



Calumet County Historical Society Museum

**Open Sundays June-September 1:00 to 4:00
or by appointment**

Have you seen this display of Calumet County textile production?

By Cindy Ellenbecker



Textile Trivia:

Between 1893 and 1911 Montgomery Ward sold spinning wheels; Sears and Roebuck never did.

Spinster is a term originally denoted a woman whose occupation was to spin fiber. Because spinning was one of the few occupations women of yesteryear had available to them, an unmarried woman could support herself spinning. Gradually the term began to refer to an unmarried woman, older than what is perceived as the prime age range during which women usually marry and became synonymous with the term **old maid**.

Spinning yarn to be knitted or woven into garments marked a stage in evolution of human kind from savagery to civilization. Primitive societies used skins for clothing; therefore, the creation of fabrics by spinning and weaving marked a great social transition. And, at the beginning of the 18th century, spinning and weaving in America was viewed as an act of patriotism.

Immigrant women, particularly those from Germany & Scandinavia) typically brought their spinning wheels with them; most wheels could be disassembled and placed in their large immigrant trunks. Spinning wheels were typically given as wedding presents and considered appropriate for a dowry.

Spinners measured their output by the “knot” representing 40 turns around the yarn reel or eighty yards, and it was not uncommon for the best spinner to be able to spin a hundred knots a day of single ply yarn, although we do not know how many hours “the day” consisted of—with other chores and limited lighting being factors. (80 yards x 100 knots = 800 yards of single ply in a day).

However, single ply yarn is not sturdy. (It’s easily pulled apart.) So minimally, yarn used for knitting or weaving was typically 2-ply, necessitating another day of spinning to get the second batch of 800 yards spun, and then the spinner had several more hours spinning/plying the two strands together before it could be used. How much would 2.5 days of constant spinning yield towards a garment? The answer: not enough! It takes roughly 1200 yards of two ply for a knitted ladies’ size small sweater!



Although mechanization had a powerful impact on middle-class women living in the cities, hand spinning persisted in rural areas such as Calumet County into the 1850s.

However, by 1860, spinning wheels began to disappear as relatively inexpensive yard goods began

to be more readily available to many Wisconsin settlers; there was, however, a brief resurgence during the Civil War (1861-1865).

In Wisconsin

- E. Palmer Andrus, resident of Winooski, a small village along the Onion River in Sheboygan (now a ghost town) was in business well before the Civil War. He was listed in the Wisconsin State Directory in 1857-8 as a spinning wheel manufacturer. (There was an increased need for spinning wheels during the Civil War.) in 1864, Andrus sold wheels for \$4.50 each. By 1870, Andrus discontinued making wheels and opened a cheese factory.
- In 1865, Little and Relf of Sheboygan Falls manufactured and sold spinning wheels as did Walshendorf, Saupe, and Co., of Fond du Lac.
- However, the most widely sold spinning wheel in Wisconsin, if not the whole country, during the decade of the Civil War, was manufactured by J.B. Waite of Waitsville (now also a ghost town) in Jefferson County, WI.

The this photo you see a Great Wheel (left side) also known as the Walking Wheel; it was the first "spinning wheel" and the operator had to walk around the wheel with fiber to make the wheel turn. This wheel did NOT fit in immigrant trunks --as you can imagine-- and takes up so much space that the museum had to store it up high. The wheel to the right is the second invention after the Walking Wheel, and it is called a Pendulum Wheel, and is VERY RARE, so this was a real find for the museum! The pendulum was to eliminate the needed walking, but this wheel, too, was huge and the pendulum was problematic in that it hit people when they got too close.

When the smaller wheel where the operator could sit down and treadle to move the wheel was invented, the larger wheels became obsolete. The wheel pictured here is from Ira Bartz of Chilton, and the style is called a Saxony spinning wheel.

Cindy Ellenbecker holds a Ph.D. from U.W--Madison and spent her career as a college teacher. She also earned a Master Spinner degree from Olds College in Ontario, Canada; her "side job" was a shop on the farm where she sold her handspun items from animals she raised. These days she spins fiber for recreation only and is on the Board of Directors of the Calumet County Historical Society.

The Stamp Act (1765) which brought about the Boston Tea Party is cited as the chief event that hastened the Revolutionary War, but much of the dissatisfaction and resentment of the Colonies grew out of oppressive laws by the British on the raising of sheep and the manufacture of wool in the new country.

