

An Overview of What the GNP Textile-Based Craft Practitioners are Saying

August 1, 2010

Report Objectives:

In this report I will attempt to sum up the attitudes, perspectives and opinions of textile-based crafts practitioners on the GNP in terms of the following factors:

- A). Reasons and motivations for craft production in Northern Peninsula communities.
- B). Current 'conditions' of particular textile crafts according to whether or not they are getting made in abundance or are seeing a continual decline.
- C). Economic capacity and profit feasibility of textile crafts.
- D). Desire for collaboration amongst people practicing textile-based crafts.

I will address these issues through a summary of my impressions after having interviewed 43 textile-based craft practitioners in 16 different communities. These interviews were conducted between May 5th and July 5th, 2010.

Who is Making Textile-Based Crafts:

I'd like to begin this report by illuminating who is making crafts and what they are making. In general, as far as I can tell, there is a high concentration of textile-based craft practitioners on the GNP with every community housing multiple different skills and craft makers. In fact, there were so many people to visit and speak with that it became clear that it would be impossible to see everyone I wished to in the amount of time that I had. This is surely a sign of the prevalence of craft making throughout the region. The demographic practicing these crafts, for each community, seems to be women over 45 years old, with very few exceptions who were under 40. The numbers of women over 45 making textiles increased further for post-retirement ages (65-85). The youngest person that I spoke with was 32 years old and the oldest was 94 ears old. Women in there 20s and 30s who work in textiles appeared to be very rare on the GNP. When I asked women over 45 if they had a chance to pass their textile skills to younger generations, most people said "no." Of course there were exceptions to this but not many. Of the people who did say "no," there was clearly regret and frustration attached to this reality. Indeed, some people see their particular craft as a disappearing art form. This is especially true for people who practice seal skin boot making (with the pleats), mat hooking (despite its resurgence), crocheting/embroidery, and other non-textile crafts skills such as snowshoe making and boat building. When asked why it might be that younger generations of women are not making textile-based crafts, I regularly received the following answers:

"There are too many distractions nowadays with technology in society."

“It’s too difficult for young women to hold a job, raise young children and do domestic chores. They don’t have time to be at home and make things for the family anymore.”

“People don’t need to make the things that our mother’s had to make. Now you can just buy everything in a store.”

Since many of the women I talked to didn’t start knitting or quilting until after their children were fully raised, there was a sense that maybe younger generations will try to pick these skills up later in life. This possibility is something that comforted the older women who have been sad at the lack of interest from young people. Even though many people expressed concern for the future of their textile tradition, there was also a great optimism from an equal number of people. It is difficult to deny that even though these skills aren’t necessarily being passed on, there are so many practitioners currently working on textile crafts, that it seems unlikely that these skills won’t permeate to the younger generation at some point. Whether it be through individual will, or by way of organized classes, or even the presence of archives such as this one, the knowledge around these skills is waning but not in danger. Having said that, the example of sealskin boots with the pleats is another story – it was unanimously suggested that this craft is in immediate danger unless an organized effort to teach this particular skill is instituted.

What They Are Making:

The majority of handicraft skills that I encountered fall under the categories of crocheting, knitting, quilting, embroidery, sewing, sealskin boot making, and cross-stitching. By far the greatest output is in the knitting of traditional snowflake and diamond patterned socks, gloves, and mittens as well as the making of both painted and appliqué Newfoundland quilts. For knitting, even though there are many knitters on the GNP, the age of people practicing this skill is slightly higher, begging slight concern about whether or not it is being passed down to younger generations.

A large majority of women have more than one skill that they practice. For instance, a woman who double-knits, might also quilt, embroider, or crochet. Very few women have only one skill that they practice and most of them were originally taught their skill sets by their mothers when they were very young. These skills were then practiced out of necessity to make practical goods such as sweaters and socks. Many people talked about taking a break from making textile-crafts while raising children, and then picking up the skills again later in life. Some women have taken classes to learn new skills to enrich their already present skill sets. This is particularly true for quilting, mat hooking, and sealskin boot making. Since several people spoke of taking such classes, I believe that if classes were offered in other textile-based skills, people (especially women who already have one or more craft skills) would surely attend these classes. Tapestry (embroidery), knitting, and crocheting are some of the craft mediums that are currently lacking proper courses. Additionally, sealskin boot making is a skill that could be promoted outside of the communities along The Straights, where this skill is currently concentrated. There seemed to be a lot of interest in sealskin products in places like Main Brook and St.

Anthony, even though very few people in these places make sealskin products. To see courses offered along the east side of the peninsula would be a good thing, and there are currently practitioners on the west coast who are willing to share their skill with others.

Several of the people I met who make hooked mats, learned how to do this from a class offered in St. Anthony. This class has generated a renewed interest in this skill, and many people spoke of how it has benefited the longevity of the craft. People who make hooked mats as a hobby are still making use of the Grenfell patterns and tend to shy away from using their own designs. This informs that the Grenfell influence is still present even though Grenfell skills such as mat hooking and embroidered canvas have taken a backseat to quilting and knitting. While Grenfell patterns and skills are still on the decline, course offerings have made a noticeable difference. I'd like to interject here that Grenfell jackets are still being made on the GNP but in very limited numbers. The only examples that I saw were in St. Lunaire-Griquet, with patterns that were machine embroidered rather than hand embroidered. This switch to machine embroidery was done in order to make the process more time-efficient so that the jackets could be sold in greater numbers for more reasonable prices. People who do their embroidery by hand consider this a lesser form and wish to see people develop an interest in 'the old way' again, even though it is very time consuming.

Why They Are Making Crafts:

A vast majority of the women making textile-based crafts are doing so as a hobby or pastime. These skills are described as a way to help keep piece of mind, help keep their hands busy, and help pass the time, especially in the winter. Crafting is also used as a way to make gifts for friends and family. There were only a few women who looked at their skill as a way to generate profit. These women tended to be more 'professional' in their approach, and therefore less spontaneous and creative. They had been using these skills as a way to supplement income for a long time, and had developed time-efficient methods, such as using a sewing machine that does embroidery, or using paint to add fine detail on quilts, rather than sewing. Aside from the more professional quilters, the other women who make quilts to sell, said that it wasn't really profit that motivated them to keep going, seeing as the time for money ratio doesn't work in their favor. There is a very strong attitude that using these skills to generate income is definitely not a worthwhile venture as a quilt, or pair of socks, can never be sold for the actual value of the item. Some hobbyist quilters and knitters sell their work, and/or take product orders from people, but even so, they stress that the moment they felt like there was pressure to do work, the enjoyment of the hobby would be reduced. For this reason, some people who used to sell their craft items, have decided to stop doing so in order to keep it just as a special hobby. This is especially true for quilters who spend a great deal of time on each quilt-- sometimes weeks, sometimes months.

Since I had very little contact with any professional mat hookers (i.e. women who sell their work through Grenfell Handicrafts), I am not sure how they feel about the profit possibilities of their craft. Every person that I met who makes hooked mats said that they do this work as a hobby and have no desire to market their skills. I tried to get in touch

with people who do mat hooking for G.H. but was unable to get in touch with anyone. This is unfortunate as it would be beneficial to hear their opinions about whether or not they think their mats are being sold for a fair price and whether or not they consider their individual returns satisfactory.

Desire for Collaboration:

It seems that the GNP would benefit from a new textile-based arts & crafts center where people could collaborate, attend classes, get information, and possibly sell their work. There was some resentment present towards some of the existing centers (i.e.. Shoal Cove Handicrafts, Bayview Crafts, and Grenfell Handicrafts) because of their exclusivity about who can sell their work, a narrow idea of what crafts should be sold, how products should be made, and/or product price mark-ups. One sealskin boot maker said that she would receive too small of a fraction of the price her boots were being sold for. She stopped selling to them and now just makes boots for friends and family. If there were to be a new center, it would have to be broad in its approach and be a more egalitarian 'artist-run center' style organization. Some people seem comfortable not being a part of an organization, but even these women showed some interest in having access to new ideas, new mediums, new course offerings, and fresh avenues for selling work at prices they approve of. While many people don't think there is an ability to profit from these sales, most agree that it is better to keep prices affordable, with the majority of the sale going to the craft person. That way, the skill can continue to be used as a hobby but with some measure of return attached. A new textile-based artist-run center could help facilitate some of these desires and goals.

Concluding Statement:

In listening to what textile-based craft practitioners have to say about their work and about the futures of their skills taught me that indeed there are voices that need to be heard. The skills in question are ones with a long history on the Northern Peninsula, with ever-changing roles. The objects that these women create were once made out of necessity but have now become craft or art objects. They are largely made as a hobby to sell to members of the community for next to nothing, and to help pass the time during post-retirement life stages. I believe that I only visited with a fraction of the women who have skills to share, stories to tell, objects to sell, and energy for collaboration. The women I did speak with were mostly kept separate from each other due to distance between communities and politics within existing organizations. Having said that no one seemed unwilling to change this reality. Even though there are countless textile craft makers on the GNP, none spoke of competition, and all spoke of love and enthusiasm for their crafts of choice. To see this enthusiasm harnessed for collaborative projects could be of benefit to both the people making crafts, and to future generations who have yet to discover their skills.

If there are any questions or comments regarding this over-view, please contact me at lisawils@gmail.com, Lisa A. Wilson, Folklore M.A. Candidate, Memorial University, 2010-2011