

## GUILD TOURS WOOLGROWERS

Imagine touching one thousand unwashed fleeces every day! And then imagine sorting each one according to its degree of cleanliness, length of staple, and diameter of fiber. Seventy Weavers Guild members were able to watch several highly trained men to just that on two tours in March at the North Central Wool Marketing Corporation ("Woolgrowers").

Our tour guide was Mr. Dick Boniface, the Wool growers' Director of Field Services, Director of Public Relations, and editor of their newsletter, The Wool Sack. It is truly amazing that he also had time to show us around the entire Woolgrowers operation at 101-27th Ave. S E, Minneapolis, and to spend approximately two hours explaining how wool is graded and marketed, and answering our hundreds of questions. Mr. Boniface was raised on a farm in southern Wisconsin before going to the University of Wisconsin to study Agricultural Economics. His chief interest was in cooperative marketing. About 25 years ago he came to Minneapolis and went to work for the Woolgrowers where he has been ever since. Just as he is wearing many hats now, he grew up to these roles through the ranks, spending some time as a wool grader before moving into the office. Part of his duties carry him into the field where he talks with sheep raisers, examines fleeces after shearing, and buys fleeces.

The North Central Wool Marketing Corporation is actually a federated cooperative representing 20,00 producers in Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, and a few in other states. Some of the wool is bought outright from the producers, some is taken on consignment, which presents a complicated book-keeping problem, solved by their accounting computer. The Woolgrowers represents about 15% of all the wool produced in the United States and about 20% of all the sheep raisers in the United States which attests to its successful marketing of the fleeces it handles.

We learned that 60% of the wool is shipped in by train, the rest by truck, and that the transportation alone accounts for four or five cents per pound on the final selling price of the fleece. The wool in grease arrives from the sheep raisers in large burlap bags which are opened, then separated according to the diameter of the fiber, length of staple, and condition of the fleece. This is all done by eye by men who work seven years to become a master grader. There are 35 classifications altogether, with intriguing names such as "quarter baby": a fairly coarse short fiber. The other primary grades are: fine, half, braid (or low quarter), quarter, and three-eighths. The crimp in a fleece is what give the wool its elasticity. The finer the crimp, the finer the diameter of the fiber, and the greater its elasticity. The finest fleeces come from the merino sheep, a native of Spain. As the merino was cross-bred with the French Rambouillet and Columbian sheep, the fiber became coarser. With the coarseness, however, comes longer staple.

Once the wool is graded it is baled in a ferocious-looking machine which eats up ten carts of fleeces, washes them together into a small compact bundle; the worker wraps a burlap around it, binds it with wires, releases the pressure, and holds his breath for fear the wire may snap. These bales hold about 100 fleeces, or about 1000 each. Since the wool business is seasonal, the warehouse is just now beginning to be stacked with bales of fleeces prior to being shipped to their destinations in woolen mills in the United States, England, France, Egypt, and Russia.

Finally, each bale is evaluated in the laboratory which the Woolgrowers maintains on its premises. It is one of the few marketing outfits which does analyze its own fiber. A core of the fiber is taken from each bale. In the lab, the core is

weighed, then carefully washed free of its natural lanolin and dirt or debris which may be caught in it; it is then weighed again when it is completely dry. This determines the loss of grease and dirt and is the determining factor of the price at which those fleeces are sold to industry or individuals. Finally, with a special device, a thin shaving of fiber is collected on a slide and taking an average, the fleeces in that particular bale can be accurately described with the appropriate grading name. This also serves as a double check on the graders themselves.

Mr. Boniface told us that there are certain sheep raisers who have animals with very nice fleeces. These he saves out and sells through the Woolgrowers shop to spinners who wish to make their own yarn from local fleeces.

There is much more to tell, but I have taken up enough space. I invite you who missed the tours to watch for a similar tour next year if it can be arranged. Meanwhile there are some materials which describe the grading process, a chart showing various grades of staple, and copies of the Wool Sack for you to look at in the Guild library. Thanks to you who participated and helped make it more interesting with your probing and intelligent questions. We all learned so much about an industry which many of us took for granted, or never gave a thought to at all.

Kathie Frank



### NEW IN THE LIBRARY

For those interested in frame loom weaving, some additions to the library include: Frame Loom Weaving – Redman; Rigid Heddle Weaving – Swanson; Free Weaving on Frame Loom – Hoppe; Double Weave on a Rigid Heddle Frame Loom – Gaston-Voute.

For off-loom techniques, check the shelf for Split-Ply Twining – Harvey; Plaiting – Step-by-Step – Glashauser; Creative Knitting – Phillips; Basic Book of Fingerweaving – Dendel.

Have you wanted to look at a Shuttle, Spindle and Dye-pot magazine and found it was checked out? Now we have copies of each month in binders that will stay in the library for reference.

Once upon a time a card file for author, title, and subject was started. Then with a greater volume of books being purchased, it was not kept up. But it was not forgotten, and a year ago we coaxed Vivian Liden to work on up-dating it. Our thanks to her and her co-workers for their good work. Vivian is no longer working on it, so if anyone would like to help type cards for this file, please contact me. I know many of you have indicated an interest in working on the library committee. If you are still interested it would save much time and telephoning if you would call me. Meanwhile, until we finish the work, there is a partial file on subjects that is useable. It is in a two-drawer grey file in the library.

Ruth Delsart, Librarian