
A Few Words on Thrift, Textiles, & a Hand- Made Economy

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Let's face it: most modern day Westerners have it pretty good. If we get tired of or outgrow a garment, we can throw it out and go get a new one right away. Fashions change? No problem, we can go out and buy the latest at the nearest clothing store or discount house with little or no inconvenience. But on Pern?

That's a different story.

Like on Earth before the Industrial Revolution, everything on Pern is hand-made and labor intensive. Every garment your character wears probably in one way or another literally took a year or more to make, regardless of what it's made of. Whether it be cotton, leather, or wool, an incredible amount of effort went into its production. Take wool as a classic example. From start to finish, a simple fisherman's sweater may take up to two years to make. The first step would have involved, inevitably, sheep. Skipping over the messy details of sheep breeding, we will go straight on to shearing.

Shearing an entire sheep, to an experienced hand, can take several minutes with power clippers. Imagine having to use hand clippers with no power outlet in sight, and in possibly inclement weather. And once you've finished that sheep, turn around. Behind you are ninety-nine more left to go. Then the shorn fleeces are sorted, washed, and graded. The bigger hunks of dirt, manure, and miscellaneous junk have been removed by hand, and the lanolin (yes, your hand cream's magic ingredient comes from sheep) has been partially removed for ease of storage and handling. Then you start carding.

Carding, to those of you who don't know, is when you rub hunks of sorted fleece between two hand-held paddles lined with metal teeth (imagine a curry comb with a twin and you'll come close to a set of carding combs). Carding not only removes the smaller hunks of trash such as thorns, it also lines the fibers up in the same direction preparatory to spinning. Imagine having to do ninety-nine fleeces (which seem to get bigger with every step as they fluff up). Granted, you'll have lots of family members and friends to help you, and it's a great way to pass a stormy evening when you can't go out and do something else, but it's still a lot of work.

By the way, if you sheared those sheep in the early part of spring, it's probably late summer by now, if not early fall.

Once the carding is completed, you start spinning. At this point you probably have two options, a spinning wheel

or a drop spindle. A spinning wheel, when properly handled and maintained, can speed up yarn production immensely, especially if you have four or five of them and a lot of willing helpers. Children, old people, women, and the hold's menfolk in the evenings are usually a ready source of labor. It's a lot of work, but there are always ways of making it pleasant: you can sing, gossip, and talk over the latest news while you work.

The drop spindle is a simple device, and one of the oldest known, for spinning fibers into yarn. It consists of a twelve-inch or longer shaft of wood with a notch cut in one end, and a counterweight near the bottom. A string is wrapped below the counterweight, brought over the weight, and then run through the notch with a half-hitch. Fleece is twisted to the end of this string, and the whole spindle is twirled and then allowed to drop with the free hand, drawing out a twisted cord as it falls. When the spindle reaches the ground, the string is wrapped about the notch and the counterweight is unlimbered, and then wrapped about the shaft with the counterweight, leaving just enough of the spun fleece to restring the notch and counterweight. You will keep on doing this until you run out of unspun fleece. Drop spindles are portable; you'll probably find yourself carrying one everywhere you go. A common sight in many third world countries today is that of peasant women walking and spinning on their way to the market, the doctor, or to a friend's house. Large groups of spinners will gather around wells, under shade trees, or under awnings where they can chatter, gossip, and in general, socialize. No doubt you'd do this too. A drop spindle is simple, it can be made in many sizes to accommodate the age and size of the user, or the type of fiber being spun. And horror of horrors, most children won't be wasting their time blipping away at space invaders with their Gameboys, they will be sitting right next to you and spinning away on their own miniature drop spindles (at least you know where they are, and can keep your eye on them...). Yes, there are no child labor laws, and they have to help, or otherwise, you'll all be running around buck naked during the winter.

By now, you probably have spun enough yarn to begin that sweater. Oh yeah, I bet you forgot about it, you've been so busy sorting, carding, and spinning! Leaving the other ninety-nine fleeces to the rest of the family to deal with, it's now time to dye the wool. For a fisherman's sweater, you'd probably leave it naturally colored, which can range from cream to various shades of gray on up to black. However, if you want colors that don't have anything to do with sheep, it's time to get out the dye pot.

A quick run-down on natural dyes: they take a lot of labor, and you are never guaranteed consistent results, unlike modern, chemical dyes.

Natural dyes come from parts of animals, roots, barks, berries, and occasionally insects. They are labor intensive, and generally smelly when boiling. Dying can be done to fleece before you spin it, or you can dye it after you've spun it. Occasionally you might want to dye it after it's been made into a garment, which can be disastrous if a bubble gets

trapped in the fabric while it's soaking, which will give you uneven results. The home dyer needs to be a bit of a chemist: he or she will probably be using recipes passed down through generations and learned while still a child clinging to their mother's skirts at the dye pots. Some of these dye formulas might be written down, but don't count on it. A lot of your Pernese, or even Earth dyers, might be illiterate.

Once you've gotten past the dye stage, or if you've bypassed that stage entirely, it's time to start knitting that sweater. *'Oh, no,'* you groan. *'You mean, it's not ready to wear yet?'* Depending on your level of skill, and the complexity of the garment you're going for, it could take you another two to three months until completion. Again, don't worry, you'll have plenty of company while you knit. You and a lot of your family and friends will be sitting around carding, spinning, weaving, crocheting, sewing, mending, and knitting in the evenings when all the rest of the work is done. If you are elderly and unable to handle heavy labor, you will probably be sitting around with your age-mates all day, knitting and making garments for everyone else, even if you are a man.

A fisherman's sweater is a garment that requires a lot of skill, not to mention memorization: the intricate cabling is passed down through the generations and differs from family to family. In fact, they are almost as unique as fingerprints. An informed observer can tell exactly where a body (wearing one of your sweaters) that's been washed up on their beach came from even if they don't recognize the wearer. (Highland tartans, when worn correctly, serve a similar purpose.) Anyway, if you're persistent, you will eventually have a beautiful, serviceable, and warm garment to either wear yourself or to give to a loved one. Oh, and by the way, you'll probably start another one the moment you finish this one, in between the new year's shearing, sorting, carding, dying, etc.

What if the garment wears out? If it's properly made, it won't for a long time. If it does, and it's worn past mending, you can either unravel it for the yarn and knit it into scarves, mittens, or caps, or chop it up and comb the fibers into a batch of new wool (this can be quite attractive, especially if you comb red scrap fibers into white wool, you'll get a speckled effect) or use it to stuff pillows and mattresses. If the fabric is cotton, linen, etc. it might be used for dust rags, paper, and dragon polishers. If it is in fairly good shape, it can be cut down for children's clothing, cut into strips for braided rugs, chopped into stuffing for pillows, or cut into quilt pieces (quilting being another valuable skill which I won't go into here). Nothing goes to waste if you can help it!

Also, you wouldn't own as many clothes as current western Earthers do: the poorer people would wear cast-offs and hand me downs, and they would wear them until they fell apart. A middle-class person might own two or three outfits, one for every day, one for dirty work, and something really nice for special occasions. And yes, there would still be hand-me-downs. The three outfits go through rotation, your every-day outfit might have once been your holiday

best that had been stained, or worn to a frazzle, while your slopping outfit might have once been your every-day outfit. And you would take care of them. After all, it's a lot of work to make them. If you are wealthy, you would own more, and you'd probably still have been involved in making textiles, only you'd be working with higher quality materials such as angora. You would also have a servant trained and dedicated to taking care of your wardrobe and keeping it in repair. And whenever you felt one of your outfits was wearing out, you might give it to your servants or poorer relations, and they would be grateful for it.

And something that a hand-made culture would probably never do: deliberately rip or tear a garment to be fashionable. Today's fashion sub-cultures where such deliberate mutilations are popular would be viewed with dismay, if not with downright suspicion of being dangerous mental aberrants. (A case in point: a friend of mine from Kenya who was over here studying Agriculture couldn't understand why there were so many beggars on campus. I told him that they weren't beggars, they were students wearing fashionably torn clothing. This was truly amazing to him, for where he came from, clothing was expensive and to have new garments was both a status symbol and a privilege. To deliberately deface a garment was unthinkable. He put it down as a display of conspicuous consumption: Americans were rich, therefore, they showed their wealth by being able to destroy their clothing with impunity and still be able to afford more... think about it.)

Pretend you are a Pernese housewife who has just completed the above labors, and given your sweater to your favorite niece. And the little chit deliberately takes the shears to the garment in order to be 'fashionable'. One: you'd be furious. Two: you'd probably never give the ungrateful brat another garment as long as both of you are still breathing.