

SPINNING

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## SPINNING

## 1.

Mrs. Maggie Spear lives on a farm about eighteen miles from Burkesville, Kentucky, in the Pea Ridge Community of Cumberland County. The date and time of the interview with Mrs. Spear had been prearranged between Mrs. Spear's son, Dale, and my mother-in-law, Mrs. Ethel Anderson. Dale Spear is principal of Cumberland County Grade School and my mother-in-law is a first-grade teacher there. I first learned about Mrs. Spear's spinning talent from Mrs. Anderson who had known Mrs. Spear for quite a number of years-- having taught Dale when he was in grade school. Two years ago this summer, Mrs. Spear had demonstrated her spinning at the Cumberland County Fair and had previously been on television here in Bowling Green doing a spinning demonstration for WBLK-TV.

The date of the interview was agreed upon for Saturday, March 18th, sometime around 10 or 10:30 in the morning. These arrangements were made with Mr. Spear and he said his mother would be delighted to see us any time. I did not speak directly to Mrs. Spear about these arrangements but through her son.

On the day of the interview it was a cloudy, wet, miserable morning when we started out. Leaving the Modoc community of Cumberland County around 9:30, we arrived at Mrs. Spear's house approximately 10:30 a.m. We only had to stop and ask once the directions to her farm. The road is blacktopped all the way except for a section just before you get to her house. The house sits off the main road on the top of a little hill. A gravel road leads to the front yard and Mrs. Spear was outside coming from the direction of the barn when we arrived. We could tell she was curious who we were until Mrs. Anderson got out of the car and was recognized by her. She seemed surprised to see us and with good reason because her son had failed to tell her we were coming this particular morning. Even though we weren't expected, Mrs. Spear was very friendly and pleased to see us, and invited us to come in, but to excuse the way her house looked. A grandson, Jim Spear-- age twelve, was staying with her since her husband, whose name was also Jim, had died only ten months ago-- as Mrs. Spear put it " ten months ago this very day my husband lay a corpse". We were offered chairs and Mrs. Spear said again for us to excuse her house cleaning and the way she looked. She was dressed in overboots, a scarf around her head, and her husband's old coat; however, she was neatly dressed underneath.

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Conversation was between Mrs. Spear and my mother-in-law for the first few minutes and this helped "break the ice" somewhat. However, Mrs. Spear was a very warm, outgoing person and conversation never seemed "strained". They talked about her family and how they were doing. Mrs. Spear has lived on Pea Ridge all her life and has raised five children: Troy Spear has an M.A. degree from Western and is now Administrator of Cumberland County Hospital; Dale Spear is now principal of Burkesville Elementary School and also has an M.A. from Western; Grady Spear is a fifth-grade teacher at Kettle Elementary School located near Pea Ridge and has a B.S. from Western; Mrs. Madie Spear Long is a housewife living on Pea Ridge; and Mrs. Bernice Spear Daniel works in a drapery factory in Indianapolis, Indiana. A good education seemed to be very important to Mrs. Spear and her philosophy was "if you miss school you miss everything". Mrs. Spear is 82 years old and seems to be in excellent health. She has the disposition of a much younger person.

Mrs. Anderson asked her would she mind showing some of the articles she has made and she brought out a shoe box filled with colorful pin cushions, a pair of hand-knitted woolen socks, a knitted cap, and a pair of gloves she called "half-hands" because the fingertips were left open so things

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could be handled easier. She sells the pin cushions and has sold a few socks and gloves. She mostly knits articles for her family. She explained it took two "hanks" to knit a sock and two hanks equal to about  $\frac{1}{2}$  lb. of wool ( $\frac{1}{2}$  lb. of wool makes a pair). She explained that 4 or 5 lbs. of wool comes off one sheep. I asked Mrs. Spear would she mind doing some spinning for us and she seemed pleased to do so. Her spinning wheel was up in the attic and it took some maneuvering to get it down. She explained that it took up too much room to keep it set up down stairs. She refused our offer to help get it down since there was just room for one person on the attic steps. Lighting inside the house was bad and when taking pictures we had to leave the front door open. Also, her grandson kept getting in the way and we had to ask him to turn down the television so we could hear Mrs. Spear talk. She explained the house had been built before the Civil War but a few rooms had been added through the years for convenience.

Mrs. Spear explained that the spinning wheel was over 100 years old and that "old man Henry Jennings" made it. It had belonged to Mrs. Spear's husband's father and was passed down to her. The spinning wheel was very important when she was a young girl since they depended on it for blankets, socks, shirts, caps, gloves, dresses, sweaters,

and all articles of wearing apparel, and it was very important that young girls knew how to spin. She would sit up late at night spinning. She remembered making a man five pairs of socks for a bushel of corn. Mrs. Spear said when she was thirteen years old her father told her and her sister, Ruth, that if they'd card and spin enough wool to knit a pair of stockings apiece he'd buy them a new pair of shoes. They use to keep quite a large herd of sheep just for spinning purposes but she did not make her dyes for the wool. She used "store-bought" dye for coloring and that Rit was the best.

II.

The spinning process is a very simple operation. Mrs. Spear had some wool already carded and she began to show how to spin it into yarn (See Photo 1.) There is a strong cord-like string wound around the large wheel and fastened to the whirl (Photo 2., 5.). Mrs. Spear commented that she remembered making the whirl out of a "piece of elder". Two corn shucks were afixed atop the whirl, called broaches, which were used to wind the yarn around after it had been spun and these had been placed there by her husband's mother "some seventy-five year ago". They were so old that she just kept them and never tore them up (See Photo 5.).

She explained that corn shucks were placed on the metal end of the whirl so that the yarn could be spun around it which made it easy to pull off when it got full. These she called broaches and explained that two broaches full made a hank. She demonstrated without using the shucks and had to manually unwind the yarn off the whirl (Photo 3., 6.). After filling the broach you started another strand and simply began again by pressing the roll of carded wool onto the end of the yarn where you had stopped before, then giving the wheel a big turn to get it started (Photo 4.). The wool has oil in it that helps it stick together so you



can get it started again. Mrs. Spear kept insisting that it was "easy done".

Mrs. Spear asked if we wanted her to show how to double the thread. She said it wasn't any trouble and could remember winding it around a chair back to double it. You either have to cross your band or run the wheel forward in order to double your thread. She explained that it wears your band out so to cross it that she generally just runs the wheel forward. It's the same process for a single thread except you now get a double thickness thread. Then wind it into a hank.

III.

Next, Mrs. Spear showed us how to card (See Photo 7.). She explained that a woman from Oklahoma sent her the cards and that she had three pair besides those. The cards resemble two curry combs and she placed the wool on top of the fine wires and began to pull in opposite directions. By pulling in opposite directions the fibers were combed out straight and then the carders were turned to make a roll. While carding Mrs. Spear said that her mother use to weave blankets for the family and only used cotton to make hand towels. Her mother made wool shirts for her "daddy" and wool dresses for "us kids". Mrs. Spear did grow cotton to use for spinning and remembered that "one fall when I got all my cotton picked that winter I had 28 lbs. of lint cotton". She remembered quilting eight quilts for Jim's sister, Lydia Rush, one time on "the halves"; "I got four".

Sheep are always sheared in the Spring of the year, last of April and first of May. Her son keeps the sheep and they sell the wool. She remembered getting "near to 60¢ a pound" for wool at one time.

Mrs. Spear really enjoys spinning and has taught both her daughters to spin. She showed us the picture that was made of her spinning at the county fair two summers ago.

Mrs. Spear asked would we like samples of the yarn. She gave us a piece of the carded roll of wool, a little ball of spun yarn, and a sample of the double thickness yarn. She said we could take all we wanted. When asked if she sold any of the things she made, she said she knitted mostly for her family but she did send a pair of socks up to Cincinnati once and got \$5 for them. That's the most she ever got. She showed us a box full of pin cushions she made and they were very colorful. She said she sold them and <sup>MY</sup>mother-in-law and I asked if she'd let us buy two. She wanted to give them to us but we insisted on paying for them.

Mrs. Spear was such a nice lady and we thanked her for being so cooperative. She said she enjoys having company since it gets so lonely for her since her husband died, and invited us to come back any time we wanted to.

IV.

PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Mrs. Spear turning the large wheel with her right hand and letting the yarn wind around the end of the whirl with her left.
2. Different angle showing the entire spinning process. Notice the cards lying at the base of the wheel.
3. Mrs. Spear is demonstrating how to get another strand of yarn started after filling of a broach. She is pressing the roll of carded wool to the end of the yarn.
4. This is a good close-up of the metal end of the whirl with the spun yarn wound around it and of Mrs. Spear pressing the carded roll of wool to the end of the yarn.
5. In this view you can see a good close-up of the two very old broaches atop the whirl, and of the whirl itself, which Mrs. Spear made out of a piece of elder wood.
6. This photo is merely a close-up of the spinning process.
7. Mrs. Spear has just carded a roll of wool.