

## THE DISTAFF SIDE

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The phrase “the distaff side” is routinely used as an expression meaning “the wife,” but many people do not know its origin. A distaff is one of the tools used in spinning, which was considered women’s work. The emblem of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution incorporates tools of spinning into its logo. The book of Proverbs in the Bible describes a virtuous woman as one who “seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands” and “layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands holdeth the distaff.”

“No art which has been so long and widely practised remained so unprogressive as that of spinning. On the other hand, since about the middle of the 18th century, when human ingenuity bent itself in earnest to improve the art, there have not been developed in the whole range of mechanical industries machines of greater variety, delicacy of action and capacity than those now in use for spinning.” This is how my ancient *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes spinning. Let’s look at what this means.

In researching this article, I discovered that my mental images needed some reworking. We think of a woman seated at a spinning wheel when we think of spinning. However, spinning could be done without a spinning wheel, and some spinning wheels were walking wheels in which the operator stood.

Two basic tools are used for spinning: a spindle and, for some types of raw materials, a distaff.

A *spindle* is a wooden rod, tapering toward the ends, usually with a notch (hook) at one end. At the midpoint of the spindle is a disk, often perforated and of heavier material, that helps maintain the spinning momentum.

A *distaff* is a rod with a base that holds the long fibers that are to be spun and twisted by hand and gathered on the spindle. Short fibers are simply pulled from a ball. Examples of long fibers are linen, wool, tow, and long-fiber cotton.

*The Complete Spinning Book* says that the hand spindle “must rank among the outstanding discoveries of humanity.” It is basically the first tool in the process to mechanize the creation of thread. Versions of spindles have even been found in Neolithic tombs.

I most certainly would not have been able to spin. My son often points out that I cannot walk and chew gum at the same time (I can, but his point is well taken), and it seems to me that spinning requires the coordination of a circus juggler. One begins by pulling fiber off the distaff (held under the left arm of the spinner) or the ball, twisting the fibers, and attaching them to the spindle.

Now comes the balancing act. The spinning of a yarn this way isn’t a continuous process, but sort of a nonstop multistep process. The spindle is put in motion (remember the disk at the center) while hanging from the twist or yarn. As fiber is pulled (drawn) from the distaff, the spinner rolls it between her right fingers and thumb, pulls and smoothes it with both hands until it is the proper thickness,

weight, and strength, and then lets the spindle twist it, finally wrapping it around the spindle. The key seems to be continuity and proper tension. Nope, this definitely isn’t something I’d be good at.

The spinning wheel helped. A lot. With hand spinning, the spindle was started spinning like a top with the fingers or by rolling it on the spinner’s leg. The spinning wheel used a treadle to set (and keep) a large wheel in motion (as opposed to the small disk on the hand spindle). This let the spinner focus on the hand manipulation that turned the fiber into yarn. The spinner was still constantly balancing the pulling of fibers and shaping them into yarn, but the treadle helped with the spindle tasks.

By the mid-1700s in New England and Pennsylvania, the majority of households that were prosperous enough to leave a probate inventory possessed a spinning wheel. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich reports that the 30–40% ownership of the 1670s in Massachusetts had grown to about 55% in Essex County, Massachusetts, to about 70% in Chester County, Pennsylvania, and to 80% in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, the most rural of the areas tallied.

I mentioned walking wheels above. These let the spinner walk back and forth to keep proper tension, pulling out the raw material while working it with her hands and then drawing it up on the spindle, which was much easier than accomplishing this by waving her arms around in the air. (OK, so it was more graceful than that, but you try holding your arms out in front of you hour after hour.)

Once the concept of the mounted spinning wheel was accepted, inventors came up with several mechanisms to help with each of the portions of the spinning process and integrated them with the basic wheel.

The most meaningful improvements reduced the amount of hand-labor required. *The Complete Spinning Book* comments that “Prior to the invention of the spinning jenny by James Hargreaves in 1765, all of the thread that went into all of the fabrics used for any purpose was passed through the fingers of a handspinner, nearly always a woman, on to a hand spindle or self-powered spinning wheel.”

Even early spinning wheels were customized to accommodate the type of fiber. There is a display room in an outbuilding at Mount Vernon that is filled with a great array of spinning wheels of different sizes and styles.

There were indeed significant improvements in the tools of spinning in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, but I’m pretty sure that the craft still required a level of coordination that I could never achieve.

### RESOURCES

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