

"You don't have to be warped to weave, but it helps. You don't have to be warped, but it helps."

~ The Prairie Wool Weavers Guild

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Imagine a chorus of women, most old and kindly enough to be your grandma; or if you are a grandma, then your coffee buddy, card-playing buddy, or perhaps your walking buddy. Others are a little younger, your mother's age or your teacher's age, and just as kind as the grandmas. These women are dressed in matching patchwork vests, which they have woven, cut and sewn together themselves. And they are rapping. "You don't have to be warped to weave, but it helps. You don't have to be warped, but it helps," they sing, complete with choreographed actions.

Those familiar with the fundamentals of weaving will appreciate the pun. On those naïve to the ways of the weaving world, the joke may be lost; the fact that "warps" are the vertical threads used in weaving is moot. But, even the unenlightened can't help but be intrigued by the rapping sensations who are the Prairie Wool Weavers of Craik, Saskatchewan. Hoping to satisfy my own curiosity, I sat in the Solar Garden Restaurant on a blustery October morning, only a few miles outside the sleepy rural community. A banner hung overhead as a reminder of where I was sitting. The display, of cotton and hemp, announced the centre's name in dark brown bubble letters, set against numerous interwoven colours representative of the prairie landscape. It took the Prairie Wool Weavers roughly 59 hours of collaborative effort to create.

And beneath this banner I was introduced, quite enthusiastically, to the art of weaving, spinning and dying, and to five of the 12 women currently committed to keeping these art forms alive in Craik.

For the past 28 years, the self-dubbed "loosely woven organization of slow moving fun seekers," has been gathering to share lessons, both in weaving and in living. Today, the guild meets on the first Monday of every month, a date "set in stone," according to Jo McAlpine, long-time member and daughter of founding and current member, June Exelby. Participants take turns donning the hostess cap, supplying a comfortable space, coffee, and some fancy desert to make the mid-day meeting all the more enjoyable.

Although sporting near identical vests, they are quite a diverse bunch, with a dose of spunk shared between them. They come from village, town, country, and city: Craik, Aylesbury, Bladworth, Davidson, Mistusinne, and even Regina and Saskatoon. And all are teachers. They generously pass along to one another their years of experience and learning, just like extra fabric, "precious patterns," or weaving tips. In fact, many enter the guild with only the basic knowledge of weaving, or even, of what a loom is. Through the give and take, they've become like family to one another said Bev Obrigewitsch, a weaver for over 20 years. They've even "started to think alike," added June, with a kind of fatalistic humour.

Their group is one of only four weaving and spinning guilds in the province. The others, Saskatoon, Regina and Prince Albert, are the first, second and third largest population centres in Saskatchewan. Craik--located about mid-way between Regina and Saskatoon on Highway 11--has a population of 461. Fewer than the number of threads it takes to weave a small wool blanket. And, said Bev proudly, they are "as active, or more so, than any of the others." Together they attend craft shows, festivals, and sheep-to-shawl competitions, at which fleece is sheared, washed, spun, and woven into a shawl on the spot. Every second year, a weekend conference is put on by the province's four guilds, and, as tradition goes, the Craik ladies are in charge of the entertainment.

Their last conference at Bruno saw them rapping, "you don't have to be warped to weave," for their fellow weavers, between details of the most memorable projects and experiences had over the course of the Guild's life.

But though they share a common thread in their passion, the weavers of Craik say they differ from the guilds of urban foundation in a fundamental way. As "professional hobbyists," the act of weaving for the Prairie Wool Weavers stems from the love for the craft, the sense of accomplishment and for each other's company.

No doubt the city-based guilds share these rationales. But, say the Prairie Guild, many of the urban guild members weave to make a profit.

Such motivations harken back to the 1940s, when the Searle Grain Company embarked upon a program of weaving instruction and inexpensive loom supply in the prairies; its goal: to allow farmers' wives the opportunity to produce their own clothing and household-textiles, thereby becoming less dependent on purchased goods. As the post-war years set in, the craft became a livelihood for women forced to leave their jobs and return to the farm. Indeed, some of the looms owned by the Guild have come from this initiative. But today, its members weave for fun, exercise and friendship forging. Monetary objectives can breed a kind of competitiveness that makes developing the camaraderie shared by the rural bunch difficult. "We share our mistakes as well as our successes," said Bev, looking around the table fondly. Most of what the women weave today - anything from placemats, runners, blankets, and coverlets, to rugs, mug rugs, clothing, and bags - is given to friends and family.

Sitting with some of the Prairie Wool Weavers, sharing in their enthusiasm, their humour, and their candour, the key to their small-town success became evident: Encouragement.

Criticism, for these women, might as well be a foreign language. In the short time spent at the small square tables slapped together to make one big one in the Solar Garden Restaurant, I nearly succumbed to whiplash attempting to keep up with all the compliments being passed around the table.

Though Irene Ehman is only a "rookie," having joined the guild in 2001, she can weave a fantastic tea towel. Wilma Spencer has been weaving for 19 years. "Since 1986" she declared without a moment's hesitation. We admired her vest, which was embellished with beads and gems she had creatively sewn within the woven patterns. Though Bev has a fear of tapestry, she can weave a pick-up project, where threads are hand picked one by one, like nobody's business. All this was spilled out in conversation, between laughter, easy banter and mouthfuls of the Denver sandwich lunch special.

A faded green Hilroy notebook was passed around by Hilda Dale, a member for almost 15 years. In it, the Prairie Wool Weavers history is penned: the names of past and present members, and dates of entries accentuated with red ink; the handwriting and pen change as the years go by. From its March 1977 beginnings in scribbled blue to a sweeping black; primitive computer type to a modern memo in Arial font, the lives and lessons of the Prairie Weavers are recorded.

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A quote from weaver Bev Obrigewitsch - "I would want to belong to Weavers even if I didn't weave. Just because they're so much fun."