

THE NEEDLES AND THREADS OF PIONEER WOMEN

The pioneer woman used many of her daily hours growing, preserving and preparing her family's food. Along with those chores were the other household necessities of child care, cleaning, laundry and teaching daughters how to do all those things as well.

Whenever she was able to sit down, her hands were never idle, for then she must be busy with some sort of needle and thread. She provided the necessary clothing, bedding and household items and linens that were essential for her family's well-being.

She usually made nearly all clothing items from bloomers, under-vests, chemises, petticoats and drawers to the winter coats, jackets, head and hand coverings.

Fabrics and thread were expensive and not easily acquired. A few needles and pins, a thimble were cherished and carefully guarded items.

If you were fortunate enough to have a few sheep, the wool was often taken to someone in the community who had a loom and for a fee, they would weave your wool into a much needed fabric for you. Woolen and cotton fabrics were often a subject for bartering with owner of a general store or traveling peddler.

While most households didn't have their own loom, it was probably rather common for them to clean, wash, comb, card and spin their own wool for weaving or knitting purposes.

Often there was an unmarried sister of the man or woman of the household living with them and she earned her "keep" by doing many of the necessary chores. One that was very time consuming was the wool preparation and spinning. It is thought the term spinster, meaning an unmarried woman, probably came from the fact that this husbandless woman often did much of the spinning, thus was a spinster and the term took on a new meaning in describing her status.

Some of the needles and threads jobs that would be appropriate to portray during the visitation times and do-able by most are the making of--

clothing; comforters; quilts; sheets and pillowcases of cotton feed/seed/flour/sugar sacks; household linens such as window and table coverings; braided, hooked and woven rugs; knitting and crocheting sweaters, head and hand coverings; wool preparation and spinning and perhaps at some later time, candle-wicking bedspreads.

To prepare for your participation in any of these activities, would first require an appropriate costume with a high degree of authenticity.

To prepare for your activity, you would need to gather the necessary materials for use in making items. Some suggestions are:

- Clothing appropriate fabric, cut to size and ready to sew; needles, thimble, thread, a few pins, scissors
- Comforters wool or other salvaged fabrics cut into squares, needles, heavy thread, thimble, scissors, an inner filler (old blanket or extra-loft batting) and a dark fabric backing (heavy flannel). For knotting the layers together a heavy, dark colored cotton cord-like thread, similar to crochet thread or a pearl cotton thread would be suitable.
- Sheets & pillowcases—white cotton feed, sugar or light-weight seed sacks that you've laundered and bleached (don't be surprised if not all the printing disappears—it adds to the quaintness). Cheap muslin that's wrinkled and coarse could also be used—launder first to make it softer and easier to handle. You'll probably want to press out some of the wrinkles as best you can, but don't worry about ironing it smooth.
- Quilts old looking fabrics of muted colors and older designs (some left from your costume) cut into 2½" squares. Also needles, thimble, thread, pins and scissors for piecing together a simple nine-patch blocks for a quilt top.
- Household linens—feed sacks or muslin that can be turned into table and window coverings; perhaps some scarves, etc.
- Knitting & Crocheting—yarn should be plain, dull and darker colors to look as much as possible like they've been dyed with shells, barks and other natural plant materials. Needles and hooks should be wooden ones. Items to be made would probably be socks, sweaters, head and hand coverings in a plain, simple design.
- Rugs wool or wool type fabrics cut into strips to be braided, hooked or woven into floor coverings. Cotton fabrics could be used for braiding and weaving if wool not available.