

Family Weaves 18th Century Crafts Into Fabric Of Lives

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MANHEIM (Lancaster Co.) — Ask Donna Haines anything you want to know about spinning, weaving, and knitting.

Donna knows it. She can do it. In fact, Donna teaches these skills and much more to people from ages 2 to 90.

Teaching two-year-old 18th century crafts may seem a bit mindboggling, but Donna believes that children of that era grew up helping their parents and it became a natural part of their lives.

"Two-year-olds can pull the wool apart and drop spindles, and five-year-olds can hand card wool," Donna said.

With a master's degree in elementary education, Donna, a former school teacher and director for a Montessori school, runs a day care with the goal of teaching 18th century crafts.

She uses Montessori methods of instructing young children to develop their own initiatives.

"I don't want these crafts to be lost. It is important to pass them on to the next generation," Donna said.

Some of the activities include hand dyeing by using natural materials. Children learn how boiled onion skins, grasses, flowers, and walnuts can be used to produce different colors and shadings. They insert their own projects and pull them out at different times to see the variations in shading.

First graders learn to crochet and knit. Children of all ages help care for the sheep and help work in the garden. Some of the other projects include bird house making, crystal making, tin smithing, candlemaking, wooden crafts, and wreath making with pinecones.

Donna's interest in teaching wool crafts was piqued when her three-year-old daughter Amy (now 13) wanted a pet lamb.

"I tried to convince her to get a kitten or a dog," Donna said. "But she wouldn't budge."

Donna purchased the lamb with the belief that "if things didn't work, we could have lamb for dinner."

That was 10 years ago and the family still hasn't had lamb for dinner. Instead, Amy and her 11-year-old sister Stacy continue to increase the flock and, like their mother, have become adept at spinning, weaving, and knitting.

Donna said that she was raised in a family where everyone did some type of craft, such as rug braiding, metal working, quilting, etc.

Donna decided to take up spinning and weaving and taught herself to spin.

"It was extremely frustrating, but I was tenacious," Donna said of the skill that she continues to perfect. In fact, of all the crafts she does, spinning is her favorite.

She took some weaving lessons at a loom store. A coverlet took the grand prize at the Pennsylvania Farm Show.

"My ancestors came from Ireland and Scotland, where they were accomplished spinners and weavers. My great-great-great grandfather brought the jacquard process (fabric with an intricately woven pattern) to the U.S. from Scotland," Donna said of her heritage.

So when her daughter started raising Romney breed, known for high quality handspinning wool, Donna already knew the basics of how to spin and weave.

All her teaching is done hands-on. Students assist when sheep are sheared twice a year. The wool is washed to remove natural grease and dirt. Carding blends the various types of wool fibers and straightens the fibers so they lie in the same direction. Spinning extends the fibers to turn the wool into yarn. Weaving produces cloth by interlacing two sets of yarn. On



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a loom, threads running lengthwise are the warp, while threads running crosswise in the loom form the weft. As each warp thread passes through the loom, it is raised and lowered by the loom. A weft (filling) thread is shot through the opening created in the warp, thereby forming a woven fabric.

The Haines sell wool, spun yarns, and fleeces. They also make blankets and other woven items to sell.

In addition to wool, the Haines grow flax to spin into linen. Flax is planted in April, harvested 100 days later, and hung to dry for later use. According to Donna, one handwoven linen outfit requires an whole acre of flax.

As Donna spins, she gives tidbits of information. The flax, after it goes through a heckling process appears to be a wig. In fact, in the 1700s, flax was used to make wigs.

Donna explains that is where the terminology "flaxen hair" originated.

The Germans spun the flax with water to make the fiber stronger and smoother. Flax spun without water such as that made by the English resulted in a more fringed appearance.

"Tow-headed" also has its origin in spinning. A tow refers to coarse, broken flax prepared for spinning.

After the heckling and skutching process, flax is wound into a distaff like cotton candy.

The thinner the spin, the more expensive the linen. In the 18th century linen was used for tea towels, coverlets, and clothing. Each time natural colored linen is washed, it becomes whiter.

For Donna and her daughters' portrayal of the 18th century arts, they dress in clothing handspun from flax and patterned in the exact style of that era. Donna's dress and apron imitate those worn by Pennsylvania German women, and Amy's dress copies that worn by a young girl living in England during that era. The blues and browns of the dress were hand dyed using indigo for the blue and walnuts for the brown linen.

Donna explained that women of the 18th century never put wool next to the skin. Instead, a linen dress was worn beneath a linsey-woolsey (a rough linen or cotton fabric woven with wool) dress with a woolen frock on top.

The Haines work at their projects year-round. Sheep are sheared in the spring and the wool

prepared during the summer; linen is harvested and prepared in the fall to use in weaving and knitting during the winter months.

During the fall months, Stacy and Amy are busy showing sheep at Elizabethtown, Denver, New Holland, and Manheim competitions. They also participate in lead line, a competition where they are judged on both modeling clothing made from wool and control in leading a sheep. Last year, Stacy was first in lead line at Manheim Farm Show, and Amy second. The year before, the two flip-flocked in positions.

A few weeks ago at the E-town Fair, Stacy showed the reserve champion Romney and collected

two blue ribbons and a trophy. Amy showed the reserve champion Dorset and collected five blue ribbons.

In January, Amy and Stacy head to the Pennsylvania Farm Show. Next year, the Haines plan to participate in a few national shows.

Amy and Stacy are adept at many 18th century crafts and enjoy helping their mother teach day care students. Donna goes to all the elementary schools in the Manheim Central School District and in other districts by request to show sheep and demonstrate spinning techniques. A former full-time craftsperson for Landis Valley

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Donna said that she was raised in a family where everyone did some type of craft. Now, she and her daughters continue that tradition. They sell wool, spun yarns, and fleeces. They also make blankets and other woven, crocheted and knitted items to sell.



In addition to wool, the Haines grow flax to spin into linen. Donna explains that the terminology "flaxen hair" originated from flax that is prepared for spinning. Not the "wig" appearance of the flax in the background.