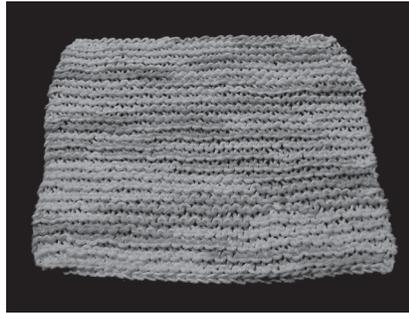


The Story of Wool



The first settlers that came to the United States eastern region brought sheep with them. Even Captain John Smith and his follower brought sheep with them when they settled in Virginia. Soon the number of sheep in the United States eastern region began to grow. From the wool of the thick coats of their sheep, the colonial women wove their blankets and clothing and made the long warm stockings worn by men and women.

As more and more people came to the United States region, more and more woollen cloth was needed. Luckily there were great spaces of land where more sheep could be pastured.

The first step of the colonists in making woollen cloth was shearing the sheep. They were sheared at least once a year with something that looked like large scissors called shears. The whole woolly coat was cut off. If it was cut evenly the fleece would hang together in one piece. Next it needed to be washed since the wool is very greasy and full of sand and dirt. The wool was usually washed in a nearby stream. When it was washed it left the fibers all kinky and tightly matted together. The next step was to straighten out the wool so it would be fluffy and easy to spin. It was straightened out by a pair of hand carders. Hand carders are small tools with wire teeth on one side. The wool was placed between the two carders and drawn back and forth through the teeth until it became a soft, fluffy roll (bunch) of wool ready to be spun into yarn.

There were two ways of spinning yarn. It could either be done by spinning by hand or by a spinning wheel. The colonists spinning by hand tied their “bunch” of carded wool to the thick stick. Then, pulling out tiny tufts of fibers from the wool with the stick, they twisted the wool into thread between their thumbs and fingers. They took the twisted wool off the stick and fastened it to a weight. When the weight was dropped, it dropped slowly towards the ground as the strands of fibers were slowly let out of the “bunch” of wool. As it dropped closer to the ground it also spun. This spinning twisted the strand of wool and drew it out into yarn. When the weight reached the ground, the spinner picked it up, wound up the yarn, and continued the spinning process.

The spinning wheel made yarn much faster. A four-foot wheel was spun by one hand. The four-foot wheel, in turn, spun a smaller wheel with a band made of twine and twisted yarn. Projecting from the small wheel was a spindle which turned very swiftly. With a “bunch” of carded wool in the other hand, fibers of the wool would be connected to the spindle. As the spindle turned, the colonist maneuvered the wool so that a small strand slowly came out of the “bunch”. As the fibers wrapped around the spindle it also twisted the strands into yarn at the same time. Making twists in the yarn made it very strong.