Jr. High History Lesson Includes Flax Culture

BY BARBARA MILLER Lycoming Co. Correspondent

WATSONTOWN - One of the most popular exhibitions during Heritage Days at the Hower-Slot House in Watsontown is a rare flax culture demonstration performed by Richard Nornhold.

Nornhold, a geography and social studies teacher at Warrior Run Middle School, has a strong interest in colonial culture. He also teaches a class in local history.

His interest in the culture of the early settlers, Nornhold says, began when he was a boy.

"When I was a kid I collected Indian relics . . . Then I became interested in the culture of the people who replaced them. I find everything about it fascinating, terribly fascinating. How did people make their clothing ... raise sheep? How did they do it?"

Nornhold owns many original pieces from the colonial period. On the wall of the Hower-Slote House, currently being restored by the Warrior Run-Fort Freeland Heritage Society, hang memorabilia such as arrowheads, musket balls and powder horns. Nornhold found some on the property while Penn State students excavated others from nearby Fort Freeland in 1979. According to Nornhold, Fort Freeland was the site of the only battle of the Revolutionary War fought in central Pennsylvania.

Nornhold uses the Hower-Slote House, built in 1829, as a classroom where his students learn about colonial life first hand. The house is located about a quarter of a mile from the Warrior Run School. There, in addition to flax culture, he teaches students about colonial living, including lessons in cooking over a fireplace using authentic period utensils to prepare dishes enjoyed by the early settlers.

For the past few years Nornhold and his students have sown a 30-by-40 foot section with flax near the Hower-Slote House in what may be the only remaining flax patch under cultivation in Pennsylvania. Here in a hands-on experience they learn flax culture from the planting of the seed to the weaving of fibers on a loom. They relive a tradition that was once an essential part of the lives of the earliest settlers to the region.

"When I teach, I just don't want to tell them," Nornhold says.



Richard Nornhold holds a sheaf of flax in one hand and flax he has processed in the other. The processed flax is ready to be spun into yarn.

"When they participate, they remember it forever."

According to Nornhold, sizable quantities of flax were being grown in Pennsylvania as early as 1698. Flax was cultivated then, as it is now, for seed as well as for its linen fiber. Linseed oil extracted from the seed is used in the production of paints and linoleum among other things, while linseed cake, because of its high protein content, is valued as an animal food. Midwestern states such as South Dakota, Nornhold says, grow flax for linseed oil, whereas flax grown for fiber is cultivated overseas in countries like Holland.

Before the advent of the cotton gin, growing flax was necessary to produce clothing for the family and to provide household linens. The average family planted two acres of flax, allowing approximately

one quarter acre of flax per person per year.

In April, Nornhold says, early settlers broadcast the flaxseed on the prepared soil and harrowed it lightly into the ground. Since the flax plant doesn't compete well with weeds, the task of weeding usually fell to the young girls while the young men often sat around the edges of the field keeping watch to protect their counterparts from the "devil." Folklore at the time, explains Nornhold, associated the flax patch with the devil and, therefore, the young girls needed protection.

In mid-July the flax was harvested by pulling handfuls out by the roots since the fiber extends into the root of the plant. The handfuls were then tied into small bundles and shocked like sheaves of wheat in the field. By harvest time flax achieved a height of 18 to 36 inches and its small blue flowers had turned to a seed boll.

Threshing to remove the seed boll was the next step in the flax growing process, according to Nornhold. It was accomplished in varying ways, but was usually done by hand on the barn floor. Next, in a ritual peculiar to flax, the bundles of flax were retted or rotted by spreading the flax out in a field for three to five weeks until the outer fibers began to rot. This procedure, known as the dew retting process, rotted the natural muscilage of the outer fibers or husks so they loosened from the preferred to immerse the flax in pond water for a certain period of time for the same purpose.

Braking of the flax, which Nornhold says was considered the hardest part of the flax operation, came after the flax had been dried in a rough fireplace to make it very brittle. The flax brake was a piece of equipment usually constructed of oak timbers which sat on four legs and was used to break the woody boon of the flax while exposing the inner fibers. It was operated by one person who held the flax in one hand while with the other hand lifting the heavy hinged top which came down to break the brittle plant.

Although Nornhold agrees that braking flax is the most physically demanding component of the flax

(Turn to Page B18)



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Hackling the flax removes the final particles of the outer stem, leaving behind fiber only.