



**Interviewee:** Ms. Jo Ann Oborski, Textile Demonstrator, Living Archaeology Weekend  
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**Interviewer:** Tom Law, Producer, Voyageur Media Group, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio  
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*Q. Could you please introduce yourself for our viewers, and how you started making textiles?*

A. "I'm Jo Ann Oborski. I'm working with Living Archaeology Weekend doing cloth and clothing production for the early frontier's people in eastern Kentucky. The timeframe is 1776 to 1780s."

"I started with an interest in spinning and for two reasons. One, my sister was spinning wool and that seemed just like a fun thing to do. I have always been into sewing and cloth production, and so I decided I was going to teach myself. I didn't know of anybody around here who could teach me. So, I bought a wheel off of eBay. I bought wool from a place out in Kansas and I sat down and started to try to spin. I made yards and yards of rope, but eventually I got fairly good at spinning."

"Well, this was fun and I could knit with it, but then my sister gave me a loom - a floor loom, a rug loom - and it sat in our house for a couple of years, and I finally decided I'm going to learn to use this thing. So, then I started into weaving. Now here I am, spinning, weaving, trying to do classes on it, trying to tell people why we did this in the years gone by, why we might want to think about doing it now, only because much of the clothing that we have today is made out of that fine stuff called nylon which is an oil-based product. By going to older methods and older things that we use, these are easily renewable products, and oil is not all that renewable."

*Q. What does it take to become proficient at the skills that you've learned and what's it take to master those skills?*

A. "I think proficiency leads to mastering of it, but it is spending the time until you get used to using your feet and your hands together for both treading wheels and on the loom. And as you get more proficient, you are going to go to using other wools. You might have started out with a medium wool such as this one, and then you want to go to something that is very fine. And so, learning to spin wools that are different lengths, different fineness will lead to you to being more of an expert, if you will, but we all - what you're satisfied with as being very good might not be what someone else is satisfied with. So, it's each person's call."

*Q. What's your advice to people who want to kind of take this up and might get frustrated with it?*

A. "It takes time, and if you don't have the time or the wherewithal to sit and practice, then you're probably going to be disappointed in doing this. One of the things that I have tried with people I have taught - and I found it works the best, if you can get them to do it - is to get their wheel, take it home, and just sit and practice treading it for a month before you come to learn to spin. That way, you teach your foot to get that wheel going in the right direction each time. Then you come back, and we teach you how to use a drop spindle, such as this. You get to learn to work with the wool. Then you combine those two together on the wheel. Everyone that I have taught that way has picked it up very rapidly. Those that they didn't want to do that, it took a little longer."

*Q. What textiles and technologies did early pioneers bring with them?*

A. "The early pioneers brought flax in the form of seed; and not immediately, but pretty soon after they came here, they would have brought in sheep. Sheep were not possible or probably not brought in the very earlier days because they didn't have barns. They didn't have fences. They had no place to keep them safe. So, anything that they brought with them had to stay in the cabin, once they built it, with them, until they could build a barn or fences. So, that was something - that it took a while for sheep. We do know that there were sales in the Lexington area going on about the 1780s where they were selling sheep, so that if a man needed a new ram or wants more ewes in his flock, he could go to Lexington and he could get more sheep."

*Q. What type of sheep were most popular during this period?*

A. "The medium- to long-coated sheep were the ones that we used most. Cheviots were a favorite with many of the settlers who came out here, if they could get them and have them. That is a sheep that came from Scotland. The English sheep were the Leicester Longwools, and that is a fleece that is probably 8 to 10 inches long and it has a nice sheen to it. Both of these fleeces are sometimes not comfortable for next-to-the-skin wear, but that's what they had to bring with them."

“Flax, we could carry the seeds. It was a law from Virginia - we were a territory of Virginia before the Revolution. Virginia law said that if you were going to be a settler here, you had to grow one-quarter acre of flax a year to meet your family’s needs. That meant you had to bring seeds back there because they didn’t know if it was here or not. They didn’t know what was back here to be able to use. So, they carried their seeds; and a quarter-acre of flax wasn’t going to meet anybody’s needs, but it got them started, and as they grew that flax, then they would have collected the seeds, and each year, they would have had a little more and a little more and a little more. So, flax was the first thing, followed very closely by sheep and wool. We learned quickly that you combined flax and wools and it was called linsey-woolsey, because flax, once it is spun is linen, and why the name change, I have no idea.”

*Q. JoAnn, what is flax?*

A. “Flax is a plant that the Euro-Americans brought to this country with them. If they didn’t know what was here, they didn’t know how to use it, and so they had to bring what they were familiar with.”

*Q. What’s it look like?*

A. “This is the flax plant. It grows to about 36 inches, takes 100 to 110 days to reach maturity. You would plant this late April or as soon as you could get it in the ground. Flax doesn’t care about a little frost. Cold is fine. Freeze is not good. So, we would turn our ground and hand-cast the seeds out of these pods onto the ground, and we would put our quarter-acre in. About 100 days, it’s time to pull this stuff out of the ground, and you pulled it because - see these roots that are down here? - the fiber starts down in the roots and goes all the way up, one long fiber goes all the way up on these stems. So, you didn’t cut it. You pulled it so you didn’t waste any of your fiber that you had raised. This flax right here is just pulled. That’s the color you wanted it to be, and you can see tiny little seedpods up there.”

*Q. JoAnn, can you tell us about the seeds of the flax plant?*

A. “Well, the seeds are quite small. Here are some in this bag. They grow about seven in a pod, and what you would do is get the pods off the plant as soon as you pulled it and got it out of the ground and then you would - it was called rippling - you would ripple your seeds off and put those into a bag and put them away for the time being, just to keep them dry and mice out of them. So that was your chore for them.”

“Then you had to work this fiber up. Now, we have to get the woody part on the outside of the stem off, so we can get to the fiber that’s underneath it, and we’re going to ret it. There’s two ways of retting. What was done here in Kentucky was called dew retting. Had we tried putting this flax into the rivers, it would have been

gone before we ever came back to look at it. So, we would lay it out in a field and it would be a - you would lay it flat, and you would lay it up to about this thickness, and you would leave it out there for anyplace from 2 to 4 weeks, and the first couple of days, okay, we'll just let it - but then after about three days, you would go and you would turn all of this stuff over, so you've got equal dew, equal rain, equal sunshine coming down on it, and basically what you're doing is composting this. That is - composting enough to get the woody part to break down without destroying the fiber that's underneath it. So, once it started to smell somewhat like a compost pile, you knew you were ready to go to the next step in taking care of your flax and getting the fiber out of it."

*Q. What other local resources were critical in creating these historic textiles during this era?*

A. "Well, you needed to have spinning wheels. You needed to have looms. These were absolutely necessary for you to be able to take your fiber, once you got it, and make something out of it that would keep you warm and dry. A wheel - most men had the skills to make the wooden part of the wheel, but you needed a blacksmith to make the metal parts - well, the wood depended on the type of trees that were growing in the area where you settled. What you wanted, in most instances, was a hardwood with a softer wood to actually make some of the wheel. The loom that we are going to discuss took a lot of tension, and it needed to be hardwood virtually everywhere or wasn't going to hold up. A lot of them that you find are made from American Chestnut, which is no longer a tree that we have, but the early pioneers found those, and they were enormous trees. So, they got a lot of wood out of one tree."

*Q. The iron?*

A. "Iron, well, someone had to carry it in here and you might have a blacksmith, but the blacksmith would fix a farmer's plowshare or something else that he needed before he would make something for a wheel. So, what usually happened was that, after the blacksmith had worked all day, and if he had iron and he was working with it and he's hammering away at it, he would have this little bit of metal left at the end of the day, and he would use that to make a part for a wheel. So, when a woman needed one, he had it. That made the iron in the wheels very, very hard, because it had been worked and heated all day."

*Q. I thought production took the whole family. Can you describe the family and their different roles?*

A. "Well, I will start out at the beginning of both of them and that was with the men of the family. They had to clear the ground. They frequently did the planting, although the women could have cast the seeds for the flax. They also had to take care of the sheep. They had to build fences and barns and stuff to keep them in and keep

them safe. So that was the man's job, and in the spring when it was time to get ready to shear the sheep, he or his wife - an adult - was going to have to get these sheep as clean as they could, and they did it very much like some of the Middle Ages. They took the sheep in the river and scrubbed it in there, but you had to go in with it, because if you had sheared it before, it was too easy for your wool to get away from you and go floating down the river. And you didn't have extra kettles and so on to launder them in, so you had to keep a hold of it, so you gave the sheep a bath. You took him in there with you. So, some of the sheep probably didn't appreciate this, so it would take an adult to handle that."

"The woman, of course, she helped with the shearing if need be, and usually was, but she would help with the shearing. Then she had to work the fleece up with carding and combing and getting it where it was smoothed-out and she could use it. Now, going back to that, some of the sheep probably did not get washed, because they wanted to spin in what they called spinning in the grease, which meant they wanted the lanolin left on it. Lanolin was nature's Gore-Tex, and it helped shed water on outer garments. Did they smell like sheep? Absolutely, and when they got wet, they smelled more like sheep, but it's nature's Gore-Tex and we used it."

"As far as the flax went, the women and kids could get down on the field and pull weeds until it was maybe 2 to 3 inches tall. By then, it was starting to get a little stiff, and you didn't want to break the plant, so then it was on its own. And it had to grow until it reached its maturity, and you pulled it. And that was men and women working together. As far as the breaking-down of the flax plants and getting them worked up where you were going to be able to spin it and make something out of it, that was pretty much purely women's work - to break the stems and get the flax out of it."

*Q. How many skills were taught to children?*

A. "They were all taught to them, eventually. Little girls frequently started being handed some wool on a cold winter night sitting near the fire. You might have been carding wool or picking wool or doing something of that sort - just staying warm. By the time a girl was five, six, they started her to learn to spin. By the time she was nine, she knew how to spin whatever mom wanted. She was fully cognizant of how you worked these wheels, how you prepared the fiber, and what you were going to do with it after it came off the wheel. So, they were very -- taught very early."

"Little boys did not get to miss out on this. They learned to weave about the time they were seven. That was when their arms were long enough to reach the beater bar and their legs could reach the treadles. It was not that they were going to be a weaver. Heavens, no. That wasn't going to happen. But when a young man found a young lady that he wanted to get married, he had to build everything in their cabin, and the hardest thing for him to make was going to be the loom. So, if he had sat and worked on the loom and understood all the parts and pieces of why it had to do what it had



to do, he would be able to make one. There was no going to a catalog or whatever to order a loom. You had to make it. And so, that was why the young men learned to weave early in their lives. Not that they're going to be one, but they are going to learn how."

*Q. So, all of this was a year-round enterprise? Can you describe through the year, through the seasons, what it took to create textiles for a pioneer family?*

A. "Well, in the spring, of course, lambs would be born, if you had sheep. Flax would be planted. Midsummer, getting into August, you're going to be pulling that flax. You're going to be starting to work it up to get the fiber, the seeds off of it, the fiber out of it. And in the very early days, such as at Fort Boonesborough, which is where Daniel Boone was, they had one loom in the log - in one of the big buildings at the Fort."

*Q. They had one loom?*

A. "They had one loom that was in a large building at the Fort. The women, they all knew each other and who did the best. The woman who was the best weaver in the community would go to the Fort, and she would set up a loom and, as your fiber was ready to be processed, she wove for you. There was not enough room in an eight by eight cabin, which is what most of us had, to put a six by six loom in it. You just didn't have the room. So, there was one at the Fort. This woman would go, she would do the weaving. So, we will say that John's wife has her flax and wool ready to go right away. She's got six daughters and they've got it done. So, they will take the flax to the Fort for the woman who's going to do the weaving, and she will weave for you. She will weave as long as there is light during the day. To pay you back for that, because she's going to be very busy working for you, well, there was no money charged. The individual who has her fiber being woven, she takes the responsibility of watching the weaver's children and feeding her husband while she's working for her. Then, the next person comes in and she gets another - you know, the family goes to this one. So, it was a round-robin, but no money was traded."

*Q. We have this kind of romantic idea of life in Kentucky for pioneers as being easy and everything was here, but it wasn't. What was life really like?*

A. "Life was hard. Not necessarily the best thing to bring children into. So, with the very early settlers when they first came out, it was frequently a man and an older son, and they got things set up and then went back and got the women and the kids and brought them back out. It was a hard life, very hard. It was dangerous, and with the Revolutionary War going on, initially the cabin that we lived in was about eight by eight with a dirt floor. We were required by Virginia law to build a cabin and have a door on it, four-sided cabin, have a door on, and that meant you were a settler. But that dirt floor and keeping your animals in there was not the best of places to be. Eventually, you would get a wooden floor. You would get a second story on it, and it

made it much easier for families and children, and a number of people got very sick, and from a movie that I saw it said, 'If you're sick, whatever is going to fix you, will find it around the kitchen.' And that was about what they had."

"Well, for settlers in eastern Kentucky, the only other place that you can get clothing or cloth - you had to walk two weeks either direction up to Fort Pitt and trade, or you didn't have money, so that was something of a challenge. Fort Pitt was the closest place or back through the Cumberland Gap and back where there was more settlement. You could purchase items back there, but then you had to carry it back through the Gap and bring it here. In the meantime, nobody is taking care of your crops. So, this is not a good idea at all. If several men left, who is guarding the Fort? Who is there to protect them? All of that just...it didn't work. You had to be self-sufficient, and basically, what I have been able to find is that, in a year, a man would hopefully get two shirts and two pair of pants. A woman - she was on the bottom of the list and maybe she would get a skirt. You had to make clothing for your children, and when you made them, believe me, it was all hand-me-downs, so that the oldest child got clothes and then the next one got to wear them afterwards."

"Clothing for babies was a thing called a sack, which very much looked like a pillowcase, and they would put a hole on either end. Some actually put a collar. Most just bound it around, and the shoulders they tucked in. We didn't have diapers. So, it doesn't take much to figure out a newborn in this sack, when nature took its call, you had to take it off, rinse it out, hang it up by the fire, and put the other one on. And hopefully you had two sacks. Little girls frequently came out of the sack about the time they were five. When mom realized that she could wear a skirt and walk then she came out of the sack. Little boys frequently were in the sack until they were seven or eight. Several years ago, I talked to a gentleman and he said, 'Yes, I wore a sack,' and he was in his 80s at the time."

*Q. So basically, textiles were a very important commodity?*

A. "Textiles were a very important part of your life. It kept you warm and that was necessary. Now, the men would continue to hunt, and there would have been leather used, but the textile itself - you needed that, and you had to learn how to work it up, such as the wool. It kept the sheep warm, but it's not attached to you like it was attached to the sheep. So, you had to figure out how to put those fibers together so that it kept you warm and dry; not sick."

*Q. Why is it important to understand these textile technologies?*

A. "I think you need to know about textile production and clothing: what your great-grandparents had to deal with. You can go to a store and buy something that has been made by a machine. They didn't have that luxury. So, you needed to - you need to know what grandma and grandpa put up with and how they worked, or your

great-grandparents - how they worked to make a life for themselves here for future generations.”

“For me, I learned to sew as a child, and this just added to my knowledge of what I was - had been working with, how to make the cloth, what it took to do this, and I think that in today’s society, all of us need to understand where our stuff comes from. Yes, it comes from a factory, but somebody had the concept to weave, to sew, and to put things together so that you can buy them. That’s simply my point of view of why I do this. It turns out that every now and then, folks are interested, and of folks that have come through where I have been demonstrating, one of the important things that they will say to me is, ‘You know, maybe we better start learning some of this, so that we can do it again,’ especially when we get into the idea that oil is becoming not a product that we are going to have just unlimited amounts of forever. And so, renewable resources are very important to us, whether we realize it yet or not.”

*Q. Do you feel like the traditional technologies and techniques are coming back?*

A. “Oh, I know they are.”

*Q. Tell us about that.*

A. “Flax is - well, it’s grown in this country. But what we have been growing for the last millennia, I guess, was flax that you only wanted the seeds for the oil so that they could make paints and dyes and things, or you could eat them. But the flax that we were growing - we didn’t care if there was anything in the stem, if there was any fiber or not. Over in Europe, they produced hundreds of thousands of tons of this stuff. They use a lot of it. It’s showing up in our clothes, frequently, and it’s a resource that we can grow ourselves. We can use it. You can renew it every year, and it beats something that is going to take billions of years.”

*Q. Why do you think the younger generations are kind of embracing these older technologies?*

A. “I think the younger generation is beginning to come to grips with the fact of what cloth costs, what clothing costs. They seem to be wanting to learn to produce some for themselves, even spinning it, sewing it, taking care of the animals. Spinning and weaving has become quite - it has been expanding a lot and spinning seemed to take off first. Well, you can only spin so much wool, and you better be figuring out what you’re going to do with it, and I think that became the next emphasis to what we were going to do. I’ve got a ton of wool sitting here that I have spun, and now what am I going to do with it? Knitting: that’s one step at a time. It’s a type of weaving, but it’s one stitch, one stitch, one stitch. It takes a long time. Crochet is also a type of weaving. Again, it’s one stitch. So, I think they’re looking at ‘What can I do to bring back



production of things that we used to do in this country and it went away?’ and we’re recognizing the error of our ways, that we are relying on countries -sometimes not our friends - to send us stuff that we want, or that we need.”

*Q. When you’re at a Living Archaeology weekend event and you can see the eyes light up to some of these younger students, when you make a connection of that history, what’s that like?*

A. “That’s great. It is wonderful. The little boys, it’s the mechanics. ‘Why does this work? What’s that wheel do?’ Okay. They’re into the mechanics of it and they like to stand at the looms and see themselves producing something. Little girls, oh, sometimes they’re not quite as excited about it. It’s the older girls begin to show enthusiasm. The younger ones - no, not so much - because they are not frequently all that interested in the mechanics of what’s going on. The boys, yeah.”

*Q. This is hands-on learning.*

A. “Absolutely.”

*Q. How do you feel that hands-on learning leads to the understanding of the history of Kentucky?*

A. “Well, it takes you a while. The hands-on learning business takes you a while to appreciate it. When you’re a small child, you may not appreciate everything that folks had to do, but as you get older and you look and say, ‘Okay, grandma had 12 kids and she had to cook and clean and clothe and sew for and take care of all these children.’ That’s a challenge, and you get to understand that as you get older; but very young? No. It’s not going to sink through, but it will later. It really will later. We had a group that came in that was down at Living Archaeology. There were four or five young ladies that came from the colleges each year, and they volunteered as long as they could work with weaving. They enjoyed what they were doing, and they enjoyed teaching the kids.”

*Q. What’s the most important thing you want the viewer of this video to understand about historic textiles?*

A. “What your grandparents had to deal with on a day-to-day basis; how life was hard and we’ve gotten pretty soft in being able to go and buy what we want and say, ‘Oh, I like that color or I want this or I want that, or I want 10 dresses.’ No. One or two, if you were lucky.”

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