



ONTARIO
HANDSPIN-
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SEMINAR
1964 ~ 1983

**THE
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HANDSPINNING
SEMINAR**

1964-1983

**Mary Ham
Dorothy Kirk
Florence Lloyd**

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1976 — Pat Gray in her 1776 Costume.

REMEMBERING THE ONTARIO HANDSPINNING SEMINAR: THE BEGINNING, AIMS, GROWTH AND PRESENT STATE ON ITS TWENTIETH BIRTHDAY



TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO Ontario spinners were isolated from one another. Small groups met in Toronto, east of Toronto, west of Toronto, and north of Toronto; however, there was no "Spinners Day" when spinners assembled to do their collective "thing". Edna Blackburn of Caledon East, Ted Carson of Hornby, and Dorothy Kirk of Toronto talked about this many times when they met. Finally, they decided to put action to their words and, after much planning, on June 27, 1964, the Spinning Seminar was born. The original plan, contingent on the success of the first meeting, called for the Seminar to move about the province to reach more spinners. In 1965, the Spinning Seminar became the Ontario Handspinning Seminar.

For the first six years the Seminar was held in the open air: at the farm home of Mr. and Mrs. Wes Blackburn, 1964-1967; at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ted Carson in 1968; and at the home of Mr. and Mrs. E. Schilder of King City in 1969. The setting graduated from the hot sun to covered areas when large tents were erected. Increased attendance brought the need for more space for programmes, sleeping accommodation, and readily available food. During the next four years, the Seminar moved to the McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa in 1970, hosted by the Oshawa guild; to the Royal Botanical Gardens and Connaught Hotel in Hamilton in 1971; to the Tailsman Lodge at Kimberley in 1972; and then to the Guild Inn, Scarborough in 1973. Need for still more space took the Seminar to York University in 1974 where it still meets.

The Seminar was intended to be an enjoyable day for spinners when they would have time to learn new techniques, exchange information and ideas, meet old friends and make new ones, and just visit. The first Spinning Seminar was planned for one day. A registration fee of \$1.00 was requested in the hope that this would pay for the postage and printing of the programmes! That first programme is reproduced here.

- 9:00 a.m. Assembly
- Make yourself known and pick up your name badge at the registration table.
- 10:00 Introductory Welcome
- Eileen Muff - Director, Community Programmes, Ontario Department of Education.
- 10:05 Sheep Shearing
- A demonstration shearing
- 10:20 Fleece Sorting
- A wool authority's demonstration and talk on the various qualities found in fleece.
- 10:40 Scouring, Mordanting and Vegetable Dyeing
- Dorothy Kirk and Edna Blackburn During necessary waiting times, various other aspects of spinning will be interspersed.

Carding

Hand Spindles

- Walking Wheel
- Two methods will be demonstrated by Dorothy Kirk and Mr. W. Hall.

1:00 LUNCH

2:00 Guest Spinner(s)

- 2:45 Staff Side
- The gentlemen have a few moments to show their stuff!

- 3:00 Informal Work Shop
- Please bring your wheels and your problems.

The weather was anxiously monitored that week. Would there be sun or rain? What would we do if it rained? However, the sun shone brightly all day. How happy, but exhausting, that first day was! We were glad to see so many local Ontario spinners and the many Americans who came across the border from our neighbouring states of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. Many ideas were exchanged, lasting friendships were begun, and as the day drew to a close, everyone made promises for the next year.



1964 — Dorothy Kirk washing wool.



1965 — Margaret Reid pointing.

The attendance in 1964 was seventy-five; in 1965, eighty-three; and in 1966, one hundred and nineteen. This grew each year until fire regulations and other factors limited the number to two hundred. Many applicants often could not be accepted. Finally, all registrations had to be made in advance with none accepted at the door.

In 1964, the Seminar was *all in the open*, but from 1965 to 1969, two large tents were used. This was welcome protection from the hot sun of the first

year and also from the rain in 1968. The Seminar was planned for Saturdays in the beginning, but because of the urgings of those coming a long distance, it was made a two-day, Friday and Saturday, event in 1966. At the Guild Inn in 1973, the schedule changed to Saturday and Sunday. Eventually at York University, an evening programme prior to the Seminar was begun.

The fees in 1964 were \$1.00. With the addition of the tent and "Johnny on the Job" rentals, the fees in 1965 were \$2.00. When a two-day format was adopted in 1966, the fees were changed to \$5.00, a level at which they stayed for eight years. Annual increases to \$6.00 in 1974, \$7.50 in 1975, and \$10.00 in 1976 were needed to provide more space for workshops, sales, and other features. By 1979 fees were \$20.00, the present figure.

Our registrars have played a very important part in the Seminar. Anne Bradshaw was registrar from 1965 to 1969. Connie Johnston (assisted by Doreen Adams in 1970) was registrar from 1970 to 1973. Florence Lloyd assumed the position in 1974, and Mary Ham from 1975 to 1977. Beth Newhall served for two years, 1978 and 1979. To this time, the registrars gave their services freely. However, the executive committee, recognizing the amount of work in the position, decided in 1980 to provide an honorarium. Betty Bending Wilkinson was registrar from 1980 to 1982, and Barbara Carter Scott is the present registrar for 1983.

The Seminar founders planned and conducted the programme, assisted by Thelma Parker and others from the audience from 1964 to 1968. In 1968 with a larger registration and the need for more workshops and leadership, more people were asked to join the committee. The following year the committee consisted of:

Marion Adams	Ingrid Goebel	Jessie Norris
Anne Bradshaw (Reg.)	Dorothy Kirk	Audrey Wright
Ted Carson	Pearl Leonard	Bunty Yeomans

Edna Blackburn withdrew from the committee to act as an advisory member. Doloria Chapin, Dorothie Lyons, and Dolores Meisterheim were asked to report on spinning in the United States at our 1969 Seminar. As a result of this involvement by our American friends, Doloria Chapin made an extended trip, interviewed spinners, and in 1971 published her *International Handspinning Directory and Handbook* which was updated in 1975.

Over the years many dedicated people gladly served on the committee. We could find no record of committee members for 1970 to 1973, but in 1974 the executive members were:

Grant Betzner	Cora Bowman	Pat Gray
Minnie Bloem	Ted Carson	Florence Lloyd (Reg.)
Dorothy Kirk		

The committee for 1975, 1976, and 1977 was:

Grant Betzner	Harriet Boon	Pat Gray
Minnie Bloem	Ted Carson	Mary Ham (Reg.)
Dorothy Kirk	Carole Smart	

In 1978, Beth Newhall served in place of Mary Ham. The 1979 committee was:

Grant Betzner	Minnie Bloem	Harriet Boon
Eleanor Conway	Pat Gray	Dorothy Kirk
Florence Lloyd	Beth Newhall (Reg.)	Carole Smart

1980 brought a shift in the people responsible for the planning of the Seminar, as a number of the original group felt they had to withdraw for a variety of personal reasons. Harriet Boon and Patricia Gray picked up the leadership role and drew together a new committee. The nature of the Seminar did not change, but the personnel did. The committee for 1980 was:

Minnie Bloem	Harriet Boon	Eleanor Conway
Pat Gray	Anna Gwizdala	Doreen Jeffers
Florence Lloyd	Dale McGregor	Barbara McLean
Wilma Petch	Margaret Patterson	Betty Wilkinson (Reg.)

and for 1981:

Minnie Bloem	Harriet Boon	Anne Silk
Isabel Gray	Pat Gray	Jill Everest
Dale McGregor	Barbara Scott	Betty Wilkinson (Reg.)
Doreen Jeffers		

and for 1982:

Minnie Bloem	Harriet Boon	Barbara Scott
Pat Gray	Doreen Jeffers	Dale McGregor
Anne Silk	Els Van Dam	Betty Wilkinson (Reg.)

and for 1983:

Minnie Bloem	Harriet Boon	Caroline Dyk
Pat Gray	Dale McGregor	Joyce Rumney
Barbara Scott (Reg.)	Anne Silk	Els Van Dam
Betty Wilkinson		

Gift bags were given out to registrants for the first several years. They contained note pads, pens, pencils, rulers, calendars, thermometers, purse sewing kits, samples, information booklets, notes, etc. These had to be discontinued because of the difficulty of obtaining donations, and "give aways" were replaced by printed notes.

Sales tables were an interesting and valuable part of the Seminar from the first. From displays of a few fleeces and dyes, they have grown to true store offerings of books, all fibres, fleeces, dye materials, and equipment.

Demonstrations and workshops have been enjoyed through all the Seminar years. In 1964 there were demonstrations of dyeing, sheep shearing, wool preparation, spinning, etc. The first flax workshop was held in 1965 along with other sessions on scouring and carding wool, spinning unusual fibres, grading fleeces, and handspinning and its application to weaving. This first flax workshop prompted Penny Clark, a Toronto teenager, with her mother's help, to grow flax, process, spin, and weave it into a tie for her father. She gave an account of this at our 1967 Seminar. The flax theme has been repeated several times over the years with more detail provided on each occasion.



1973 — Grant Betzner breaking flax at the Guild Inn.

Silk reeling from cocoons was done at the 1966 Seminar. This was the forerunner of many interesting and informative workshops dealing with silk: spinning hankies and Tussah bricks, blending, dyeing, its use in weaving and knitting, and its colourful history.

In 1967, Mr. George Fuller from the MacDonald Institute, University of Guelph, spoke on fibres. Miss LeWarren came from Hamilton in 1968 to give an inspiring talk on dye plants. A speaker from Dupont gave a

presentation on synthetics in 1969. Two years later, Mrs. Mary Humphries, Textile Master at Seneca College, showed a film on mohair entitled "Homespun". The same year, Mrs. Curtis Reed from Pennsylvania discussed dye plant identification with Seminar participants.

At the Royal Botanical Gardens, indigo dyeing was introduced in 1971. Many people brought small skeins to dip, and how they marvelled at the colour change in the air! In addition to the many workshops on natural dyes, there were also commercial or synthetic dye workshops. Edna Blackburn gave an excellent talk on synthetic dyes in 1969, as did Ted Carson in 1970. In 1977, Grant Betzner gave a graphic display and lecture to the whole assembly prior to individual workshops on direct dyes, acid dyes, fibre reactive dyes, and the methods for using each type.

Cotton was "King" in 1974. This theme was inspired by the 1973 visit of Olive and Harry Linder of Arizona.

A finishing course was given by Minnie Bloem in 1976. This proved to be so popular that it has been repeated.

Also, at several Seminars Grant Betzner demonstrated pendulum wheels and lever spinning wheels. These wheels are of the walking-wheel type in that the wheel is turned by hand and a spindle is used rather than a bobbin. Instead of the spinner walking back and forth, she sits down and, by means of a foot piece, causes the pendulum or lever to "walk". These wheels, of several styles, were patented in Ontario in 1865, 1866, and 1867 and were constructed in Kincardine and Strathroy as well as other places.



1967 — Ingrid Goebel shearing, assisted by her daughter.

At the same Seminar, Ted Carson gave a most informative illustrated lecture on sheep breeds from the earliest times to the present. In 1978 Canada's own sheep breed, the Romnelet, developed at Manyberries, Alberta, was researched and introduced to the Seminar by Ted Carson. Sheep shearing was demonstrated many times by Mr. Blackburn and others. In 1967, Ingrid Goebel did the shearing. In 1974, Mr. Robert Walker, noted breeder of sheep and sheep dogs, spoke on wool production. Neil Metheral of Creemore also demonstrated shearing of his Cheviot crossbred sheep.



1977 — Dye workshop with Margaret Dines-Young.



1977 — Carding with Ted Carson.

In 1980 Marlene Markle, an artist from Holstein, gave an informative lecture on colour and design prior to workshops on the same topic. Dale McGregor complemented this presentation with a discussion of colour theory.

Programmes are developed around a featured fibre as suggested by spinners at previous Seminars.

Each year, with larger attendance, more workshops were offered by more workshop leaders invited from many areas. The workshop leaders deserve a great deal of credit for the success of the Seminar. From three or four leaders in 1965, their number has fluctuated to forty-one in 1978, twenty-six in 1979, twenty-seven in 1980, and sixteen in 1981.

Every year has had its *highlights*. One example appears here. Mr. and Mrs. Loftus from Wayne, Michigan, noted spinners and makers of fine wheels, attended many Seminars. The Americans were preparing for their Bicentennial in 1976 and at our 1975 Seminar, Mr. and Mrs. Loftus proposed a competition for 1976 with the prizes, first and second, being two of their handmade wheels. The competition demanded the following task.

A complete, authentic, 1776 costume is to be made for either a man, woman, or child from any part of the world. The garment must be handsewn (commercial thread acceptable), handwoven, knitted or crocheted from 100% handspun natural fibres. Dyes must be authentic to the period. The underclothing need not be authentic unless it shows. All sources of information on design, data on dyes and any other pertinent information must be sent to the Registrar by May 1, 1976.

Patricia Gray, who is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art in Material Arts, took up the challenge and carried it to a successful conclusion. Her costume consisted of a petticoat, woven both warp and weft of two-ply natural linen, and a striped overdress of single-ply Corriedale fleece in plain weave, using madder-dyed and natural white yarn. Both linen and wool lengths were forty inches wide and five yards long. Pat's exquisite dress was deemed most worthy of first place, and Mr. and Mrs. Loftus presented her with a beautifully-made thirty inch spinning wheel. The Loftus's gave the award in appreciation for the Seminars, the friendships, and the learning they had received. We feel it was a very fine gesture indeed.

Regular programme features have taken on a variety of dimensions. *Wheels Around the World* was, and continues to be, a significant part of the programme. People were and are encouraged to bring, show, and tell about different wheels (new and antique), unusual spindles, wool winders, flax equipment, and other interesting items. It has brought to light many different pieces of equipment and their manner of use in other parts of the world. *Spinning songs* were enjoyed many times. Ingrid Goebel and her young daughter performed the popular German Spinning Song. Norman Kennedy entertained with many Scottish spinning and weaving songs. Pearl Leonard's original spinning song has been requested many times and is

reproduced in part below.

*There's an old spinning wheel in the parlour
Spinning dreams of long long ago.
There's an old spinning gal there beside 'er
Spinning sweaters for Shari and Joe.*

*Sometimes she should be doing dishes in the kitchen
Washin's piling higher in the bin.
But that old spinning gal in the parlour
Don't do nothing but spin, spin, spin.*

Displays were part of the first Seminar. In 1964 sample skeins and cards of mounted samples of nature-dyed wools were on view. In 1965, people were asked to bring completed projects to display, and in 1966 peg boards were provided for display articles. From a few articles those first years, the display area (under the care of Minnie Bloem for many years) has grown into a majestic array of expertly crafted articles of every fibre. In 1970 and later years, display articles were requested in advance so they could be displayed to better advantage. These displays, now assembled spontaneously by Minnie Bloem, continue to be a highlight of every Seminar.



1975 — Display of handspun articles, York University.

The members of the West End Spinners of the Toronto Spinners and Weavers undertook to spin and mount on cards samples of fleeces available to Canadian spinners. This membership included:

Betty Bending	Audrey Collins	Betty Coolsma
Jo Field	Marguerite Gadsby	Mary Ham
Connie Johnston	Florence Lloyd	Helen Sereda
Elaine Whyte	Sophie Winkels	

The spinners became an independent group, and added Barbara Moore, Beth Newhall, Ria Wilson, Ginny Wisener, and Catharine Warnica to their numbers. They continued to work on expanding the collection and for the 1976 Seminar, it was completely revamped. The fleece samples were washed and a woven sample was added. Mary and Jim Ham prepared and attached the wooden frames to the newly mounted displays.



1976 — Isabel Gray with the sheep pictures.

In a similar vein, the *fashion shows*, begun in 1971 at the Royal Botanical Gardens and held in the Rose Garden, have developed from a small beginning to a focal point of every Seminar. The *skein competitions*, which were begun in 1972, have attracted many worthy entries every year. Unfortunately, lists of prize winners have not been recorded.

In 1977 and 1978, we appealed to the shepherds with "Shear Delight", from sheep to finished product with photographs and accompanying samples. In 1979, the dog-owner spinners enjoyed "Going to the Dogs". That same year a new category was introduced to give recognition to the

many spinning articles displayed. Special projects follow from the previous year's programme. In 1981, the special project was a pillow; in 1982, a vest. Project submissions have demonstrated a variety of talents which complement handspinning.

A logo, designed by Jay Hriskow, was adopted in 1978 and it appeared on the programme folders in 1979 and 1980 and continues to be used on the stationery. Since 1981, Dale McGregor has been designing outstanding programme covers. Many *fun times* were enjoyed such as the spindle race, the finger knitting and many others. For example, in 1967 a spinning bee took place. Ten teams of three each took turns at teasing, carding, and spinning. There was much good-natured comment and merriment. Various *lucky draws and doorprizes* have been won. In 1967, a fine new spinning wheel was given. Other prizes have been top-grade fleeces and other supplies.

We have had many interesting visitors to every Seminar. In 1966 Mary Snyder, noted California weaver, lecturer, teacher and author, attended at the Blackburn farm. She enjoyed the Seminar, and subsequently introduced spinning and dyeing at the Banff Centre when she headed their weaving department. In 1967 Norman Kennedy, a weaver, spinner, and



1967 — Norman Kennedy and Edna Blackburn.

dyer from Scotland, sang and spun using a Scottish wool distaff and spindle. He now has a school in New England. Also in 1967, Mrs. Scotch from Richmond Hill dressed her upright flax distaff as she did in her native Hungary and spun with her spindle. She preferred to use her spindle for the flax which she later used in weaving. That same year Doloria Chapin, from New York State, showed the Navajo way of spinning with a large supported spindle and their unique way of winding it on with the help of one foot. In 1969, Marilyn Kluger, an author from Indiana, spent a busy day at the Schilder home. Afterwards she wrote *The Joy of Spinning*. Although we have had many people present their spinning wheels, Mr. Clarence Rognvaldson from Acton was the first in 1968. He discussed building spinning wheels and unveiled a recently completed one. The Rognvaldsons, of Icelandic descent, first made spinning wheels in Manitoba and continued to do so after moving to Ontario. In 1981, Gordon Lendrum came from Peterborough to demonstrate and discuss his folding and very portable wheel. Katharine Grinyer, a faithful attendant at early Seminars, gave a history of the Seminar in 1978.

A few quotes from letters received from grateful participants are included here.

Mrs. Sylvia Thorne, New York State, wrote:

I would like to say that I have learned so much from attending past Seminars and look back at them as some of the pleasantest times I have had. The Friday night banquet was smashing and the Spinning Song was another smash.¹

Miss Edythe Cawker, Owen Sound:

The programs and the leadership provided made a great impression on me as a beginning spinner. It was exciting and exhilarating to be spinning away in the workshops with so many spinners. I came away from this weekend with many fresh ideas, great plans and a basketful of supplies.

Mrs. Tabitha Rossetter, New Orleans:

My trip to Oshawa remains vivid and proved a lifetime adventure to me.....I took away from the meeting many beginnings which have proved to have many ramifications - all of which were begun because of the generous, patient and friendly to a novice who could have been a nuisance.....

The Ontario Handspinning Seminar has never sought or been given grants or any financial help from outside agencies. We have been able to manage our own finances. From a zero dollar beginning, there is now a small bank balance saved for a rainy day. In 1964, there was no charge for a meeting place. In 1965 and 1966, tent rentals were \$251.45 and \$255.75. These costs increased during 1967, 1968, and 1969, and together with the rental of a "Johnny on the Job", were \$325, \$317, and \$322. In 1974 the move to York University incurred costs of \$735 which have gradually

¹The Hiawatha Spinners and Mrs. E. Bryant of Oshawa hosted the Seminar at the McLaughlin Gallery in 1970.

increased to over \$2,000 in 1981. *Workshop materials* were all donated by the founders and leaders in the beginning, but as workshops and expenses increased, these costs were covered by the registration fee. The founders of the Seminar gave their time, travelling expenses, and workshop materials quite freely at first. As expenses increased and the Seminar was on a more steady keel, changes were made. In 1966, the three founders were given \$25.00 each as committee members and \$10.00 was paid to each workshop leader. This was continued to 1974 as finances permitted. From 1975 to 1977, eight committee members each received \$25.00. Committee costs in 1981 were \$332. Workshop leaders do not now receive any remuneration, but are allowed free registration and the materials are supplied by the Seminar.

Some of the original participants of the Seminar have died and left us with a fine legacy.

Mrs. Bielman	Mr. Wes Blackburn	Mr. Bryant
Mrs. Bessie East	Miss Katharine Grinyer	Miss Janet Hall
Mr. Kainz	Mrs. Charles Lyons	Mr. Curtis Reed

Some have moved to distant places and cannot attend.

Mrs. Betty Locke
Mrs. Jean Chapman and children
Mrs. Beth Newhall
Mrs. Elaine Whyte Cain

It has been said that the best we can give our children is roots and wings. We hope the Ontario Handspinning Seminar has given everyone roots and provided wings for those who have had the urge to soar and research some of the wonderful things still not familiar to us.

