

Why Green Mountain Spinnery By David Ritchie

The Green Mountain Spinnery was founded, approximately, between the years 1975 and 1981 and it was formed by a gathering of local artisans and educators recalling the phrase “think globally and act locally”.

In Claire Wilson’s case, she and her husband Norm had met at the progressive Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Together they moved to raise their family in Putney, where Norm had been asked to direct Antioch’s first graduate school.

Libby Mills and her husband Bob were already settled in the area. Both integral instructors at Putney School, with its inclusive and active farm and forest based curriculum, while raising a family at home, including sheep.

At Norm’s early and very unfortunate passing, Claire organized a local gathering based on the national network of activists committed to the principles of nonviolence called Movement for a New Society, which had originated in Philadelphia, PA.

David and Diana, both local graduates of the School for International Training, joined the study group formed as a result of the gatherings. For at least two years a group of 10 to 15 participants met monthly to think globally about issues of the day and then ask where things stood in their own neighborhood. Much of the world was increasingly concerned over our inability to provide healthy food, in the milieu of fertilizers and pesticides. We were reading Frances Moore Lappe’s “Diet for a Small Planet” in a time of heavy dependence on California produce. Recent arrivals in Vermont were starting new, smaller farms, and earlier in the decade, the Northeast Organic Farmers Association of Vermont, had just been founded.

Meanwhile in the fiber world, old, local, textile related mills were closing. Both Claire and Libby, with recent memories of knitting for soldiers in World War II, were sourcing their preferred yarns mostly from Europe. It was Claire, in her quiet, but determined voice who was asking:

“When I see sheep in these hills, why do I find no yarn made with their wool?”

At this time many locals were learning how to practice nonviolent civil disobedience in Movement for a New Society Affinity Groups to protest the construction of the Seabrook Nuclear plant in New Hampshire. Their dedication to the cause precipitated Claire and Libby finding themselves in a prison cell together. For them, this became the unexpected moment available to consider a response to Claire’s question and to now go from defending the environment to championing it with dreams for an ideal enterprise. We had studied from a book called *Small Is Beautiful*, and all of us were determined to create a democratic, shared workplace that could connect our crafts-people to these hills in Vermont.

It was also our wish to serve the local shepherds, who were doing the daily, challenging work of caring for the land and animals, by spinning their wool and increasing its value to them, as local yarn, to bring to their consumers. Farmers' markets were just then proliferating. We made a list of friends in our local community asking them if they would consider loans, with various terms. Wow! For some reason they liked the idea which got us hopeful.

Soon we found three graduate students from The Tuck School of Business to help us in something which we had zero experience with: creating a business plan and selling it to the community. They were able to advocate for us, as we met with suited executives from The Vermont Economic Development Association (still in existence today). A recent visit by one of the former students said that our project was the envy of their class. Yes, we got that loan!

Of course we wanted this on our terms and created our Statement of Purpose expressing our concern for the lands and animals grazing on them, the surrounding community, and our own in-house dedicated workers.

Asked recently how a company, situated between the farms and the spinning-knitting-weaving community, with so many unknown challenges, could get on its own feet, and then continue to remain a vibrant enterprise? Claire very quietly will tell you:

“You have to really love and believe in what you are doing.”



From left: David, Diana, Libby and Claire receiving the loan, and first big break, from the Vermont Economic Development Association (1980)

The company you see here today began from these roots. We have witnessed many changes as our community, locally and nationally, has become more conscientious about the potential of natural fibers. So too has grown this realization about the jeopardy of our planet and the need across the globe to regenerate our soils.

As workers with the fibers, we have our own inner soils to care for and how to handle all this creation as a team. Then comes this incredible gift of what these grazers (or plants like organic cotton) can contribute and the variety of beauty we can realize from it.

We hope that you will enjoy and participate with us, in the present, at the Green Mountain Spinnery today.

Our Original Statement of Purpose, below, written in 1980, is still the basis of our mission:

- 1) To produce and sell the finest American wool yarn from New England sheep for use by handweavers and knitters. We want to process a wide range of natural fibers which are locally available and to enhance them with outstanding colors. We also would like to produce lanolin.
- 2) To scale our production (approximately 600 lbs. per week) in ways that
 - minimize adverse effects on the environment
 - minimize the need for shipping raw materials and finished yarn over long distances
- 3) To work toward self-reliance in our geographical region by
 - providing specialty yarns to area crafts people
 - providing a service to sheep breeders, not otherwise available, through custom processing and fleece acquisition, and thus encouraging diversified farming
 - using regionally available raw materials to make a product needed in the region
 - being a model small business geared to meet a regional need; encouraging others in similar ventures
 - working toward using a locally available, renewable energy resource to heat our building, heat our water, and power our machinery. Converting to that source as soon as possible.
- 4) To create a vital work environment where workers are challenged to make use of their skills. To evolve into a worker-owned business.



