



DAWN DE BUSK/Frontiersman

Nicole Putnam, second from left, above, admires a hat Denise Morrison, left, knitted for her daughter from wool she dyed, as Judy Niemeyer, center, and Kristina Tornqvist focus on their own projects. Below left, Kara Johndro knits a swatch with double-pointed needles. The women were among 31 Valley Fiber Arts Guild members who gathered Saturday at the Palmer Public Library for Saint Distaff's Day, marking the end of Christmas break and a time when people in the Middle Ages spun wool and cotton.



Sew & tell

Guild members form warm circle

DAWN DE BUSK
Frontiersman reporter

PALMER — Weaving a Scottish tartan rug can be a more-than-exacting project. Every square must have precise right angles, every element of one side of the pattern must be symmetrical with the other side — if there are eight knots on one side, there must be eight knots on the other.

The rugs are too heavy for many looms, and making them is so demanding that Michael Bagenski couldn't even find a book about how to do it, so the Anchorage resident

struck out into unexplored terrain when he started weaving his red, green and white Christmas tartan rug.

"Getting the loom set up is a big part of weaving. Once I get my teeth into a bone, I don't let go," Bagenski said as the Valley Fiber Arts Guild gathered Saturday at the Palmer Public Library to celebrate Saint Distaff's Day. "I've always been intrigued by tartan design. Some historians think the tartan was brought to Scotland by Spanish invaders, but the Scots perfected it."

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to use his
pockets with oil
money.”

— Dean Meili,
Palmer

Yarn

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Never heard of Saint Distaff's Day?

Actually, it's not named after an actual saint. It's a reference to the distaff — spindle — on a spinning wheel. Customarily, Jan. 7 was the day when people marked the end of Christmas break and began to spin wool or cotton yarn before the planting season.

Three women brought portable spinning wheels to the gathering. Others wore something they'd knitted: a hunter-green vest, scarves dyed in brilliant purple, minty green, pink, even one with beads knitted into it. Hand-knit socks encased many of the feet under the table.

Stories of what had been going on in their lives dove-tailed. The guild members talked about projects that were supposed to take one weekend or one month, but are still absorbing their time.

Some women, like Big Lake resident Denise Morrison, have plunged into hand-dyeing

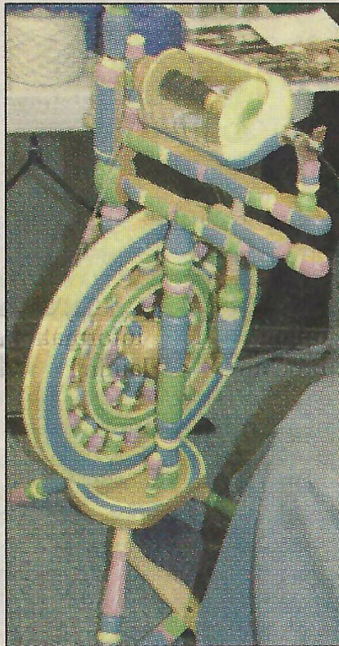
skeins of yarn with fiery orange, sunset red, cool teal, and Kenai River-blue hues.

Many others — like the legendary Penelope working all day at her loom and undoing her weaving at night — unraveled, unknitted, unspun their projects, knot by knot, to find a way to make it more exciting or more perfect.

Valley resident Marjorie Bellringer's husband, Jim Freitag, asked if she would knit a helmet liner for him since he worked as a framer in the winter months and wanted something warm yet moisture-wicking under his hard hat.

Bellringer used hand-spun alpaca and angora fibers and created head gear shaped like the helmets medieval knights wore, except soft as a kitten's fur, with polypropylene.

"I had to pry it out of his hands to bring it to 'sew and tell' today," she said.



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Palmer resident Amy Durgeloh's portable spinning wheel is a traditional Eastern European-style wheel she painted herself.



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Kris Abshire of Wasilla knits a fish at Saturday's gathering of the Valley Fiber Arts Guild at the Palmer library.

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Michael Bagenski shows off his Christmas tartan rug. The Anchorage resident joined Valley Fiber Arts Guild members Saturday for a gathering at the Palmer library.