #6. Women using different types of smaller spinning wheels c.1939-1940. (Women Spinning Wool, Collection VA 56, Item VA 56-5.1)

Sorting and Processing Wool

Once sheep are sheared, wool must be sorted into fine and rough fibres. Depending on where the fibers grew on the sheep hair ranges in quality, with different qualities being used to knit different things. After being sorted wool was then thoroughly washed. Freshly shorn wool contains all of the grease, leaves, dirt, and bugs a sheep has collected throughout the year so a thorough cleaning is important to make sure your yarn isn't greasy or smelly.

After a good wash and dry, the next step in yarn production is to 'organise' and prepare the fibers into manageable bundles through a process called 'carding.' Carding wool can, again, be done in a number of ways, but as Dorothy told us in her youth "the women used to card [the wool] and spin it themselves" (Quinton & Quinton 2021a). The traditional means of carding wool used two large, bristled paddles to brush the wool into small bundles (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRe2T2QnVCU for a video example of historic wool carding). These brushed bundles reduce the amount of clumps and knots you would otherwise get while spinning yarn, and organise the fibers into a manageable sized bunches to work with.

While both Dorothy and Hilda know about carding wool with paddles, Hilda also remembers carding machines, which spin a bristled drum around quickly to sort through wool efficiently. While electric drum carders have existed for at least a century, those which Hilda remembers would have, no doubt, been powered by hand since, again, the premises was not electrified until 1965.

Once wool was properly carded you could finally get to the final step in yarn production - spinning! Spinning yarn is a fairly easy, if lengthy, process whereby a large wheel connected to a bobbin is spun either by hand or with a peddle. As the bobbin spins, wool fibers connected to the bobbin are twisted together in order to 'lock' the fibers together in a long, thin strand (yarn). Once bobbins are full of newly spun yarn, they can then be removed and wound into a bundle or a ball - ready to be used to make all manner of knit garments.

Spinning wheels, like all other technologies, also changed over time - Hilda recalled that people used "a big old fashion spinning wheel at one time, but after they'd be a smaller one, [later] they'd get a smaller wheel" (Quinton 2021b). Hand spun yarn, unlike industrially made yarn, retains the character of the animal from which it came, giving each ball of yarn a unique texture and strength.

Fig#7. Colourful modern Newfoundland patterns for traditional mitten types (C. Legrow 2018)

Dyeing Wool

As Dorothy told us, to get different colours for knitting "They used to dye it-the wool didn't they? Now they didn't have real dye but they used to dye that….they used to boil it with something to make the colour"

Dyeing wool or yarn can happen at any point after the wool has been washed. Normally, however, wool was dyed prior to being carded so that all of the fibers could be evenly boiled. Historically, outport women used to dye their wool using natural dyes made with things like beets, lichen, and different woods to obtain different colours (Murray 1979).

Dyeing wool is a two step process. First, wool is boiled in a 'mordant' - a chemical which strips the outer coating of the dye to fully penetrate the individual fibres later. While mordants today can be made from a number of chemicals like chrome or iron, historically most people used urine as a mordant because of its affordability and availability (Decks Awash 1975). Once the wool was boiled with mordant, it would then be transferred to a different boiling pot in which the dye materials (beets, wood, lichen etc) had been removed where the fibers would be simmered for at least an hour, until the desired colour was achieved (Murray 1979).

Fig #8. Dyed wool rug made in Greenspond in the early 1900s (ICH Inventory, ICHRH00170)

Home-Grown Knits

Once yarn was spun and dyed women on the Quinton Premises would knit garments as needed for everyone in their households. While Dorothy and Hilda both recalled how people hardly needed to buy anything in the past, since most things could be made at home, they did need to buy knitting needles and other tools from a shop. One advantage the Hilda and Dorothy recalled which came from living on the Quinton Premises in Red Cliffe was having easy access to the Quinton shop, which sold dry goods and supplies 'from a needle to an anchor' to local communities all around the bay (Quinton & Quinton 2021b).

Dorothy and Hilda recounted that most people knit in the past, making socks, mitts, hats, and sweaters to keep warm. Traditional knits including things like trigger mitts, thrummed knits, and classic geometric patterns were staples in everyone's closets all across outport Newfoundland. Beyond clothes, rugs could also be made from home-spun yarn to keep homes warm in the cold winters.

Blankets, unlike other knit goods, were a little bit different and wouldn't normally be made on the premises, Dorothy told us that "if they wanted a blanket done they used to send it [the wool] away" because blankets were normally woven, and most people didn't weave and even if they did weave, didn't have a loom large enough to make blankets.

As the province, and the world, has tapped into globalised markets very few knitters today obtain their yarn from local animals, and even fewer people spin their own yarn. Regardless, while very few sheep remain across the province today, it is difficult to overemphasise the significance of this animal's role in helping engrain knitting and rug hooking in Newfoundlander's identities.

Fig #8. An image of Valerie Young showing her thrummed mittens in 1990. (Young 1990)

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