

Weaving intermingles friendship, passion

By Barbara Curtin

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In an age when cloth is cheap and readily available, few people appreciate the ancient process of weaving a garment strand by strand.

Not so for the members of the Salem Fiberarts Guild. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, they volunteer at the Willamette Heritage Center, demonstrating their craft for visitors. On Fridays, they return for their own enjoyment, sharing lunch, tips and camaraderie.

"I spent yesterday at home weaving a blanket for my great-nephew," said Dorothy Golick one recent Friday while enjoying a break with a half-dozen fellow weavers. "I was at the loom from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., except for lunch. During that time, I saw nobody else."

Sherry Kuhns chimed in: "It's a form of family."

If you're going to spend all day weaving, the former Thomas Kay Woolen Mill is a good place to be. The fourth-floor Textile Learning Center is sunny and still scented from the strong wooden beams that housed a major Salem industry from 1889 to 1962. A couple dozen looms of many shapes and sizes are available to rent monthly. Many of them display projects in process: towels, blankets and scarves.

It can take years to master the art of threading several hundred strands through a loom in the exact pattern desired. After the loom is "warped" come many more hours of infinite patience, operating foot pedals to lift specific combinations of threads, then passing a shuttle through the "shed" formed between the two layers.

So it's not surprising that the handweavers form tight bonds. They give one another scarves and handbags or buy them at the handweavers' benefit sale. They trade advice, solve problems.

Some of the projects are utilitarian, such as Kuhns' specialty dish towels.



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Tom Seymour of Mt. Angel prepares projects by "dressing" or "warping" the loom in the Textile Learning Center on the fourth floor of the Mill Building at the Willamette Heritage Center Friday, April 13, 2012 .

At a glance

Salem Fiberarts Guild offers classes for anyone interested in fiber arts. The group meets from 10 a.m. to noon on the fourth Wednesday of each month at Willamette Heritage Center, 1313 Mill St. SE. Members also weave informally from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Fridays.

Sheep to Shawl festival: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. May 12, Willamette Heritage Center, with family events featuring sheep and sheep-shearing, Grand Ronde weaving demonstrations and other activities. Free, donations suggested.

For more information:
www.willametteheritage.org/fiber_arts.html

“If you’re going to dry dishes, you might as well dry them with something pretty,” she said.

Other pieces seem destined to become heirlooms. Kathy Horn, the guild’s president, hoped as much for the yellow and white baby blanket she was weaving from bamboo thread for a great-nephew.

Not one to shirk from a challenge, Horn also has woven a scarf from the spun hair of her golden retriever. “You can’t go to Macy’s and find that,” she said with satisfaction.

The dean of their circle is 104-year-old Faith Black, who has been part of the guild and its predecessors since the 1940s. Dimming eyesight recently curbed her weaving, but she still shows up for companionship .

Tom Seymour, the sole male weaver, described himself as “the baby of the group,” with three or four years’ experience. He was working on a maroon and white sample pattern for the guild’s upcoming workshop.

Part of the appeal for him is the seemingly endless variety of weaving patterns.

Like many of the guild members, the retired elementary school teacher has his own loom at home. He keeps a second project going at the mill for companionship and support.

“I love it when I come up here,” he said. “To weave all the time would be great.”

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