From Sheep to Shawl

"This is Eureka!" A woman held up a skein of wool the colour of a summer sunset. I was at my first meeting of the Tzouhalem Spinners and Weavers Guild not knowing anything about spinning or weaving, but felt at home in this group of women who were introducing me to their art. We ranged from age thirty-five to eighty-two and encompassed such backgrounds as fibre artists, a mompreneur, one sheep farmer and three "mixed" farmers, a lawyer, a fashion designer, mothers, grandmothers, a nurse and a teacher. We were a diverse group with the commonality of wool. From sinking our fingers into a thick fleece, to drafting out sticky fibres to spin, wool just makes us feel good. Whether we knit, weave or crochet, creating beautiful, utilitarian goods seems innate. I'd been intrigued with spinning and weaving for years, then after participating in the guild's hands-on display at the local fall fair, I was hyped.

The woman who held the skein was now pulling a large knitted swatch, bright white, from her basket and passing it around. Ooohs and aahhs went up as each woman fingered the wool. "Is this Eureka too?" someone asked. "Oh, Eureka is so soft," cooed another as she stroked the swatch along her cheek. I'd knitted a few items over the years but had never taken note of the brand of yarn. There had been a lurid synthetic yarn in the Eighties called Phentex, but outside of that I could not name any. One woman giggled as she was passed the swatch and said, "What a fantastic fleece for her very first." Ah. A sheep.

"Eureka" turned out to be spelt with a "Y," not an "E." The ewe's owner, Jan Mackinnon-Loop, told me a lettering sequence is used to denote the year of each lamb's birth. Her other ewes had names like Uma and Xaviera. Yureka was a curious and friendly one-year-old Romney-East Friesian cross. She had been the star of the Sheep to Shawl event at the

Cowichan Fall Fair from the moment the shearer touched clippers to fleece (the term used for the wool after it has been shorn). Spinner Barbara Dowd said that as soon as she saw the fleece coming off she knew it was gorgeous. Again, ooohs and aahhs sounded through the group of spectators, largely spinners and weavers, which sent Dowd hustling through the crowd to Mackinnon-Loop to ask if she could buy the fleece. Before any bidding wars broke out, Dowd was the proud owner of Yureka's silken white coat.

Wool is shorn from most sheep once a year to allow a generous growth period. The primitive, long-haired breeds such as Icelandic are an exception as they can easily be sheared twice a year. Yureka too was an exception, being born in February and shorn the following September especially for the fair. Her fleece was already outstanding. Mackinnon-Loop attributes the fleece's fine crimp, or curl, and plushness to crossing a long-wool Romney with the desirable crimpiness of the East Friesian. The time of year to shear has many variables, the location where you live being most important in regard to weather. Many farmers prefer to shear right before lambing season so their ewes' rumps will be free of matted and soiled wool when they give birth. An early-in-the-year shearing also encourages ewes to keep out of the wind and rain, thereby protecting their lambs from harsh weather. Not quite as important on southern Vancouver Island as in far-flung sheep regions such as the Scottish Hebrides.

The shearers at the fair demonstrated three ways of getting a fleece off. First, the "old-fashioned" way, with inexpensive hand shears, which is preferred by many farmers as they can be used out in a field, and do not shave close. This latter can be advantageous, again, depending on climate, as the sheep are left with some insulation against the weather. The demonstration included antique hand-crank shears, and electrical shears, fastest of them all, which I recently saw in action on my friend Harry's farm. I stood as close to the shearer as I could get as he did

the flock of three Icelandics. We set up under the barn eaves and watched as he smoothly grabbed each sheep from the stall, resting it on its haunches against his legs. The sheep go docile, like chickens on their backs, and barely squirm. The fleece is neatly buzzed off, up and down and around the body, and remains in one piece. An experienced shearer like this one barely leaves a nick—no more than a sleepy man would while shaving his face.

When the sheep were shorn and back in the field they looked considerably smaller. The ram, Brown, didn't look aggressive anymore, just wiry with an attitude. We stopped for coffee and I asked the shearer if he was going to "skirt" the fleeces, as I had read that it was the next step. He smiled and said no; *we* were going to do it. I was thrilled, so when he left, Harry sharpened the clippers (like heavy duty scissors) and we lay the fleeces flat, picked sticks and straw out, and skirted the edges to rid them of mats and manure. The discarded material doesn't need to be wasted though; Mackinnon-Loop uses it to mulch her garlic beds.

A fresh, unwashed fleece is referred to as being "in the grease" and, after skirting and picking, your hands are sticky. The lanolin has a pungent, wild smell which is comforting to me but turns some peoples' stomachs. At this point the fleece can be sorted into types, or left to sort after washing. For instance, the Icelandic sheep is a dual-coated breed, with a short, soft undercoat and a long, coarse outer coat which can reach 15 inches. Some handspinners will spin these coats together, but most will spin them separately for distinctly different uses, such as soft sweaters and coarse rugs.

Yureka's Romney and East Friesen heritage produces a fleece that is all one type, but even on such a fleece there may be patches of different crimp and this can be separated out

depending on the market for the fleece. In this case the market, Dowd, who is a handspinner, thought Yureka's fleece was one of the most exquisite she'd seen, just as it was.

Washing, drying and "teasing" the fleece are the next steps and although labour intensive, the outcome is airy, fluffed fibre. A fleece can be soaked in a washing machine with organic soap then put on the spin cycle and repeated as many times as needed to get the water running clear—never agitate! This will felt the wool, which is a way of matting fibres and only an interesting effect for certain projects. Lingerie bags are useful if the fleece is in a lot of pieces. Mackinnon-Loop learned that keeping the temperature consistent between soaking and rinsing also prevents felting.

Drying a fleece can take awhile but hanging it in a closed bathroom with an oscillating heater works if you're in a hurry. Otherwise, fleeces have been lain out to dry on chicken wire stretched between sawhorses in the sun, on wooden laundry racks, or screen door panels over a woodstove, anything that will allow air to circulate. Turning the fleece from time to time will help.

Teasing, or "picking," is the process whereby the locks of wool are opened up. Although time-consuming, Dowd says she finds it relaxing and can't wait to get her hands on Yureka's shiny, white wool. It's a matter of sitting with the fleece and pulling it apart into airy bits, akin to a child pulling pieces of cotton candy off the stick and letting it fly. When picking is done commercially in a machine, it is blown into a room. There are small, home-sized pickers on the market if you'd like to save time. The last of any foreign matter can be removed as you tease. Now the wool is no longer "fleece," but fibre.

Carding comes next. Hand cards look like over-sized dog brushes, the type with ultra fine steel teeth (called card cloth in this case), and by using one in each hand, small pieces of fibre are combed back and forth, from one brush to the other, producing a web of fibre that lays mostly in the same direction. Women in developing countries such as Peru have been filmed in their tiny dirt-floored homes, carding fibre, wearing brightly coloured, woven clothing, a product of countless hours of labour.

When the carded fibre is peeled, or rolled, gently off the card you have a "rolag," which is the product used for spinning. There were hand carders available to try at the Sheep to Shawl booth and the big surprise was how long it took to comb even just a little piece of fibre into a web. Many spinners own their own drum carders to speed things up. It is mind-boggling to imagine the effort involved in one sweater made from the ground up, and an excellent rationale for the higher prices of handmade items.

Spinning is the next step. I watch the women in the group feed the fibre into their wheels, drawing and holding, feet peddling in rhythm while they chat. All over the world women (and sometimes men) sit and spin, preparing yarn to weave or knit into clothing and blankets for themselves and their families. A long-time guild member named Michele has offered to show me how to spin today. I've gotten the hang of using a primitive hand spindle after five sessions so feel ready to try an actual spinning wheel. It looks so relaxing. The point is to twist the fibre into a usable yarn. Up until now it is only held together by the oil (lanolin) in the wool, plus the natural "hooks" of the fibre and the fact that it has been carded.

Michele shows me how to stretch the rolag out with my fingers nearly to the breaking point to loosen up the fibre. As you spin, whether it is on a hand spindle or a spinning wheel, part

of the motion is to further stretch the fibre as you guide it into the twist. I slowly pump my feet and can't even keep the wheel going in one direction! With Michele flipping the bobbin for me and guiding my feet, I catch on. Now my hands are acting up. I can't seem to stretch the rolag, pinch off the fibre and feed the front bit into the wheel at the same time. I am trying to do five things at once. Eventually I have some wool spun onto the bobbin, a tangle of thick and thin and I am ecstatic anyway. I am going to love this. There is something about it that feels right to me. I fit into this community of women.

Some of the group has experimented with dying their wool using avocado skins, indigo plants, beets, wild mushrooms and numerous other natural products. Results are rainbow-hues, yarn that looks like desert sand, mottled blues like the sea. At the Sheep to Shawl exhibit a loom was on display over the three-day long fair and guild members took turns weaving a shawl where the public could watch. The result is an array of golden squares with many intricate patterns, a useful shawl of beauty, woven by many hands.

Small-scale agriculture and its offshoots give us not only superior products but a personal tie to the animals and producers, and to the land and the seasons. How else would we have a chance of meeting the sheep who produced the wool, of seeing the animal on a website or knowing that Brown, for instance, enjoys a scritch behind the horns and Yureka likes to be petted under the chin. Within the next two weeks Yureka will give birth to her first lamb, or lambs, by the look of her belly when I was at the farm. Perhaps more shiny fleece on its way to being lovingly handspun and knit into sweaters by a community of women.