

Spinning Leaders

All of us at the Ontario Handspinning Seminar in 2004 are the beneficiaries of a remarkable legacy. Dorothy Kirk, Ted Carson, and Edna Blackburn began the Seminar in 1964, and each of us has benefited from their desire to revive handspinning in Ontario.

Dorothy Budge Kirk 1911 - 2003

Dorothy was born in Owen Sound, where her father raised sheep on the family farm. She was taught to spin and vegetable dye by Mrs. Fowler at the Women's Art Association in Toronto in the early 1930s. Braiding and lace making soon followed. She learned well on a borrowed family wheel, later inheriting equipment. Dorothy began to teach, not only privately, but also at the Ontario College of Art and at the Banff School of Fine Arts. Her talent and her skills became well known all across the country. By constantly writing to the far corners of the earth, she acquired an astounding knowledge of textile matters, which she always shared with her students. When her husband retired in 1972, Dorothy returned to Owen Sound and became involved in the Master Spinners and Nature Dyers Course at Georgian College and taught at all the College's locations. Over many years, countless numbers of students passed through her hands. Her bywords were excellence and experimentation. With the help of that twinkle in her eye, she eagerly shared with each one of her students her amazing enthusiasm for all the fibre arts.



Photo
Owen Sound Sun Times, Willy Waterton

Dorothy's fine collection of spinning wheels and equipment from all over the world brought joy to her, and was most instructive for her students. This was a shared enjoyment as Dorothy collected and her husband Harry provided the skill to repair and restore. The collection is now safely housed in the Grey County Museum in Owen Sound.

Ted Carson 1927 - 2003

As early as his school days, Ted was fascinated by textiles. He had been taught to knit by a neighbour and his grandmother instilled in him a love of fibres. With encouragement from his wife, Mimi, Ted left Ontario Hydro after seventeen years to begin a new career. He expanded their small venture for importing Italian knitting yarns into a retail and mail-order fibre business called *Handcraft Wools* which was located in Streetsville, Ontario.

There was a romance with wool for Ted. Clearly, raising his own sheep was the next step, and he had a special interest in naturally-coloured fleece. Gradually, the shop began to bring in all manner of exotic fibres to spark the interest of both spinners and weavers. There was silk,



Photo - *Ontario Craft* 1985

alpaca, and wool from a wide range of breeds that we, at that time, hardly even knew existed. A shop run by Ted Carson seemed to provide endless possibilities. A great deal of the success of the shop came, not only from Ted's own enthusiasm, but also because all of his staff knew how to both spin and weave.

Teaching was a big part of his career, and he taught superbly in Canada, the USA, and New Zealand. High standards and creativity were very much his own personal way of going, and he passed those ideals on to his students. The lessons in carding stand out in the memory of many of his students. There were always funny little gimmicks, and humour played an important part in Ted's teaching. How often did he say, "Just relax and enjoy your spinning". Eventually the shop moved to Minden in the 1990s, and Ted still kept his fine flock of sheep on the family farm at Lochlin. For twenty years he was an inspirational teacher at The Haliburton School of Fine Arts.

Edna Blackburn 1911 – 1996

Born in Ballycroy, Ontario, Edna Blackburn's life story is intertwined with the history of spinning and weaving in Ontario. She became interested in spinning at the age of thirteen, but did not own her first wheel until 1944. A Scotswoman, Margaret Moore, taught her spinning, weaving, and natural dyeing. In 1954, she and her husband Wes purchased a farm in Caledon East, raising sheep and rabbits. This became the home of the Albion Hills Farm School. Edna began to make her mark on the textile community when she was a member of the committee which organized the first Ontario-wide weavers' conference in 1955. From 1959 to 1972, she was resident spinner, dyer and weaver at Black Creek Pioneer Village, demonstrating to school children and the general public five days each week. In the 1960s, the Canadian Guild of Crafts awarded her a scholarship to study at Leeds University in England. Later, she mentored three textile students who became Leeds students. Edna conducted research at the Royal Ontario Museum, working for Dorothy Burnham, and she studied at the Penland School in North Carolina.



Photo - *Craft Dimensions* 1971

Edna Blackburn was Ted Carson's first spinning teacher.

In 1964, Edna, Ted Carson, and Dorothy Kirk co-ordinated the first Ontario Handspinning Seminar which was held in a tent at her farm.

In honour of their contributions to spinning and weaving in Ontario, Edna, Dorothy, and Ted were presented with Honourary Master Spinner certificates by the Ontario Handweavers and Spinners in 1982. Edna was also part of the committee which organized the workshops for Convergence '86 in Toronto.

Edna participated in the Studio Tour of Artisans in Caledon East and continued to teach until her death in 1996.

This is a glimpse of three pathfinders who have brought to many of us their love of textiles. They made the solid foundation on which the Ontario Handspinning Seminar has been built. We, who currently come, enjoy the learning, the sharing and the fellowship. It is wise to remember that we benefit for their efforts and from those of other people who followed in their footsteps. All of us have been touched by these pioneers and we have reason to be profoundly grateful.