

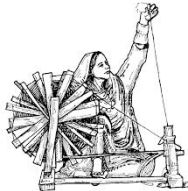
A Word About Spinning

For thousands of years, humans have spun plant or animal fibers into yarn or thread in order to be able to make textiles. Archaeologists have found some of the earliest evidence of woven textiles in France, dating back 20,000 years. This was a string skirt that was part of a carving of a small statue of a woman. And in the country of Georgia, archaeologists have found a spun flax fiber dating to 30,000 years ago. This may have once been part of a net, rope, blanket, clothes, tapestry, headgear, basket, or other spun and woven items.

Early peoples made yarn or thread by rolling fibers together on their thigh. They also used a slender stick (spindle), with or without a whorl (weight), to make yarn, as illustrated in the picture. Early people in Central Mexico used a small ceramic bowl to support the spindle.



Prehistoric native peoples living in the Red River Gorge spun yarn, cordage, or rope from wild plants, like dogbane, milkweed, and nettles. They also used the inner bark of trees, like pawpaw, walnut, red cedar, mulberry, and willow. They used the yarn and cordage to make sandals, baskets, and nets. Archaeologists found a fragment of a 2500-year-old sandal at a site in Carter County.



A drop spindle always has a whorl. It hangs freely, and its twirling spins the yarn. Weavers used the drop spindle as their primary spinning tool until approximately 1000 years ago. That is when, it is generally thought, the spinning wheel or *charkha* (pictured here) was invented in India. In more remote areas of the world, weavers still use a drop spindle to spin their yarn.

The spinning wheel is a surprisingly simple invention. It includes a cord encircling a hand-driven wheel that attaches to the spindle, which is oriented horizontally. The spinner holds the fiber with one hand at an angle to the spindle, and slowly turns the wheel with the other.



By the 16th century, a foot pedal or treadle had been added to help turn the wheel. This allowed the spinner to use both hands to work the fiber.

Spinning became increasingly mechanized near the end of the 18th century. This meant thread could be made on an industrial scale. Although factories sprang up, and produce most of the thread we use today, small-scale spinners continue spinning for home and cottage industry use.

In historic times, spinning in the Red River Gorge likely was done by individuals in their homes, much like this lady pictured here in Laurel County, Kentucky. They wove cloth from the yarn they spun, and then made clothing from the cloth.



Laurel County, Kentucky – 1885
(Kentucky Historical Society)

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