

## MARY BARBARA SCHAUFF – SPINNING HISTORY

In 1938 members of The Grant County Historical Society made a field trip to Muscalunge, near Beetown. They went to see one of the last practitioners of the traditional art of Wool spinning in this area practice her craft. **Mary Barbara Schauff** was seventy three at that time (she died in 1942), and was still very active in making socks, sweaters, even underwear from native wool. She used dyes that were derived from local sources. All in all, it was of great interest to the GCHS members of that time, and I suspect it might interest some of us now, even those of us who have never seen the practice. Let's hope that modern artisans do not forget the fabric arts of the past. Below you will find two articles about Mrs. Schauff, and photos of the Historical Society visit.



From an 1878 Map of Grant County

**From a Herald Independent article of 1938:**

**“I’ve Been Spinning Yarn for Nigh onto Thirty Years...”**

"I've been spinning ever since my man brought home a spinning wheel that he bought at an auction sale down in Beetown, nigh onto thirty years ago." And with this remark, Mrs. Mary Barbara Schauff began an interesting resume of events that have transpired during her fifty-three years of married life on the old home farm, located just over the brim of Schauff Ridge, five miles southeast of Beetown.

"So you're The Independent man?" is the way she greeted the writer. "Bring in the spinning wheel, Annie, and some wool, and show him how it works." And Annie, one of the three daughters at home, brought in the spinning wheel, and the spool holder, and the frame on which the finished skein is wound.

"Yes sir," spoke Mrs. Schauff, whose seventy-three years have dealt kindly with her memory, "My man came home one night from an auction sale held down at Beetown, and he had bought a spinning wheel that must have been pretty old then." "Bless you, no," she replied to our inquiry, "this isn't the same one. I wore out that one; bought a new one and wore that one out, and this is the third. Oh, a fellow up at LaCrosse still makes them, but land sakes, they cost \$13.75 now."



Picture taken "at the Grant County Historical Society meeting at the old Muscalunge Mine - 1938"

Mrs. Schauuff takes a short cut of the finished product because she has eliminated the carding of the wool. Experienced fingers manipulate the rough wool as she treadles the wheel and from out of her hands flows connected strands of wool that is twisted into a single thread and wound onto the spool held in place on the spinning wheel. She next joins the strands from two, three or four spools, depending on what she is going to use the yarn for, and twists them into heavier yarn which is run from the spools onto the skein wheel. When this wheel is filled to its capacity with rough wool yarn, it is securely tied to prevent it from tangling. It is next washed to snow whiteness, and then dyed to suit her demands, or left the natural color. "Yes, I've had as many as 14 skeins hanging out on the porch at one time to dry." "See this color here," and she pointed to a square block that was one of many that made up a chair back. It was a beautiful golden brown, of mottled effect. "I dyed that from Walnut husks. That makes the finest kind of dye."

Mrs. Schauuff not only spins yarn for her own use but for many people of that community who bring rough wool to her, and she knits for many of them, too. An attractive pair of mittens was brought out to show the weight of the yarn used, but the style of knitting employed by Mrs. Schauuff was of more interest than the weight. Two colors were knitted at the same time into an original color

effect. "That's easy," said Mrs. Schauff, "you just run the two strands of different colors over your fingers, and keep track of the number of purls." Just that easy, we thought. "Oh yes. I have knitted dozens of pairs of mittens and socks, and sweaters; and I have knitted underwear from home spun wool for a Cassville man. Some of my knitting has gone as far as Kansas. I knit lots of things for around the house, too."

"We have lived on this farm for .... well, we celebrated our golden wedding three years ago... it has been fifty-three years we have lived here. We fed 240 people for dinner on our golden wedding day."

Living at home are three daughters, Annie, Adeline and Mathilda and two of the boys, Tony and Carl.

"Well, come out again said Mrs. Schauff as The Independent man made ready to depart, "and I'll try to have a supply of wool on hand. See these black socks. Well they are made from the wool of black sheep, and I think it's the best kind of wool."

Despite the chill out-doors, and the effect of such weather on bothersome rheumatism, Mrs. Schauff followed the writer out onto the porch. "See those log buildings? Well, they was built long before I came to this place to live. Yes, they're pretty old. The old log house stood right over there. Well, the boys will be getting home before long. They went over to Slaght's this morning to butcher. Goodbye, and come out again."

And so ended a very pleasant visit with a kind old lady, who may have spun yarn from rough wool, and knitted it into socks and mittens for the men folks because of necessity thirty years ago; but today it is our guess that it is a hobby, a pastime, that she just don't care to give up.





*Some of the older members who  
attended the Grant County  
Historical meeting at Old Muskegon  
1938*

## **There's been a Heap of Spinning in the Home of Aunt Barbara Schauff**

(Milwaukee?) Journal Special Correspondence (1939)

**Cassville, Wis.** - -Sheep shearing time didn't come any too soon this year to Mrs. Barbara Schauff's place in Waterloo town if you ask Aunt Barbara herself.

"This house is plumb out of fleece," she said. "What with all these sweaters and things to be finished, it'll take a heap of spinning."

The big dining table in the center of the room was loaded with knitted articles in various stages of completion. Unflustered by unexpected visitors in midmorning, Aunt Barbara resumed the knitting she had laid aside when a carload of company swarmed in upon her. She was putting the finishing touches to a man's cardigan jacket, and as she shifted the heavy garment around, a big ball of natural blond

wool rolled from her lap under the table. One of the visitors hastened to retrieve it, remarking on the four thread strength, and the evenness of the texture.

"Yes, it's our own make," Mrs. Schauff acknowledged.

"Mother can spin a thread that's as fine as store thread" one of the grownup daughters offered, indicating a little old red spinning wheel in the corner. "And just as even too," she said.

Aunt Barbara's knitting needles clicked steadily. The faint note of the Zephyr's siren was borne in on the clear air, carrying the reminder that beyond the next ridge to the west gleaming streamlined trains carry men and women swiftly to and fro in a complicated modern world.

### **A World Far Away**

Here, with the talk of reels and spindles, of carding and knitting and dyeing, that world seems very far away. As natural as the serene Mississippi river hills, among which she has spent the whole of her 75 years, Aunt Barbara Schauff finds nothing strange in her devotion to one of the most primitive and all but forgotten household arts. "For 40 years she has taken the fleece from the backs of her own sheep, carded, spun and fashioned it into innumerable useful articles of clothing for her own kith and kin. That strangers from "outside" should marvel at that is a source of Wonderment to her.

Ever since that fellow from the historical society happened in last summer, caught her spinning and carried her and her spinning wheel off to a big meeting at Muskellunge, more and more "outsiders" have been finding their way to this remote spot in the rugged western Grant county hill country.

A devious way it is, too, across the Rattlesnake River, then up, into the hills, and finally over the narrow road cut out of the side of the rocky ridge which leads to the farm. In a white house perched on the very summit of the ridge, surrounded by ancient oak and walnut trees, Aunt Barbara sits and spins.

### **Yearned for Wheel**

"When I was a little girl," she told her visitors, "I wanted, more" than anything in the world, a spinning wheel. My mother was too busy with a family of 15 children, to humor any one of us, so it was long after I was married and had children of my own that my wish came true. One day the mister came home from a sale in the neighborhood, bringing an old spinning wheel that he had picked up for 75cents.

"Now you can spin all you're a'mind to," he said, "if you can get the wool." '

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"I'll get the wool," I promised him. "I'll raise it. We started our flock that year with a pet lamb one of the neighbors gave our 9 year old Josie, and we've been raising our own wool ever since. I didn't have anybody to show me, so I learned to spin myself, and a pretty mess I made of it too for a while. Finally I got the hang of it, and now it's as easy as washing your hands." She broke into a chuckle. "I've brought my children up right, too, you'd better believe. I've seen to it that every one of them learned to spin and knit, even the boys!"

Mrs. Schauff is particular about not washing the fleece. It's best, she says, with all the natural oils left in it. She cards, spins and knits it up in its natural state. Then comes the washing process, with a mild soap and soft water. When it is dry, it is, she asserted, as soft and fluffy as a pet kitten.

As for dyeing, some folks hold with store dyes, but Aunt Barbara thinks there's nothing quite like a rich brown dye made from the hulls of the native black walnut.

### **Zippers Are Popular**

The even, burnished brown sample of her craftsmanship which she displayed to her visitors would have done credit to the most exacting pioneer dye maker. The zipper front on the dyed jacket gave the garment a finish and professional look.

A comment to that effect drew from Aunt Barbara a wry face. Then with a twinkle in her eyes, she told how, for a long time she had refused to have any truck with the new fangled fasteners. Finally one of her innumerable male relatives for whom she was knitting a sweater, outtalked her, and much against her better judgment she finished his garment off with a zipper.

To her surprise it caused its owner no trouble. But it is causing the knitter plenty! The word got around and now all the boys she has made sweaters for during the last two or three years, are coming prancing back with 'em, to have the fronts taken out and changed to zippers!

Life, it seems, is complicated, even in Arcadia!

*("Arcadia" as used figuratively above refers to A mountainous and picturesque district of Greece, in the heart of the Peloponnesus, whose people were distinguished for contentment and rural happiness.)*



Mrs. Schauff 1938

The “Coloroto” picture of Mrs. Barbara Schauff in the header is from the Journal (presumably the Milwaukee Journal). Coloroto stood for “color” and “roto” – a rotogravure printed in more than one color.