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Taking the Wheel:

The Antique Spinning Wheel Collectors' Collaborative

BY MATHILDE FRANCES LIND

A few years ago, when I was researching Estonian spinning wheels, I happened upon an old riddle that has haunted me ever since: “The ghost in the corner, a girl at its side” (Koern 1942, 172). The answer is “spinning wheel,” but why is it a ghost? I have often imagined that it comes from the memory of women who used the spinning wheel in the past (the girl’s grandmother?) or the eerie whirring and creaking sounds when the girl treads it. As I have become entangled in the community of antique spinning wheel collectors over the past seven years, that ghost has taken on greater significance in my imagination as the old

spinning wheel itself—a shade of past work and art that occasionally hangs on, as long as someone at its side anchors it to the world of the living.

Of course, like so many ancient crafts, handspinning is far from dead and gone, and there’s a vibrant international community of spinners with their own literature, events, and makers of new tools. Still, the old wheels are constantly at risk, as collectors pass away, institutions shut down and disperse their collections, and time and circumstances take their toll through water damage, fires, woodworms, pet damage, and lost parts. Collectors and users of old

spinning wheels are a fraction of the larger handspinning community, so there are only so many homes for these grand old tools, and each spinner can only take in so many spinning wheels. However, research benefits from engaging with larger collections so that we can put individual wheels in context and establish regional commonalities.

The closure of the American Textile History Museum in 2016 and the recent passing of major collectors like Carlton Stickney have emphasized the need for the community to take conservation into its own hands and help private collectors to document and make plans for their collections. With



Antique spinning wheels and loom at Lone Rock Farm, 2024, which has hosted several key gatherings of antique spinning wheel collectors, leading to the establishment of the Collaborative. *All photos by author.*



Spinners discuss the future of the study collection of equipment from the American Textile History Museum at an open house at Lone Rock Farm, 2017. Kate Smith is in the foreground.

digital technology offering new ways to connect researchers with collections and find objects at risk, antique spinning wheel collectors are coming together to safeguard these tools and make them accessible online, even when we lose track of the physical objects.

The Antique Spinning Wheel Community

Ask around at a gathering of historical textile people in the northeastern United States, and you'll meet textile artists, antiques collectors and dealers, historians, people who work in local museums, restorers, and enthusiasts whose interest has come from a powerful family memory, a significant heirloom, or a connection to the history of the place where they live. People who love old spinning wheels are part of this larger community. Brought together by our hunger for information about these under-researched tools and the pleasure of spending time with people who understand our enthusiasm, we gather at symposia and workshops, like the annual Coverlet College at the National Museum of the American Coverlet in Bedford, Pennsylvania (1); the Antique Spinning Wheel Symposium (held at the Landis Valley Museum in Lancaster,

Pennsylvania, in 2024, and the Somerset Historical Center in Somerset, Pennsylvania in 2025) (2); and the Textile History Forum hosted by Rabbit Goody of Thistle Hill Weavers, based in Cherry Valley, New York (3).

People from this wide range of backgrounds do serious research on handmade objects and the people who made and used them. They present their findings to the community at these in-person gatherings and in virtual conferences and working groups, like the annual Weaving History Conference hosted by the Thousand Islands Arts Center in Clayton, New York (4) and the monthly Coverlet Study Group hosted by Marty Schlabach of Seneca County, New York (5). The dedication and insight of these individuals are impressive, and together, they are creating an astonishing body of scholarship on the textile history of the United States. Some of their research is available in publications like *The Spinning Wheel Sleuth* newsletter, published by Florence Feldman Wood (6), the proceedings of the Textile History Forum, and exhibition catalogues at the National Museum of the American Coverlet. However, the state of much of this research is precarious: the

publications have limited circulation and small print runs, many of the older books are out of print, and collections of objects have been broken up or lost.

A Land of Ghosts

There is an acute sense of precariousness in the community. At each of the gatherings that I have attended over the past few years, many collectors and researchers voiced concern about the need to back up data and document objects to make them more accessible for research and save some impression of them, in case they disappear. To be a researcher of antique textile tools is to live in a land of ghosts and constantly scramble to rescue what we can. We often have little information about the tools and their previous owners when they fall into our hands, and each death of a collector or closure of an institution means the potential loss of a wealth of historical information archived in these tools and held in the minds or paper notes of their keepers.

One such loss was Carlton Stickney of St. Lawrence County, New York. Remembered by his community as a gentle, intelligent, and modest man who collected a wide variety of antiques and enthusiastically shared his findings, Stickney passed away suddenly in January 2022 (Feldman-Wood 2022). His collections were sold at auction. While I was living in St. Lawrence County, I was told that many of his historically significant items were sold quickly and cheaply, and the antique spinning wheel community was unable to step in and try to keep the items together so that they could continue to be examined and researched. Portions of his collection still show up at auction from time to time, and I personally was able to take only one of his spinning wheels due to lack of space. The passing of Carlton Stickney left community members mourning him as a friend while also grieving the loss of his knowledge and collections, and this was one of the motivating factors for the formation of an antique spinning wheel collectors' collaborative.

My first interaction with this community was in 2017, when I attended an open house



Marshfield School of Weaving founder Norman Kennedy (seated at head of table) and then director Kate Smith (standing at head of table) at Lone Rock Farm, Marshfield, Vermont, during the 2018 Textile History Forum.

at Lone Rock Farm and the Marshfield School of Weaving in Washington County, Vermont. The occasion was the arrival of spinning wheels and other textile equipment from the collections of the American Textile History Museum (ATHM) in Lowell, Massachusetts, which had shut down the previous year. The mood was bitter-sweet because the loss of the ATHM had been such a blow to the community, but at least these objects had been placed in good hands. Despite its closure due to budget issues, the ATHM staff did their best to place objects and archives with responsible institutions, where they would be valued. Nevertheless, some were ultimately auctioned off, and the whereabouts of many items are unknown. In 2018, Kate Smith, the director of the Marshfield School at the time, tasked me with creating a digital collection of the ATHM equipment as part of my research at the school (7). The objects came only with paper files and no digital records, so I recreated them from printouts and old, handwritten

notes and made them accessible online using omeka.net, a platform that supports digital collections and digital exhibitions (8).

Early in 2024, we had another scare when the Marshfield School of Weaving, led by a new director, Justin Squizzero, announced that its lease would end in September. Where would the collections go? Would the ATHM wheels be lost? Thankfully, this situation ended well for the school and the objects. Now operating as the Newbury School of Weaving, as of January 1, 2025, the school has found a new location and has the collections safely stored. Nevertheless, this episode further emphasizes the need to create an independent database of such collections at a time when so many nonprofits and educational institutions are reprioritizing and even collapsing under economic pressure.

The Collaborative

At the 2023 Antique Spinning Wheel Symposium, held at Kate Smith's Lone

Rock Farm, just up the hill from the Marshfield School, Nora Rubinstein and Brenda Bobb Page facilitated a discussion about forming a kind of antique spinning wheel guild. Craft guilds in the United States are a powerful factor in grassroots efforts to safeguard material culture, and sometimes these guilds are associated with a particular site or collection. For example, I started spinning when I joined the Aurora Colony Handspinnners' Guild in Oregon, which formed in 1982, in association with the textile equipment collection of a 19th-century utopian settlement. Setting up a guild to help document and share knowledge about antique spinning wheels is a big effort with plenty of precedent, and soon we began to meet online to discuss some of the issues brought up at the symposium and articulated by Nora Rubinstein in a follow-up article in *The Spinning Wheel Sleuth*. These issues include, "bringing more (and younger) people into our spinning work; addressing the future of spinning-wheel collections (wheels and

associated tools) so that they are not lost to the community of those who value them; [and] retaining and expanding the knowledge we have about the craft, the objects, the makers, and the spinners” (Rubinstein 2023).

Like all grassroots efforts, this one has been passionate and complicated. We have settled on accomplishing a few different tasks, including making a draft mission statement, working on a spinning wheel database, and creating a list of print and digital resources for researchers. Approaching our work as a kind of triage, we are looking at what we can accomplish quickly and with enough flexibility to respond to new information and needs as they arise. For example, the database is most useful if it allows people to quickly and easily enter objects with minimal information, like an image and a very brief description of a spinning wheel seen at auction, which none of our collectors could buy and transport. In such cases, only the digital impression remains available for researchers, but it can make the difference when trying to understand the range of wheels with a particular feature or maker’s mark. However, some studies require granular detail, so the database should be able to capture that when it is available, and it should be searchable. This leads to a particular challenge when we expect data to be submitted by users who are not tech-savvy or who have very little information to offer, and we are working on digital and paper forms to strike the balance between detail and simplicity.

Capacity and resources are focal points in all our conversations. As a small, informal, voluntary group, we must be careful about committing to work that is beyond us. Although some processing inevitably requires human intervention to ensure that the data going into our database is relevant and properly organized (that is, information is not entered on the wrong lines on a form and photos are appropriate), we recognize that this could quickly become a full-time job if the database project gets traction. Likewise, any organized work to save at-risk collections would likely need to connect with the

existing Antique Spinning Wheel Railroad, a very informal network of spinners who rescue, foster, and transport textile equipment that cannot be easily shipped. We simply do not have the numbers on our own.

However, capacity and resources are also core issues in more organized institutions, and our scrappy group of volunteers has several advantages over them, when it comes to conserving these objects and knowledge about them. First, textile equipment is our priority, while most institutions that collect these items and associated information have multiple competing priorities, which often results in less attention to digitalization and conservation of textile tools. Second, we can be nimble because we are not part of a rigid institution, so we are not beholden to a board of directors (who may or may not understand the core mission), or constrained by financial obligations (such as maintaining a building or paying salaries). As people

with full lives, we may not get things done as quickly as we might hope, but we are also in a good position to respond to the needs of the moment and incorporate the many perspectives of textile equipment collectors who might benefit from our work.

The knowledge contributed by our members is both broad and deep, which gives us a strong foundation for creating a useful database. For example, one member of the steering committee collects yarn reels and would like to include them in the database, and this helps to keep our scope broad enough to include textile tools other than spinning wheels. It also means that our group has the expertise to create useful categories of reels and their features for our forms. Just as museum collections often develop through the contributions of individual curators and donors, our database will grow through and be guided by the interests and expertise of the individuals in the collaborative. Thanks to



ATHM 1991.178.95, one of the spinning wheels catalogued by the author in 2018, for the Marshfield School of Weaving. See <https://marshfieldschoolofweaving.omeka.net/items/show/121>

digital technology, we can have the storage capacity to account for a broad range of textile equipment collections, unlike a museum with a physical collection and limited space.

Moving Forward

Another major conversation in this community is how much of our purported knowledge is based on speculation rather than evidence, particularly since the leveling effect of the Internet often makes it difficult to distinguish experts from overconfident amateurs. In my own research, I frequently run into very strong assertions about the history of fiber arts that turn out to go no further back than the 1960s, or even just the past two decades. This sometimes happens in settings where one could reasonably expect to trust the information given. For example, I once witnessed a worker at a well-regarded museum tell a guest that it is impossible to spin flax without a flax wheel, which among other problems with the answer, would eliminate the thousands of years of bast fiber spinning before the invention of the spinning wheel! (9)

Creating a reliable resource for textile research will support more evidence-based conclusions about antique textile tools and their uses. We have already created a resource list that includes publications, important websites, and videos. I recently began the process to input the list into Zotero, a free citation management app, to keep it organized and make it more accessible to researchers. Hopefully, this will reduce misinformation and increase awareness of available publications so that we can avoid constantly reinventing the wheel when it comes to textile tool research.

Another big task that we are just getting into is deciding on commonly accepted terminology for tools, their variations, design features, and parts. Creating uniform nomenclature will make items comparable, allowing for analysis that can follow the actual evidence in large bodies of data. Making a glossary is an iterative process, so we are working on a starter form for the database, using a provisional set of terms. This prototype will be tested by some collectors and

revised, based on what is missing, and then we plan to make visual keys for each question that relies on specific terminology. Out of this process, we should be able to derive a glossary with visual examples. In addition to deciding on specific terms to be used in our database, it is important to include vernacular terms and their variants in the glossary, so we need to collect those from our users, whenever possible. Having those terms increases accessibility but also gives us a larger trove of keywords when searching for print and archival sources, looking at old inventories, and interacting with a broad base of collectors and researchers.

Once we have established our list of resources, the framework for our database, and an online presence to accompany them, we hope that this will increase visibility, participation, and funding for our efforts. Ideally, we would like to be able to help collectors, small museums, or historical societies document their collections and plan for their future. As we move forward, many of us have expressed concerns about avoiding the pitfalls of the organizations that have not been able to provide a reliable home for these objects and archives. The task at hand is to remain flexible but also stable, to be good and reliable stewards. There is no easy answer for how to do that, but hopefully by being responsive and committed, we can stay ahead of some of the losses and provide useful information for the next generation of researchers and collectors.

Notes:

- (1) Coverlet College at the National Museum of the American Coverlet, Bedford, Pennsylvania. <http://www.coverletmuseum.org/events.htm#covercol>
- (2) Antique Spinning Wheel Symposium, June 22–23, 2024, Lancaster Valley, Museum, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. <https://antique-spinning-wheel-symposium-june-22-23-2024.square.site>
- (3) Thistle Hill Weavers Textile History Forum. <https://thistlehillweavers.com/rabbit-goody/textile-history-forum/>
- (4) 30th Annual Weaving History Conference, Thousand Islands Arts Center, Clayton,

New York, October 22–25, 2025. <https://tiartscenter.org/weaving-history-conference/#acc-1fa4558-0>

- (5) See “Coverlet Study Group”: <https://interlakenpubliclibrary.org/event/coverlet-study-group/>
- (6) *The Spinning Wheel Sleuth*. <https://spwshl.com/>
- (7) This research was supported by a Craft Research Fund grant from the Center for Craft. See <https://www.centerforcraft.org/grants-and-fellowships/craft-research-fund-grant>.
- (8) See “The Newbury School of Weaving – Textile Equipment Collection”: <https://marshfieldsschoolofweaving.omeka.net>
- (9) 2.3.3. Bast fibres. 2017. In *Advanced High Strength Natural Fibre Composites in Construction*, edited by Mizi Fan and Feng Fu. London: Woodhead Publishing. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/engineering/bast-fibre>

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Mathilde Frances Lind is a folklorist and textile maker who specializes in antique spinning wheels and heritage sheep breeds. She was awarded a PhD in folklore from Indiana University Bloomington in 2023, after nearly four years of research on traditional wool production and processing in Estonia. The former director of programs and research at Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY), Dr. Lind is the 2024–2025 Kenneth R. Trapp Craft Assistant/Curatorial Fellow at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. *Photo by Tess Dawson of the author weaving a folk skirt on a 19th-century barn frame loom in Marshfield, Vermont.*

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