



Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

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Icelandic Spinning Wheel “Rokkur”

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Introduction

From the settlement of Iceland until the end of the 19th century, most clothing was produced at home. Until about 1800, most people lived on farms and agriculture and fishing were the main occupations of the nation. The most important part of the agriculture was sheep farming. The wool of the sheep was the main - for some people the only - source of fiber for clothing. As a result of that, almost every person was involved in the processing of woolen products. Up to the later part of the 17th century, no raw wool was exported. Everything was worked in country, and exported as a final product.

Introduction of the Spinning Wheel in Iceland

From the settlement of Iceland until the 18th century, all wool was spun on a drop spindle, a type of spindle that was brought to Iceland with the Viking settlers. A few references are made to spinning wheels in the early 18th century but most people spun on a spindle. In the middle of the 18th century, an attempt was made at getting the Industrial Revolution to Iceland and a few factories were established, among those, a textile factory. Spinning wheels were among things imported then.

These attempts at industrialization failed and the spread of spinning wheels was still very slow in the last part of that century. Most of the wheels that were imported were of the “horizontal” type, i.e. with the driving wheel and flyer assembly side by side. It was not until the beginning of the 19th century that spinning wheels started to spread and very quickly thereafter, they were in every home. Probably one of the reasons for the slow spread to begin with was the type of wheel available in the beginning. The first wheels to be imported were the horizontal wheels. Later, the upright wheels became, by a long shot, the most popular wheels in the country. Those fit much better into the small space in the houses in Iceland. In the winter months, the whole household gathered in the “baostofa” (or common room) to work on the wool and space was at a premium. With several spinners side by side the compact nature of the upright fit much better.

Not many wheels were imported compared with those made in the country. Most were made by talented woodworkers or by some not so talented! Every home had several wheels (likely some owned by the spinners, some by the farm owners) and most were for single spinning. On many farms there was one wheel, usually bigger than others, that was used for plying. Many people also plied on the spindle. A story is told of a woman who lived in the north of Iceland and in 1940 went for a winter long visit to her daughter in Reykjavik. She wrote to her friend at home that she was well and enjoying herself, but boy, did she miss her spinning wheel. And she reminded her friend to remember to take her spinning wheel if she ever visited the capital. This late, the spinning wheel was still an important

part of people's lives.

My Icelandic Spinning Wheel

This wheel has had three owners for the last 100 years. I am the last owner and I have only spun about one bobbin full on it. My mother gave me this wheel sometime in the 1960s when I lived in Iceland. There I used it as a decorative piece in my living room, as was "in" then. That is all it was used for. Not until I came to Canada, did I do a little spinning on it. As you can see, its condition does not invite vigorous spinning. Before me, my mother owned it for a few years. She never touched it for spinning. She had to learn to spin when she was a little girl and hated it! She could never understand why I enjoyed spinning. The wheel was given to my mother by a very dear friend, born in 1865, who had owned it most of her life. However, this friend did not use it much, since she lived in Reykjavik and since the beginning of the 20th century, both yarn and cloth was available in stores. This woman also ran her own business and likely had her hands full and little time for spinning. So I know for sure that this wheel is at least 100 years old.

My wheel is a typical upright wheel. It is obviously hand made and is well worn. The orifice pipe is worn a lot and the flyer has grooves made by the yarn passing over it. It has a double band drive with the tension controlled by the tension screw at the top of the wheel. The screw moves the flyer assembly up and down. Unfortunately that piece is broken, so it is stuck on one tension. This is a flyer wheel and the bobbin has a groove where one part of the drive band goes. Behind the bobbin, on the flyer assembly pin, a wheel is screwed tight to the flyer and that wheel also has a groove where the other loop of the drive band goes. The difference in size of these two wheels creates the difference in the speed of the flyer and the bobbin. Instead of having several hooks on the flyer to move the yarn, this wheel has holes and only one hook that is moved from hole to hole as the bobbin fills. Possibly an economy measure, but could also be for convenience. The front maiden, where the orifice pipe lies, is lined with a leather patch (as are all grooves where moving parts fit) and when I got it, a shoe lace was used to keep the pipe in place. The maiden can also move up and down to correspond to the high ring and lowering of the tension screw to keep the flyer assembly level. The drive wheel is removable by removing two pins that keep the axle in grooves in the upright sticks. One is lost and has been replaced with a cuticle pin. Unfortunately, when I moved this wheel from Iceland to Canada, the footman got lost in the move. I remember well what it looked like and hope to have another one made that will fit the wheel better than the glued together molding I am using now.

As previously said, I have not done a lot of spinning on this wheel because of its frail condition. In doing the included sample skein, I greased it up and was surprised by how much relatively smoothly it ran. It is not in a shape to be used much, but judging from how worn it is, it must have been a good tool in its time. It was probably used to spin fine grist and not likely to be used for plying.

I suspect from the looks of the wheel and knowing of its usage for at least the last 75 years that it is well over 100 years old. I find it likely that it is closer to 150 years old. That means it was made when spinning wheels were very important implements in people's lives. The spinning wheel has been known in Iceland for less than 300 years and that means that this particular one has lived for half that time. What stories it might give us, if only it could!

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