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Memory in the Fingers: An exploration of knitting through the lens of modern knitters' lives

Sinclair Rishel

University of Mississippi. Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

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Memory in the Fingers
An exploration of knitting through the lens of modern knitters’ lives

By
Sinclair Rishel

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

__________________________________
Advisor:  Dr. Kathleen Wickham

__________________________________
Reader:  Ms. Ellen Meacham

__________________________________
Reader:  Mr. Charlie Mitchell
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Abstract

This thesis explores the history of knitting through the lens of modern knitters’ lives. Information about the history of knitting was gathered from various printed and online sources. A series of interviews were conducted with knitters of different ages, experience levels, professions, and socioeconomic circles. Among these were beginning knitters, casual knitters, semi-professional knitters, professional knitters, and a knitting celebrity. The interviewees were asked about their knitting lives, including personal history, motives, preferences, and habits. Using the research and the interviews to inform each other, the researcher compiled a report on each subject which included their responses and the historical context which was relevant to each. The research indicated that knitting history is kept alive and continually engaged with on a unique level as modern knitters practice the same techniques which knitters hundreds or thousands of years ago used. It also found some significant similarities among knitters, particularly in the area of motives for knitting. This work represents an acquisition of expertise, not only in the area of knitting history, but also in interview skills.
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“I very much doubt if anything is really new when one works in the prehistoric medium of wool with needles... In knitting there are ancient possibilities; the earth is enriched with the dust of the millions of knitters who have held wool and needles since the beginning of sheep. Seamless sweaters and one-row buttonholes; knitted hems and phoney seams - it is unthinkable that these have, in mankind's history, remained undiscovered and unknitted. One likes to believe that there is memory in the fingers; memory undeveloped, but still alive.”

- Elizabeth Zimmermann, author of The Knitter’s Almanac
Introduction

There are many theories regarding the origins of knitting. Although the truth is lost to time, the stories remain. Some say knitting originated in the Middle East, somewhere near Egypt. Others say the Vikings invented it, trapped for hours on a boat in the cold North Sea with nothing to do and a lot of rope. Which is true, society may never know. However, one thing is clear: across millennia, continents, and cultures, knitting has always found a place in the hearts and hands of women and men.

The history of knitting is a very elusive thing. Nearly every text which attempts to document the origins and history of knitting begins with a phrase very similar to these: “The origin of the famous patterns of the Aran Islands is lost in antiquity…,”1 “The story of the spread of knitting from the East is as fascinating as it is difficult to trace…,”2 and “There is no knowing when women in Shetland began to knit.”3 It is an infamously elusive art and those who attempt to trace or document it are sure to encounter many of the same obstacles again and again. The purpose of this manuscript is to examine the primary factors which render the history of knitting so elusive.

Of the textiles produced in previous centuries, knitted items are unique in that they were used for day-to-day wear. Gloves, hats, sweaters, socks, scarves, and more were

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typically knitted rather than woven. Part of this comes from the nature of the fabric. Woven objects must be made in straight lines. Even in circular weaving, the item can only go straight down in one uninterrupted flow. This means that one cannot, for instance, weave a glove. Additionally, woven fabric does not have the elasticity of knitted fabric. Because knitting is formed from a series of loops, the fabric has some give to it that lends itself nicely to objects such as hats and gloves, as well as being well suited to necklines and hems, which must stretch when they are being put on. Weaving, being formed only of intercrossing straight lines of yarn, is largely inelastic and so is not as well suited to these applications.

The other component to take into consideration is the equipment required for each craft. Weaving, while simpler in execution, requires more and larger tools. In order to make a piece of any significant size, a weaver must have a floor loom, which, even with today’s advanced production techniques, are very expensive and take up a lot of space. They are complex enough in nature that it is not practical to build one oneself and so there is not much opportunity for cutting that expense. There must be a significant devotion to the craft to justify the acquisition of the tools necessary to execute it well. Knitting, on the other hand, is relatively low-demand. All a knitter needs is two sticks and some string. There are also not the same restrictions of complexity as with weaving tools. Men who knitted the first Aran sweaters “knitted…on goose quills from wool spun by the women”⁴ and even aside from those, any two reasonably smooth, straight rods will do for producing knitted fabric. This means that knitting is a much more accessible craft for the masses, enabling just

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about anyone, given the right instruction, to create everyday use items such as hats, scarves, gloves, sweaters, and more.

All of this to say that there are very few ancient knitting artifacts which survive today. “Knitting is not laid away in safe keeping as are rich embroideries and costly tapestries; it is often used, discarded when worn out, and therefore difficult to find when it comes to tracing its history.”

There occasional hints in literature of knitted items. The *Book of Kells* includes a drawing which would appear to be an Aran sweater, which Shelagh Hollingworth mentions: “…[a]n example of Aran knitting is illustrated in the ancient Irish *Book of Kells* in A.D. 820…”

There are also a precious few artifacts. Two of these dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries BC were discovered in the Middle East in burial sites. This has led many knitting experts to speculate that perhaps knitting originated in this region. Perhaps the reason that these are the two oldest knitted artifacts found lies more in the superior preservation techniques and environments of the region; it is entirely possible that knitting originated elsewhere and merely decayed over time.

It would make sense for the Shetland and Aran Islands, given their centrality and influence in later knitting developments and their natural climate and resources, namely sheep, to be the birthplace of knitting. Sarah Don in her book, *Fair Isle Knitting*, says the following about the origins of knitting: “Although one of the earliest woolen garments found dates back to the 6th century BC, it is possible that knitting began even earlier than this

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as there is strong evidence to show that sheep were domesticated as early as 10,000 BC.” Any evidence to support or refute any of these claims, however has been lost.

The first direct evidence of knitting in the British Isles which has been uncovered is around the beginning of the sixteenth century, when evidence began to surface of knitted stockings being produced in the Shetland Islands and exported. Even beyond that, the first properly documented Fair Isle sweater was not recorded until 1936. There is nearly three thousand years of knitting history missing, lost in worn out and decayed items.

The argument might be made that discovery of an artifact is not the only method by which to know about an item, technique, trend, or innovation. Written records, in most cases, provide ample evidence about any of these things for scholars to have some idea about that history. Further, it would make sense that with something as central to daily life, there would be plenty of written evidence to be able to construct at least a rudimentary history. However, there is very little in the way of primary sources regarding knitting.

The most closely related document found was an economic summary of the textile industry in England from 1250 until 1550, titled “Wool and cloth production in late medieval and early Tudor England”. This documents statistics such as sheep populations of England, units of measure in the textile industry, and other such details. While this gives some sense of the magnitude and centrality of the textile industry, it does not give information about knitting techniques of the time, where and when knitting was done, and how central to daily life knitting truly was.

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The only hint of direct relevance to daily life comes from the book *Crafts and Craftsmen*, which says “Men, women and children knitted for themselves and for market at every spare moment, sheltering in hedgerows or jogging along to fairs…”8 This would seem to indicate that knitting was, in fact, quite integral to daily life. Why, then, would something so ingrained be so poorly documented?

The first hypothesis proposed is that while knitting was indeed integral to daily life, it was also mundane. Imagine in today’s society somebody writing an essay about text messages or grocery shopping. While these are actions which are deeply ingrained in day-to-day life, they are not notable. They are simply matter-of-fact and thus, are not considered it important to document the particulars of these activities. Knitting was much the same. Precisely because of its deeply integrated role in society, it was not considered notable and so not worth writing about. The limited resources for document production of the time only exacerbated this.

In today’s day and age, if someone wished to write an article about the particulars of text messaging, they could do so essentially for free. The tools and the knowledge to produce a document are, for all intents and purposes, endless in 21st century society and the technological advances in preservation of information are so far advanced that one could reasonably write an essay about texting today and expect it to be preserved, barring apocalyptic disaster, a thousand years from now.

In medieval times, however, writing was a much bigger investment. First, one had to know how to write and then, writing would require resources to have some sort of paper or tablet and a pencil, quill, or other writing instrument, as well as the leisure time to spend

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producing a document. There were considerably more barriers to writing and so only the noteworthy subjects were given page space. Unfortunately for modern knitting historians, knitting did not make the cut.

The other factor affecting the lack of documentation regarding knitting history is the manner in which knitting techniques are conveyed. Knitting, for the majority of its existence, has been and, to some degree, remains a primarily oral tradition. The most common method by which one learns to knit is by sitting down with an experienced knitter and watching them work the stitches. Part of this is due to the fact that knitting is a very precise art. There are many steps to even the simplest of stitches and so trying to absorb those skills by reading a piece of writing, or, vice versa, trying to satisfactorily record those techniques, is quite challenging. This barrier extends to passing along stitch patterns and other knitting skills, which results in very few written records of these techniques. “It was not until instructions began to take on their present day style that sufficient interest began to be taken in the stitch patterns and proper preservation could be made.”

The other manner in which one can learn new knitting techniques is actually a form of reading. It is possible to look at a piece of knitted fabric and “read” the stitches. Because each of the two stitches which comprise knitting, the knit and the purl, have unique appearances, it is possible to look at a piece of knitting and determine, stitch for stitch, how the combination of knits, purls, and a few other stitches which are used for shaping were combined to make the pattern in question. This too, however, does not leave us a written record as the information decays with the garment.

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The very things which set knitting apart make it an elusive one. It was designed to be handled and used; it was well-used and well-loved and because of that use, decayed. It was such a deeply ingrained part of daily life that it was not studied or discussed. It was, in a way that many other textiles are not, a central part of life and an art form which meant the difference between cold, misery, and sickness and protection and health. Its beauty lies in its universal availability and unfortunately, there too lies its great downfall.
When I was 12 years old, my grandmother, Betty Sinclair, from whom I derive my first and middle names, taught me to knit. This moment sparked the rest of my knitting career and, eventually, led to this thesis. As such, it seems appropriate that her interview should open this work.

Can you tell me how you got started knitting? How old you were, who taught you, what made you want to learn?

A friend of my parents’ knitted and she crocheted and I asked her if she would teach me. I was 8 years old. She is the one that taught me.

What made you interested in learning?

I just saw it. Just seeing what she was doing and what she was making stimulated my desire to learn it. I think I learned crochet first. To be honest, I don’t know if she taught me to knit or if I picked it up later, but I don’t have any memory of my first knitting. I just feel like she taught me to do both.
I probably know the answer to this, but what kind of projects do you like to knit?

Well, at first, things like afghans, both baby and adult afghans. That intrigued me. I tried to make a little baby jacket and boots and it just came out so big. I didn’t really know enough about knitting and sizing and all that. So I didn’t do that. I went to the blanket or the rectangular, flat item because you didn’t have to worry about sizing so much. I made your grandfather a vest-type sweater, which he liked. And I still have it here. I made Parma a jumper dress when she was 3 or 4 years old and I think she has that at your house in her cedar chest. When you come home, we can see if we can find it.

Yeah, that would be great! I may text Dad and see if he can send me a picture.

Yeah! It was Uncle Bill that got me started on the socks. Your mom and I at the same time. I was successful in doing it and I seemed to just catch on and keep doing it. And I had made everyone an afghan and you don’t make two or three or four of those for a person. Although Uncle Rob and Aunt Denette have two afghans.

And I think I got two. I think I have one that you made when I was younger and I have a pink and blue and purple one that you made when I was older.

That’s kind of what I did. I made the first one and then the colors weren’t really for an adult, it seems like. So then I wanted to make you one more for your adult life, one that you can take with you into a marriage and keep. It all has to do with colors, not necessarily pattern and that’s why I did that one.

I’ve just really [knitted], not solid, since I was eight years old. There were some years I took off and didn’t do it. But it’s something that, like you, you’ll never really forget how to do it. You may not do it for several years and then something will come up and you’ll want to do
it. Although I don’t think you will because of your spinning and your overall interest in it. But I took off several years because I was busy doing other things and I didn’t really have anyone to knit or crochet for. When Grandaddy was taking his chemo, I started a tablecloth with a pineapple pattern, but I didn’t even get one pattern of it done. It was so tiny, the thread was so small, and it would have taken me forever and ever to finish it and I was busy taking care of him, so I never did anything with that. I still have it. But I like to do something that I can see better.

My mother did some crocheting. And I think she was doing it with Margie and I think that’s probably where I got interested. You’ve seen that doily that I have on my dining room table. Yeah!

Well she was doing one of those. So I got the pattern from her to do that. But she didn’t do a whole lot. She did more sewing on the machine than the handwork. But she was an active minister. She was busy. She didn’t have time to sit and do that. She was busy day and night.

The times that you took off knitting, that you got away from it for a few years, what brought you back? What made you want to start again?

Not anything in particular. It’s very possible I was in a yarn shop, like Michael’s or something, and saw a pattern that I thought would be fun to do. I don’t really remember. I know I wanted to do those afghans for Parma and Tom and Bill and Rob and Denette. And I did afghans for Auntie and her two daughters. And I had done them for the great aunts in Bert’s family. Nothing particular brought me back to it. I probably just got the urge and wanted to do those afghans for them. So I got yarn and did!
When do you usually knit? What time of day?

Well, now I knit almost every day. Since I’m no longer working and I live alone, I don’t really have much to do here. So I’m knitting, since I started those socks. And then I feel like I’ve accomplished something in the day. It’s not just like sitting and watching television and not doing anything. My life now, at my age, is not real busy. When I was playing piano for the church, I would work on music for the day and get ready for Sunday. But since I don’t do that anymore, I really don’t have anything else to do. Except I could clean house better.

Knitting is so much more fun though.

Oh yes, I’d much rather knit. It’s just different only having one person here, because I’ve always been used to five people: my three children and my husband and I. And then working, plus taking care of the house and doing the cooking and doing everything. My life was very, very busy and especially when we had the cake shop. It’s always been real busy. But as I’ve gotten older and my kids have moved out and gotten married and are adults taking care of their own lives, and since I’m not working. The first time I haven’t been working is when we moved here, and that was just in ’99. When I no longer worked, then I really didn’t have very much to do. It’s just a whole different life style. And when I came here, I came here for several reasons, but one was to help take care of you and Genevieve. So that kept me busy for several years, all the time. And then y’all grew up on me.

Yeah, we did.

It’s just the lifestyle, y’all growing up.

Yep. Can you tell me how you knit?
I knit [throwing style], with my right hand.

*And you usually work on circulars, right?*

Yeah, I do now. I love them. On straights, I was always catching something on the outside of the knitting needle. It was always catching your clothes or the arm of a chair or something. It really was bothersome. That’s why I love the circulars. They just lay in your lap.

*When did you make that transition over?*

Oh, several years ago. When they first started coming out and I saw them. And when I finally tried one of them. Because at first, you didn’t know what they were. They were really foreign. Once I got one and found out how nice it was, I quit using the straights.

*Okay. And what about when you do socks? Do you tend to do magic loop or two circulars? And before circular needles, if you were doing a sleeve or something, what would you have used?*

Well it would have been the straights. Some of it would have been the double pointed [needles] on socks. But now, I use the circular. I mainly use the 32” because that’s what Uncle Bill bought me.

*When you do sweaters and stuff, do you have a particular style you like to do?*

I have thought about doing a raglan. I really haven’t done a whole lot of sweaters. I did your dad’s sweater, and Bill and Rob’s last year, but that is the first sweater I can really remember doing. I did one for Granddad and it came out just way too big. It was the wrong kind of yarn. I tried to make it and he never wore it because it was too big. It just didn’t work out really. I did that vest for him and he wore that. But I think I have really done more in hats and scarves and, now, socks.
Smaller, accessory items?

Smaller things, yeah. In fact, I’m doing Aunt Denette a pair of socks here. And I got the Knitter’s Book of Socks from KnitPicks and it’s in there. When you come down, I’ll show it to you. It’s real neat.

It sounds like it. When you learn new techniques, knitting on circular needles, doing yarn overs, socks, things like that, how do you learn them?

I have always just looked at the pattern in the book to see what all stitches are involved and if I know them. And if not, I get the book out of all the different stitches and see if it’s in there. Until the internet became available, that’s how I did it. There weren’t that many stitches at that time and they were in those little instruction booklets. That’s where I would go and figure out how to do the stitch.

This may be a specific question, but do you remember the name of the company that did those booklets?

Well I still have the books here. It’s the Learn How Book by Kaye Dickson. It’s a little book, but it’s thick. It has all the stitches, and then it has items you can make in there. You know, like a sock and mittens and a hat and a sweater. It has different garments. And then you use those stitches so you can learn to do it. It’s put out by Coats and Clark Quality Products. Red Heart Yarn is what they have listed here.

Cool. Where do you typically get your yarn and your other knitting supplies?

Well, I used to always get it at Michael’s and stores like that, but now I get it all over the internet.

What websites do you tend to go for?
I use KnitPicks a whole lot, just because they normally have what I’m looking for.

Right. And when you’ve been to local yarn shops, what’s been the difference in experience versus buying online versus buying at Michael’s?

A larger volume, a bigger assortment of yarn.

At the local yarn shops?

Yeah. I’m thinking of the Stitch Niche out there in Diamondhead where we went. They had a larger volume of choices of yarn. But the reason I like the web better is I can always get the quantity I need and normally, it’s all the same dye lot number. So at Michael’s, they may only have three or four skeins and you need six or seven. Then it’s waiting for the rest to come in and hope it’s the same dye lot number. And it’s just easier for me now to just order it over the internet. If I’m doing something for Uncle Bill or Uncle Rob and Aunt Denette, I’ve started just sending them the websites and they can look at the color charts on the computer and tell me what color they want. So it’s just more convenient online, plus it’s a greater choice of colors and yarn.

And is there any particular yarn you prefer?

No, not really.

Okay. So other than me, have you ever taught anyone else to knit? What was your experience with that? And what was your experience with teaching me?

Well, you were real easy to teach and you picked it up immediately. I didn’t teach you very much. I taught you how to cast on and a knit and a purl and you took off and learned the rest of it yourself, if I remember right.
Yeah, I was pretty much self-taught on most of that.

And of course, I taught your mother. I don’t really remember teaching anyone else.

And I know you’ve mentioned KnitPicks, but is there a particular knitting resource you like?

Uncle Bill got me a book and I have used it. It’s a great big book that his friend in New York had and so he bought himself one. *Principles of Knitting* by Jen Hemmons Hiatt. It’s got all kinds of information in it.

Okay. Can you tell me, in as close to one sentence as possible, why you knit?

I enjoy making things from scratch and then being able to give them to my friends and my family. And they like it. They enjoy it.
Tina Soo

Tina Soo’s home is a living testament to her love of knitting. Blankets lounge on ottomans, bunch on shelves, and drape over sofa arms, some still on the needles. Upstairs in closets, dozens of sweaters hibernate in vacuum-packed bags, waiting for their turn to be shown off.

“I have too many hand-knitted sweaters. … It stressed me out to not be able to wear all of my sweaters at least once during a season,” Soo says of her collection. “So I thought, ‘I’m going to knit a bunch of blankets.’”

Soo’s life as a knitter began roughly seven years ago after a move from Dallas to Nashville. As a Dallas native, she had been accustomed to an area which offered no shortage of entertainment; after the move, she discovered many of her previous hobbies were not viable in the smaller city. Bereft of her usual pastimes, Soo searched for a new passion.

“So I thought, ‘Hmm, what am I going to do?’ I’ve always loved sweaters, textiles, just touch and feel, and … so I decided, ‘I’m going to learn how to knit!’”

Soo turned to her local yarn shop, Angel Hair Yarn in the Green Hills area of Nashville, to begin her knitting journey. Feeling she needed one-on-one instruction, she set

Photo credit: Sinclair Rishel
up a private lesson – a recent formalization of a centuries-old tradition of women and men passing down the techniques of knitting hand-to-hand, quite literally.

Knitting has, for many centuries, been an oral tradition. When knitting first evolved, printed books were a luxury. It would not have been practical to produce instructional pamphlets of any variety. Even if it were, knitting would have been an extremely ingrained part of society. It would have been highly unlikely that anyone learning to knit would have needed to turn to a book to learn; they would likely have known dozens of knitters to teach them. This remained true through the development of the printing press, when all manner of printed materials became more affordable. Even then, however, a book is no substitute for a teacher; the luxury of being able to see how a knitter holds her yarn and her needles, and forms her stitches is invaluable to a beginner.

Although most knitters still begin sitting side-by-side with their teacher, the knitting world has embraced the accessibility of the digital age. Online knitting tutorials abound, everything from illustrated, step-by-step articles to videos to webinars. Soo herself frequently turns to YouTube to learn quick new techniques. She is also an enthusiastic patron of Ravelry, the popular social media site directed at fiber artists. The site has nearly six million members and provides an online community, pattern database, and much more.

“I love Ravelry because you can find … the items that everybody has knitted and just see how it looks,” Soo says of the site. “The pattern photo is not usually the real photo after regular people have knitted it, or [are] wearing it, so … I like seeing what the real world version is like.”

The Internet has also allowed Soo to be more selective in her yarn choices. Although she prefers to buy from local yarn stores, either in her area or when she is on
vacation, there are some yarns which simply have no substitute. Silverspun, a fairly self-explanatory yarn, is spun with a small amount of silver, allowing wearers to operate their touch screen devices while wearing gloves or mittens.

“I bought some [Silverspun] to knit my gloves and it worksbeautifully. … I think Silverspun only has two or three stores they sell to, but otherwise you just get it directly from them,” she said.

Soo also turns to the internet for large or specific yarn orders. Where a local yarn shop might only carry five or ten skeins of one yarn and will be limited in what they offer, online retailers such as WEBS provide a vast array of options, and in quantities which would not be practical for a local shop to maintain.

However, Soo does default back to the local yarn shops whenever possible.

“I do try to buy from [local yarn stores] even though I might be able to order online for cheaper because I feel like I should support them,” Soo says.

For Soo, the history of knitting plays a huge role in her love of the craft. “It’s so basic. It doesn’t require Internet,” she says. “It doesn’t require anything. Just two sticks and a string of anything, you can make it into something that’s so useful and beautiful.”
Annette Trefzer

Annette Trefzer, a professor of English at the University of Mississippi, came to knitting in rather a different way than many.

“I grew up in Germany and when I went to school, … the German curriculum … had a curriculum for all girls to do *handarbeit* … that included embroidery, crochet, knitting,” she says. “And we just learned these things as a matter of course as part of the school curriculum.”

This *handarbeit*, or work of the hands, began in elementary school and continued through high school. Girls learned the needlecrafts, whereas boys learned *werken*, which dealt more in carpentry and tool trades. Knitting stuck with Trefzer and has remained in the background of her life ever since.

The first project Trefzer ever made was a scarf. The school curriculum taught embroidery beginning in the elementary school and progressed up to knitting and crochet in later years.
“It was part of our school upbringing as a girl, that you needed to be able to knit,” Trefzer says. “And I think the crowning achievement of the knitting curriculum was being able to knit socks with five needles.”

These days, however, Trefzer prefers to stick to less demanding projects. She still enjoys scarves and likes to make sweaters. As a child, she enjoyed making Christmas presents for her friends and family. Knitting also provided entertainment during family time in the evenings.

“When I was a teenager, to spend time with the family, you were expected to be around for this and that, and they would turn the TV on,” she explains. “And for me it was really boring. So I brought the knitting so I looked like I watched and I knitted.”

Trefzer hates being idle and to this day, finds herself reaching for her knitting when the television comes on, or when she has a free Saturday afternoon. As she grew into her college years, however, knitting took on a more social role.

“Knitting was really a thing that was ‘in’ in the late 1970s and the early 1980s in Germany. … Beginning college, we sat in lecture rooms and knitted while we were listening to lectures. And men knitted as well at that time. I think that must have had to do with it was the late 1970s, early 1980s. We were being alternative.”

This sort of knitting counterculture was a prevalent part of life for Trefzer at the time. In the same way which teenagers now carry cell phones, Trefzer and her friends carried knitting.

“I wasn’t formally part of a knitting group,” she says. “That sort of didn’t exist at the time. It was just a thing that a lot of young people did. So you weren’t alone when you
were in lecture knitting because there was somebody else sitting next to you doing the same thing. But it wasn’t like girlfriends got together and we knitted.”

Instead, the groups would gather at coffee houses or in other spaces to spend time together and, naturally, the needles would come out.

“I had a bag for the work and at the time, probably the most knitting [I did] was when I was at the University of Hamburg. So you back your school bag, you take the knitting bag and off you go,” she says.

Knitting stayed a large part of Trefzer’s life through a move to France until her move to the United States.

“I still remember, actually, I came with something I had started. I know what it was. It was a white linen jacket for my mother. And I made it out of really thin cotton thread. And that was the last thing I knitted for a long time.”

Living in New Orleans, she stopped knitting, put off by the heat. Even in Germany, knitting had been reserved more for the cold weather months. In the South, Trefzer found herself with no such times.

The other factor that challenged her was the lack of quality yarn. American yarns at that time were experiencing the worst of acrylics and local yarn shops were scarce in New Orleans.

“In Germany at the time, there were tons of knitting stores all around the university and there were great yarns at the time, mohair and stuff like that,” Trefzer explains. “Today, it’s really difficult. … And I frankly in those early years had no real access to a store that would have had reasonable, exciting, interesting wool and supplies at all.”
The dearth of yarn and the climate of New Orleans halted Trefzer’s knitting life for a long time. Although a move to Oklahoma pulled her out of the semitropical atmosphere of New Orleans, she was still left only with big box retailers and acrylic yarns which did not appeal to her. She bought her wool on trips to Germany, but it was not enough to sustain her craft.

“I just had a longing for those great stores where you can’t resist a lot of things,” Trefzer says. “Then I began to discover a lot more recently, say since ’98 or something, there are some stores in the States that do have that.”

One such store is Downtown Books and Purl, a shop in Apalachicola, Florida, which Trefzer frequents when she is in town. The shop, which is partially a bookstore, has a knitting corner with yarn and other knitting supplies. They sparked Trefzer’s desire to knit again.

“The bookstore had all this yarn and stuff and so I didn’t just get books, I also got yarn. And so a project started again,” she says.

Trefzer is grateful for businesses such as Knit1 Oxford and a Water Valley business known as Yalorun Textiles, as they provide the shopping experience she had searched for. And while she does avoid acrylics, Trefzer does not have any favorite fiber; for her, it depends entirely on the project. She avoids wool in the summer, preferring instead to use cotton.

“I remember this one sweater I made,” she recalls. “There were these cotton yarns in these small kneul (skeins or balls) … in cotton of all different colors, like the whole color
palette represented. So I knitted that sweater. I think I still have it. … I knitted the sweater on a color palette that allowed me to switch colors every row. Or I’d knit two or three rows and switch. So it’s got to be a complete rainbow sweater. It was such a joyous project.”

Trefzer’s sweaters tend to be fairly simple and organic. On many of them, she leaves them with an uncomplicated little cuff and, in some cases, no finished neckline.

“I leave it open, thread a ribbon in, simple. Freestyle,” she says. Although she prefers to avoid complicated patterns, German fashion has plenty of them. Particularly the geometric, closed patterns of Fair Isle colorwork are popular.

“It’s part of a kind of style of fashion in Germany that’s traditional. It’s not folkloric, but that’s kind of the classic ski winter sweater. That’s back in.”

Many of the English sweater classifications – gansey, raglan, and more – are unfamiliar to Trefzer, who grew up learning an entirely different set of knitting terms. What English knitters know as cables, for example, Trefzer knows as zopfien, or braids. Rather than a right and a wrong side of knitting, she has a right and a left side, the knit and purl sides of the work respectively.

“We do a slightly different motion than what I’ve seen a lot of American knitters use,” Trefzer says about the throwing style. “We do something different with the thread. We pick up with the needle, so there is no pulling.”

Continental knitting, the technique Trefzer learned, is somewhat more common ground, but casting on is a different matter entirely. She prefers to use the long tail cast on, but knows it as aufreihen, meaning “pull up a row”.

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Difference in terminology aside, knitting is a universal language and Trefzer has been able to share her expertise. While she has never taught a formal class, she taught her mother-in-law, who is a member of a knitting club, how to knit continental.

“I’m not sure if she’s using this now or not, but we had a fun time just sitting around and talking, knitting,” Trefzer laughs.

The knitting community is also her favorite resource for discovering new ways of knitting. Trefzer looks to classes and events offered by businesses such as Knit1 Oxford and Yalorun Textiles for her continuing education.

But at the end of the day, for Trefzer, knitting is about two things:

“Relaxation and the pleasure of seeing something grow,” she says. “I’m a pretty marginal knitter right now. It’s just fun to talk about it. And it’s a part of my life for which I wish I had more time. It is so creative. What I do in my other life, to see a paper grow is not quite the same enjoyment as to see that. It’s tangible, it’s warm, it’s soft, it’s all of those things. Maybe this prompts me to think about another project sometime, or just make room in my life for it because I’ve enjoyed it.”
Melissa Leapman

There are not many people in the world who can say they make their living from knitting, but Melissa Leapman is not most people.

Leapman is a knitting author and designer who has written more than a dozen books on crochet and knitting. She teaches at conferences around the world and is widely renowned as one of the best knitting authors currently writing.

Leapman’s status as a knitting author and celebrity has given her a unique perspective on the knitting world. Everything from what she knits to what yarn she uses is impacted by her work.

“Once you turn your avocation into your vocation, it becomes work and requires that you find a new creative outlet, no matter how much you love the original hobby,” Leapman says.
As it happens, the original hobby dates back quite a ways for Leapman, whose grandmother taught her to crochet when she was four years old. “I was the only girl in the sandbox playing with yarn,” Leapman says. The love of knitting came later.

“When I was in high school, I wanted to make sweaters for myself,” Leapman says, “but there were no crocheted sweater patterns out there that I’d be caught dead wearing! So … I bought a 15 cent leaflet with a green cover at the RiteAid and taught myself to knit … when I was fifteen.”

Making sweaters turned out to be Leapman’s livelihood. Many of her books include sweaters which incorporate cables, colorwork, and “fit to flatter” techniques knitters can use to customize their sweaters. Although she uses all manner of techniques in her work, Leapman is partial to one in particular.

“I think my favorite technique in knitting is cabling. I fell in love with crazy Aran sweaters and wanted to be able to make them. Unfortunately, my business requires that I design other kinds of stitches, not just cables. Sometimes all I want to do is play with cables.”

Within knitting, there are a number of ways to manipulate stitches which allow the knitter to create intricate patterns in her work. These include cables, texture patterns, colorwork, and lace. The first of these, cables, is a technique in which the knitter works stitches out of order to create three dimensional twisted patterns in the knitting. These may take the appearance of ropes or braids, but they may also form lattice patterns, various motifs such as anchors and knots, or winding lines.
Leapman typically learns these new stitches and techniques from books and then explores through experimentation. This results in fabulous and unique designs for her books.

Aside from her successful career as an author, Leapman is also a much-sought-after knitting teacher. Her visit to Oxford, Mississippi, this summer saw more than 45 people register to take classes with her.

“I teach advanced knitting all the time at consumer shows, yarn shops, etc. to promote my books,” Leapman says. “I love it.”

But her talents and expertise are not only reserved for those in a classroom.

“I teach beginners all the time,” Leapman says, “most often folks who just happen to be sitting next to me on airplanes. I give them yarn and needles to take with them after the flight. Many of them contact me later with photos of projects. It’s very gratifying.”

Leapman, who prefers to knit throwing, or English, style, teaches her students the same technique.

“I can’t knit continental without sticking out my tongue and swearing the whole time,” Leapman says. “I’m the world’s slowest knitter.”

Leapman’s status as a designer also grants her certain privileges. For one thing, she does not buy yarn.

“Rather, I get it free from yarn companies who want me to use it in my designs to promote it,” Leapman explains. “I prefer smooth yarns that have great stitch definition, but for my business, I use all kinds.”
In the area of needles, however, Leapman has a definite preference. “I use Denise Interchangeable circular knitting needles,” she says.

Interchangeable needles have been a game-changer in the knitting world. These needles, rather than having the metal or wooden tip permanently attached to their cable, come equipped with a small socket on the end of the needle and a matching screw on either end of the cable. This allows knitters to unscrew the tips from one length cable and screw them back onto the new length that suits them. Thus a knitter working on a shawl which has outgrown its needle need not have an entirely different needle to move the project to. She may simply place her tips on the new cable length, transfer her stitches to the new cable, and keep going. Whereas knitters once were required to own size 8 needles in 16”, 24”, 32”, 40”, and 60” lengths and were simply out of luck if their project required a longer size, interchangeable needles have opened up the game.

Leapman’s business also means she has a large online presence. She actively engages with fans through Facebook and has recently launched a series of online classes through a site known as Craftsy. For Leapman, however, Ravelry has been the most important resource.

“Ravelry has single-handedly changed my business. I enjoy the community and the wealth of information onsite,” says Leapman. Her Ravelry group, Melissa Leapman Rocks, has over 500 members and provides an outlet for Leapman to interact with her fans.

When asked why she knits, Leapman responds enthusiastically. “I love the rhythm of knitting. No wonder the media touts ‘it’s the new yoga.’ It is quite soothing. Unless
you’re under a tight editorial deadline,” Leapman continues with a grin. “Knitting is my business; they pay me to knit. I have the best job in the world.”
Aran Sweaters

The Aran Islands off the coast of Ireland were the birthplace of some of the most beautiful and complex sweaters ever made. There are three main islands, Inishmore, Inishman, and Inisheer. Climate and industry demands, particularly an economy built around fishing in the North Sea, led to the rise of knitting on the Islands, and in an attempt to make sweaters thicker and thus warmer, complex stitch patterns evolved. This resulted in sweaters knitted out of wool, either with or without lanolin, which were traditionally white and contained elaborate stitch patterns worked in panels.

Texture patterns utilize combinations of knit and purl stitches to create patterns which alternate in stitch appearance. As knit and purl are opposite stitches, they pull opposite ways in the fabric and so allow the knitter to create areas which are “set in” to the fabric. Ribbing is a particularly common instance of this technique. It is a pattern which alternates knit and purl stitches in a set, vertical pattern and so forms lines which sit at
different depths. This is commonly found on the hems and cuffs of sweaters, the brims of hats, and the cuffs of mittens and gloves. However, texture patterns may also take the shape of diamonds, zig zags, and almost any other pattern which may be created on a grid.

Each family on the Aran Islands had a unique set of patterns to them, with each pattern carrying meaning. When a new bride married into a family and had a son, she would knit a sweater for her son with one stitch pattern worked in a panel down the center of the sweater. When her next son was born, she would add a symmetrical panel on either side for him and so on and so forth the evolution would go until the sweaters were so specialized that it was rumored that a drowned man could be identified by the pattern on his sweater. In this case, it was not always the women who knitted the garments, however. Many fishermen would knit the wool their wives spun for them into patterns which their wives designed.

As is usually the case with knitting, it becomes difficult to determine exactly when Aran knitting began. There is an illustration in the Irish Book of Kells which seems to portray an Aran sweater and which dates back to 820 AD. However, the first properly documented sweater was not recorded until 1936. This gap in knitting history is quite troublesome and is explained by the obstacles discussed above. This knitting style, whenever it originated, is still in use today. There is still a fairly prominent cottage industry in existence on the Islands today. Many visitors to Ireland make purchasing a hand-knitted Aran sweater a priority.

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When Penny Nelson was 13 years old, she sat down with her best friend Mary Ellen’s mother to cast on her first stitches. It was winter in Chicago and Nelson says, “I wanted my very own scarf that I made.”

For Peggy Barnette, the revelation of knitting didn’t come till much later in life. A lifelong crocheter and a leftie, Barnette had difficulty with knitting. Right-handed throwing techniques, tension, and other troubles plagued her and so, although she always wanted to learn to knit, the stars never aligned. Until six months ago, that is.

“Then, I found continental [knitting],” Barnette says, “and it’s like the angels sang and lights came on and I basically didn’t pick up a crochet hook for five months once I started knitting.”

Nelson and Barnette are the two halves of a small fiber arts company called Skyloom Weavers. The two best friends live outside Houston and produce a stunning array of hand-spun and –dyed yarns, woven and knitted items, and pre-spun fiber, as well as knitting, weaving, and spinning tools.
Initially, the women decided each would stay her separate course in the area of fiber expertise. Nelson would specialize in knitting, Barnette in crochet. But as the business grew, the pair considered adding knitting and crochet classes at the studio. Barnette, looking to expand into the new craft and help Nelson hone her teaching approach at the same time, took up her knitting needles.

Penny says of the experience, “I have no earthly idea how I did it! … It was very stepwise … I showed her twice, watched her when she did it twice, and [she] kept going! It wasn’t planned at all.”

Barnette, who has taught several people to crochet, usually takes the same flexible approach and prefers to keep her lessons one-on-one.

While beginning lessons may be best taught the old-fashioned way, Nelson and Barnette have no qualms about turning to more digital options for learning new techniques.

Nelson, who learned “in those days [when] you had a book or you had someone show you,” has recently been studying Portuguese knitting, one of several methods of forming stitches. She learned this fascinating technique from a webinar. “[It] was online with lots of really good explanations,” she said. “That worked really well.” Nelson does sometimes prefer the expertise of friends, however.

“I am more likely not to go to YouTube,” she says. “I am more likely to search out somebody who knows how to do it.”

Barnette, on the other hand, uses “almost exclusively YouTube.” Even her continental knitting breakthrough came via the popular video site. “Penny got me started,” Barnette explains, “but she got me started English style and it was when I got really
frustrated that I decided to look into continental.” YouTube provided the breakthrough she needed and Barnette was off to the races.

In fact, Barnette frequently knits during the races – the rat races.

“My absolute standard [knitting time] is during my morning and afternoon commute,” Barnette says. “I ride the bus, so I almost always knit during that period of time.”

Barnette uses this time to unwind and relax. Although she hasn’t knitted for long enough to delve into the more complicated techniques, her experience in crochet tells her more complex projects are not for her. “I don’t want to have to think about it. I want to get into the groove and sort of get into the zen of knitting.”

Nelson, with more years of knitting experience under her belt, feels more comfortable flip flopping among colorwork, texture techniques, and more. Her only boundary, she says, is clothing. “Sweaters are not my happy place,” says Nelson, who prefers not to knit projects which require a swatch. She prefers scarves and shawls to items which depend more heavily on precise gauge.

Like many knitters, Nelson and Barnette prefer to get their yarn from local artisans; they have a relationship with a couple of yarn stores and shop there when they can. Unlike many knitters, the duo has the opportunity to attend a number of fiber shows.

“We do fiber shows all over the place and there’s an amazing number of fiber shows that have really, really good yarn and tools,” Nelson says.

Asked if they frequently use the yarn they produce, the pair laughs.
“Over the last six months or so, we have been working in a more dedicated fashion
to work with our own yarn,” Nelson says. “The problem is I see our yarn every day and so
what attracts my attention is walking in[to a yarn store] and going ‘Look at the Shibui, that’s
so cool’… It’s what we live with every day.”

“What I’ve been trying to do is do a project with our yarn and a project ‘sleeping
around’, using somebody else’s yarn,” Barnette agrees.

Barnette does source her needles online, however. “The yarn store in Katy doesn’t
have nearly enough variety for me since I’m just starting,” she says.

When asked about fiber preference, Nelson’s claim that she likes all natural fibers
equally is corrected.

“She likes linen!” Barnette says. “Why pussyfoot around it, you like linen.”

“I like linen,” Nelson agrees, smiling. “I will buy any yarn if it has linen in it. 5%,
2%, it doesn’t matter.”

“If somebody walked through a yarn mill singing ‘The Girl With the Flaxen Hair,’
that’s probably as much flax as she needs in it to buy it,” Barnette laughs.

Interestingly, the two women did note a correlation in their spinning and knitting
So clearly our hands [have a preference].”

The connection does not extend to fiber types, however, as Barnette, who is happy
knitting with 100% merino yarn, will not spin it. Alpaca, she describes as “sleazy,” due to its
denser, slicker feel.
Although working as professional fiber artists has certainly provided Nelson and Barnette with a unique perspective on the knitting world, their reasons for knitting are fundamentally common.

“I certainly do it because I'm good at it and I can make something I'm happy with in the end,” Nelson says. “I can make a scarf that I'm incredibly proud of and happy to give or sell…But it is also incredibly relaxing and it keeps my hands busy so I can spend time watching TV and feel like it is not a complete and utter waste of time.”

Barnette stated similar reasons. “For me … I am a firm believer in ‘Idle hands, devil’s workshop,’” she says. “I cannot, I physically cannot just sit. I have to be doing something. Crochet, although I love it, [has] gotten to the point that it was kind of boring. Knitting offers me a challenge, but still allows me to relax and I still get the ‘I'm not just sitting, I'm doing something.’”

Both women noted the sort of fascination they seem to attract when they knit or spin in public.

“I'll be spinning in an airport and I'll look up and have fifteen people watching me. And I like that they're watching me. I'd like it better if they’d come up and ask what I'm doing. I love when somebody does that,” Nelson says.

Barnette, who has had similar experiences, also expressed an appreciation for those who ask her about her craft. “Most of the time, the people that will walk up and ask what you’re doing are children. … They’ll ask ‘Mommy, what is she doing,’ and Mommy, bless her, rather than telling them wrong will say ‘You should go ask her.”
However, it is not only non-knitters who notice the knitters around them. Nelson and Barnette have experienced a kind of kinship which exists among knitters. Nelson notes, “It’s interesting that knitters always … recognize each other.”

“It is amazing how often I’m travelling in airports and I’ll spot another knitter,” Barnette agrees. “And you can go sit down by them, strike up a conversation, and they’re always happy to talk to you about knitting or about what they’re doing. … It’s a tribal thing. You recognize a member of your tribe.”
Crochet vs. Knitting

To the casual observer, knitting and crochet may seem at first to be very similar. Long sticks are used to loop yarn through itself over and over again, creating fabric. But there are some key differences.

First among these is the tools used for each craft. While knitting uses two straight needles which taper out to points at one end, crochet only uses one needle which ends on one side with a small hook. This allows the crocheter to “grab” her yarn and pull it through the existing loop more easily. Whereas knitting is worked more or less on a grid, with stitches being worked in rows or rounds with all the stitches which comprise the width or circumference of the piece being “live” on the needles, crochet only works with one loop at a time. Yarn is pulled in loops through the existing fabric and different stitches are created by altering the number of times the yarn is wrapped around the hook before it is passed through the existing fabric. While this means that crocheters must pay more careful attention as to where their next stitch goes, it does allow them to work on a more freeform basis than knitting, which in all forms sticks essentially to the grid format. This kind of freedom has lent itself well to lacework, although that is certainly not all that crochet may produce.

Crochet does progress much faster than knitting – three times as fast in fact. However, it also requires three times as much yarn. Many knitters learn to crochet before they ever pick up a knitting needle and many more actively practice both crafts. Knitting
and crochet may blend quite well. The provisional cast on in knitting relies on a crochet chain and there are a number of crochet finishing techniques which are applied to knitted objects. In fact, one method called Tunisian Crochet alternates between a knitted row and a crocheted row. Each is a complement to the other and they both hold a special status in the fiber arts world.
Ann Saxon Jones’ knitting genesis sounds like something out of a fairy tale.

“I was in my early twenties and I was living in upstate New York…I was living out in the woods in a geodesic dome. It had no electricity. It was real beautiful. It was near this town called Arietta in upstate New York. There were wildflowers everywhere. It was on this mountain, it was real isolated, and there was no electricity. And so I had friends who were living in New York City and they would come out on the weekends, but I would be by myself out there all week with my two dogs. And so that’s when I first started knitting because there was nothing to do,” she says.

Jones currently lives and works in North Mississippi. She is employed at Knit1 Oxford, where she leads a Sweater Clinic helping customers take on their first knitted sweaters. Jones’ fearlessness in knitting has been present since the start.

“I went into New York into this knit store and I bought some yarn and I had a book and so I pretty much taught myself,” Jones says. “And I knitted a lot of really bad things,
but I loved it. I mean, I got hooked on it really quickly. So I would just sit up there [in my house] and knit all week.”

The studio, Coulter Studios, was only the jumping off point for Jones. As there was no internet and she had no direct knitting mentors, Jones took up a book and learned through trial and error. The element of figuring out a technique still fascinates Jones today. She enjoys knitting sweaters and while she doesn’t wear lace, she does enjoy making it.

“\text{"I like the process of a complicated pattern stitch that I can’t understand,"}” she says. “\text{"I’m a kinetic learner and I think all knitting is that way. You have to do it to understand. So you just jump in and search for the pattern."}”

As it turns out, sometimes the search for the pattern led Jones into design work. When she was learning to make sweaters, Jones started out learning the basic way: the front of the sweater, the back, two sleeves, and seams to assemble the whole thing. Recently, the expansion of internet resources, in particularly Ravelry, has offered Jones a wider variety of pattern options. But that wasn’t always the case and so Jones adapted.

“\text{"There was a book, ‘Mary Thomas’ Book of Knitting’, back in the seventies that taught you how to do your own patterns, which was pretty simple. So I did a lot of my own patterns right off the bat,"}” she says.

Although the place is different, Jones’ knitting routine has stayed much the same since her time in Arietta. Her typical knitting time is at night, when she will knit for six or seven hours.
“I'll turn on NPR, the radio, or the TV, as long as it's something really good and I don’t have to concentrate and I'll just knit, knit, knit, knit, knit until I just about pass out,” she says.

Although many who conduct such knitting marathons complain of joint pain or carpal tunnel, Jones has never had problems. She attributes that to both how long she has been knitting and the fact that she knits throwing, or English, style.

“Recently, though, I tried to learn continental and I got a huge growth on my arm,” Jones says. “It broke my hand, it really did!”

But injury or no, Jones remains undeterred. She cites a phenomenon known as “process addiction” as part of her drive.

“Anybody who does anything, whether you’re cooking or gardening or writing a symphony or a novel, you have that process addiction that you want to finish it,” she explains. “And I think that’s why knitting is so satisfying because it’s like meditation and figuring out a puzzle and that creative urge all in one. And what you feed grows, so the more you do it, the more aware of the options you become and you don’t stop!”

Over time, Jones has certainly grown her craft and her expertise. Her self-taught tendencies have continued; Jones’ favorite way to learn is very organic.

“[I learn] simply by saying ‘I want to make that.’ And then you get the pattern and the pattern has things in it that you don’t understand and you learn as you go. … I worked at the knit store in Memphis for 11 years and I’ve taught so many people how to knit. And the people who want to understand it ahead of time are the most difficult people to teach.
Because you have to be willing to jump in and experiment and you have to be willing to make mistakes,” she says.

Experience has allowed Jones to perfect her teaching methods and help her students feel comfortable with their mistakes.

“The first thing I do is I show them basically what I’m doing and I show them how I slide,” Jones says. “And I cast on for them and I teach them the basic knit stitch and that takes them about five minutes. And I say ‘Okay, go home and practice that for a week!’ Because they have to have the muscle memory. Then when they come back, I’ll teach them how to cast on.”

Jones’ tried and true method allows the student to gain a mastery of the basic knitting stitch and learn to enjoy it before they dive into anything else too overwhelming. She says that usually by the time they come back for their second lesson, they’re pretty hooked.

She does prefer teaching private lessons to teaching in classes. The larger group size doesn’t allow for the kind of one-on-one care Jones prefers to administer when teaching beginners. She always encourages her students to make as many mistakes as they can while she’s there, meaning a lot of time spent with each student getting them back on track.

“One of the most important things I think about the beginner knitter is to know you’re going to fix the mistakes for them at first. Because they make so many mistakes and they have to have a safety net to know they have someone who’s going to get them back started,” Jones says.
Her methods work, too. Jones reports that about two thirds of the people she teaches stick with it.

“People usually get hooked real fast and they’ll come back the next day and be like ‘Oh my god, I made a mistake, I need more yarn.’ And you feel a little bit like a drug dealer,” Jones laughs.

Jones loves watching people gain an understanding and appreciation of her craft. Many people will tell her they can’t knit because they aren’t creative or good with their hands. Jones loves proving them wrong.

However, she does know that knitting for profit is an impractical venture.

“For a while, I did knitting for this fancy dress shop in Memphis. And I got my wholesale license and I bought this yarn. And these women would come and pick out these patterns and say ‘Okay, let’s do this with this yarn and this with this yarn.’ And I would knit my brains out and they would pay me like $90. But they’d sell it for $300! So at the end of that year, I did my income taxes and I’d worked my brains out and I broke even.”

Jones decided to invest in a knitting machine to assist in her endeavors, but found the experience horrible. The machine was limited to basic stitches, involved a lot of preparation, and cost $800-$900. If there was a mistake, she would be forced to start over on the whole project. Once the pieces were knitted, Jones was left with her least favorite part of the process to do: sew up the seams. For Jones, nothing in the process was remotely the same as hand knitting.

“There’s no evidence of a human hand, which is what makes knitting so pretty. And it was just miserable,” she says. “So don’t ever try to make money knitting. It’s not
something you can make money doing and that’s one reason I love it. … If you said, ‘I'm going to give you $1,000 to go out and buy the most beautiful red sweater you can find or I’ll give you $200 for some really pretty yarn to make it yourself,’ I’d go for the $200 and make it myself! Because it’s all about the process and it’s not about the money. There’s something about the time it takes. You can’t really put a monetary value on that. Plus, it’s so much more fun to give someone something you made than to go buy something.”

After the disaster of the knitting machine, Jones didn’t knit for almost ten years. Then, knitting came back into her life as suddenly as it had left.

“I was driving along in Memphis and there was this shop opening up called Yarniverse. And I went ‘Oh my god! Knitting! I forgot all about it,” she says. “And I went in and I bought some yarn and that was that.”

Jones soon began visiting the shop regularly and soon had a position as a part time employee, helping people fix problems in their projects. Although she doesn’t still work at Yarniverse, she has maintained the connections she made there in the form of a knitting group.

“I worked there and Brenda [the owner] started closing the store on Mondays and [the customers] all went nuts. They said, ‘Who are we going to go to to help us?’ Because they would have a whole weekend-worth of mistakes and they would rely on me on Mondays to fix it. And so they sort of got a group together and said, ‘Would you come help us on Mondays?’ I said, ‘Sure’ and we just started moving around to different people’s houses and I just helped them.”

In Jones’ experience, knitters are usually more willing to try difficult things if they have a group there to help them.
“The thing about knitting is you can go in any direction you want,” Jones explains. “You can keep it simple or you can make it as complex as you want. And if there’s other people there doing the same thing you’re doing, you’ll try more difficult projects.”

Years later, the group is going strong. Jones says that the group provides support, inspiration, and courage to branch out into riskier waters.

“Women have been getting together and doing this for centuries, this needlework. And some people have told me it’s because you’re looking down and somehow it’s easier to talk one on one, but it’s a real interesting group. We’re all very diverse and we all met through knitting. We’re all different ages from different backgrounds. And there’s about ten of us. It’s a really good group. And we talk about everything, not just knitting.”

When it comes to needles, Jones’ personal and teaching preferences are somewhat different. She learned on straights and when circular needles came into vogue, it took her a little while to get used to them. Now, however, she is a loyal circular knitter. But when she is teaching, Jones always uses straights.

“I think it’s very important for people to learn that the needle is horizontal and it goes this way or this way, whereas when you’re teaching on a circular, it’s a difficult concept to get into their brains,” she says.

Jones has experienced a similar adjustment in the realm of small circular tools. Of the three most common ways of working small tubes in knitting (i.e. socks, sleeves, mittens, etc.), Jones prefers double points over two circulars or magic loop, saying they allow her to manage her tension better. Although she disliked double points for years, Jones didn’t quit.
“If you want to learn to make something bad enough, you do,” she says. “And the more you use it, the more you get used to it. It’s that 10,000 hours business. You just have to put in the time.”

It was the visualization of circular knitting that challenged Jones for so many years. As a visual learner, she had difficulty seeing how the stitches sat on the needle. The same principle applies to her knitting patterns.

“You’ve got to know the dimensions of what you’re doing and how the pieces are going to fit together like a puzzle,” she says. “You have to learn how to read your knitting. … I think that’s the most important thing for somebody to learn to do is be able to read their knitting. Because technically, you should be able to have a sweater and duplicate it. Your pattern is right there in front of you. It is the item.”

Jones prefers to get her knitting supplies from local yarn shops. Although she orders many other things in her life online, she prefers to be able to touch her knitting supplies before she buys them. As for big box retailers, she will not touch them.

“It just doesn’t feel good,” she says. “It won’t look good. It’s all about how [the yarn] feels. Think about it this way. What else can you buy in this world for $10 or $15 that gives you so much pleasure? You’ve got the texture and the color, plus probably 10 hours’ worth of activity in that one thing. You can’t find anything else that you can buy that satisfies so much.”

And what satisfies Jones currently is Shibui, a yarn company that specializes in yarns meant to be worked in combination with other yarns. Rowan, another large yarn company, used to be a favorite of hers.
“The Rowan people have merchandising down. You know, it’s all fantasy, these beautiful models walking through the grain field with their heathery type sweater on. But I like Shibui because it’s not so granola crunchy.”

Shibui certainly does offer a sleeker aesthetic, though Jones does go a little rogue at times and work with only one yarn at a time. The company name was inspired by the Japanese word meaning “elegant with a touch of bitterness.” The company is focused around “simplicity well executed, with loving attention to detail” and “beauty through intentional design.”

Rowan, on the other hand, focuses on a more natural look. Many of their patterns emphasize comfort and homey images. The company identifies themselves as “an ethically conscious brand, with an emphasis on creating luxury, premium yarns sourced from organic, natural fibres.”

Each is wonderful in their own right and Jones certainly retains a fondness for both. And while she loves the Rowan patterns, many of which are available online, she prefers to get her patterns in a more hand-to-hand method.

“I don’t much go to the internet for patterns,” she says. “I usually find them through other people. … I don’t use Ravelry as much as other people. I get overwhelmed
by how much there is there. But I [use] mainly [Knit1 Oxford] or what other people are doing.”

The connection to patterns others are working with is not limited to current knitters. Jones is fascinated by the legacy of her craft and of the romance it holds.

“I like looking at old patterns, things that were knitted a long time ago. Crazy gloves and socks that have like 17 stitches per inch. That fascinates me. … It’s amazing what women have done through the years. … And I guess a long time ago, there really wasn’t anything else to do. It’s like me stuck in the woods. When you’ve got a lot of time on your hands, you’ll do it. … It fascinates me that when you go through the stitch books and you look at all the thousands of different types of stitches and you think about all the people that created that. The cables and the twists and all that. It’s fascinating. I love that.”

What began as a way to pass time has become a lifestyle for Jones. Knitting is a necessity.

“It clears my head,” she says. “I have to sit down and knit. It helps me process my life. It’s very centering, … When you’re knitting it’s like you’re solving problems deep in your brain and you don’t know you are. You’re doing something else, but somewhere, things are getting resolved,” she says.

And for Jones, this processing leads to a more joyful life.

“I think knitters are happier than normal people for that very reason,” she says. “It’s so meditative and relaxing. And there’s a community around it. Either it’s your local knit store or a group you knit with. It’s a creative outlet, it’s the meditation, and it’s the product
you have at the end. … Knitting is so easy to pick up and put down and integrate into your life. I just think knitting is the best. I love it.”
For Rebekah Cummins, knitting is still a fairly recent venture. She began knitting a little over a year ago around Christmas.

“One of my good friends’ mom knits and … everything she made was super cool,” Cummins says. “She was making everybody socks. I said, ‘That’s so cool how you can make a pair of socks from a ball of string, or literally anything!’ I kind of had a little experience with crochet in high school, but I taught myself that and I made one thing and gave it up.”

Knitting, however, stuck. While Cummins began by teaching herself, she soon sought help.

“When I was first … teaching myself, I used YouTube and actually when I was doing the knit stitch, I was wrapping it an extra time and I didn’t know it until I went to Knit1 Oxford and they were like, ‘What are you doing?’ They said it was a common mistake when you teach yourself. … I went to Knit1 and they honed my skills,” she says.

Knit1 Oxford, the local yarn shop in Oxford, Mississippi is a haven for fiber artists in north Mississippi. The store sells a wide selection of artisan yarns, needles, patterns,
knitting notions and accessories, and finished artisan goods. The store also provides private lessons and group classes are offered. Cummins has taken advantage of those time and again. Not only did she seek out help when she was just starting out, she also turns to the teachers there when she is learning a new technique.

“I spent a lot of time there the first time I knitted in the round and did my first hat,” she says.

Knit1 is also her yarn supplier of choice. Cummins has bought everything she uses for knitting there, but that was not always the case.

“When I was crocheting a few years ago, I got the yarn at Walmart,” she explains.

“It wasn’t even comfortable. It was the scratchiest, cheapest yarn. Swatches were basically the only thing I did. It was just really cheap yarn. I never really got into nice yarn until Knit1. And I did go to Knit1 with my friend’s mom and looked at everything and was like, ‘These yarns are way better than what I crocheted with!’ So that piqued my interest a little, having an actual store.”

Cummins found a whole new world of yarn with the discovery of Knit1 Oxford. The main difference she noticed was the way the yarns felt.

“If I had ever made a scarf out of that [Walmart] yarn, I would never have worn it. It was not good yarn that you would want keeping you warm. It was just not good quality at all. [Walmart] was just the only place I knew of. I still don’t think we have any kind of store like that in my hometown. I was mostly just looking for colors when I would go there because that’s pretty much the only thing they had to offer!”

So what does Cummins prefer now?
“Misti Alpaca. It was so soft! … I made my sister a scarf and I made my friend one out of the same stuff. … It was so soft! When I made my sister’s scarf, I would stop and feel it for a little bit. I need to make myself one, I just haven’t yet!”

Alpaca, which is known for its softness, is not the only fiber with a reputation. Even among natural fibers, there is a wide range of qualities which distinguish them. Let’s begin with the natural fibers.

Wool is a catch-all term which can include any fiber plucked or sheared from a livestock animal, including sheep, llama, alpaca, and goat. However, most commonly, wool simply refers to the fiber gleaned from sheep. Even within this category, there are many different breeds of sheep which produce a plethora of different fibers; that being said, they do all have some basic similarities.

First among these is the scaly structure which wool possesses. Wool (and all other animal fibers excepting silk) are comprised of a series of scales, called epithelial scales. “These, when seen under a microscope, show that the scales overlap one another, lapping more or less according to the breed of sheep. In the same way that water flows over a tile roof without entering, so moisture is inclined to flow over the scales.”11 This, combined with the natural oil which sheep produce, lanolin, makes for a relatively waterproof fiber. But the wonders do not stop there. When it does get wet, wool can hold up to 60 percent of its body weight before it begins to feel damp and when it dries, wool emits heat. This astounding characteristic keeps wearers of wool warm and dry. Furthermore, wool has the ability to trap air inside the fleece, further serving to keep the wearer warm.

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This structure allows for felting, except in the case of superwash treatments. It also means wool is very warm, has a good bounce, is easy to block into different proportions, and can be a tiny bit scratchy.

Much of the horridly scratchy wool of 1970s sweaters has passed out of vogue. Instead, it has been replaced by wool which is wonderfully soft. Knitters will also talk about wool having a good “structure”, i.e. it isn’t likely to stretch, disintegrate, or flop about. Another surprising and wonderful quality of wool is that it is self-extinguishing – it will burn, but only for as long as the flame is held to it. As soon as the flame moves away, the wool stops burning.

Goats, surprisingly, produce some of the finest fibers. Cashmere, the famously exquisite material, comes from goats, along with mohair, pashmina, and pygora. Each of these fibers has vastly different qualities, even amongst themselves, depending on how they are processed. Generally, goat fiber has a reputation as having a “halo” of fuzz around the yarn and of being extremely soft and downy. It doesn’t have quite as much structure as wool and does not felt as easily, though it does have the same scales.

The camelids (llama, alpaca, and, camel) also have the same scaly fiber structure. However, these fibers are known for their drape and softness. Generally, these fibers feel a little denser than airy, bouncy wool, and their softness is a bit slicker than that of goat. Alpaca, like all wool, will felt, though not as readily as sheep’s wool, which can seem to start felting if a knitter looks at it too hard.

Finally in the animal fiber department, there is silk. This fiber is really a category of its own, as it is not an animal’s coat, like the other animal fibers. Rather, it is a liquid extruded by the silk worm which hardens into a fiber when it comes in contact with air. Silk
is notoriously slippery and dense. It is also very drapey and has a shine like no other. Silk is known for being incredibly strong and can in fact be spun down to the width of one single fiber. As it does not have the same scales as the other animal fibers, it is very slick, when treated in specific manners.

There are also a variety of plant fibers to take into account. Cotton and linen are primary among these, though of course there are smaller subsets.

Cotton has held its own as a worldwide industry for hundreds of years, but among knitters, it is merely another ball of yarn in the basket. Cotton tends to be excellent for light summer garments, as it is very cool. It does not felt, which makes it much easier to care for than wools. Because of the way cotton fibers dry out after they are harvested, cotton tends to have a tacky, almost sticky feel, though in this as in wool, the degree of that quality varies greatly. Cotton also has a tendency to “drape,” or stretch over time, as it does not have the crimp which wool provides to hold it aloft. This means that any garments made from it will invariably become longer and longer over time.

Linen is another excellent warm-weather fiber. It has all the lightness of cotton and all the sturdiness of wool, though in a slightly more inelastic package. Linen tends to feel somewhat rough, especially at first and as it has zero elasticity, it can be a different experience to knit with than the other fibers. However, with time, wash, and wear, linen softens and becomes a fabric with wonderful drape, structure, and durability.

Fiber choice can greatly impact projects; different fibers are suited to different things. In the manner of Cummins’ scarf, the softness of the alpaca was just the right thing for the job.
Scarves have been Cummins’ forte in the last year, along with hats. She mostly sticks
to simple projects for the time being, although she has experimented with some basic
colorwork. However, she doesn’t plan to stay with scarves for long.

“My next goal is to learn socks. I knitted everyone presents for Christmas. I didn’t
buy a gift. So after that, I took a break and I haven’t started back yet because I’ve been
super busy, but when I start back I want to learn socks. I’m really excited. I’ve heard they’re
addicting,” she says.

Cummins has already dipped a toe into the world of hand-knitted socks.

“The last thing I made was a hat and a pair of socks for my six-month-old cousin, so
I had to use double pointed needles the whole time,” she says. “It turned out really cute.
[Knitting with the double pointed needles] was weird at first, but I got used to it. I learned
to knit on circular [needles]. Until I moved onto double points, I had only ever knitted on
circular.”

Cummins has already begun to spread her craft, with mixed success.

“I tried teaching my mom and it was small yarn … so it didn’t work. She got very
frustrated. And my friend Lee was kind of rusty, so I freshened him up a little bit. Not
taught because he kind of knew the gist of it, so that worked out pretty well. It didn’t work
out with my mom,” she laughs. “The weird thing with Lee was that he had learned throwing
[style], so when I was trying to refresh him, I was like ‘That looks wrong!’ But it wasn’t
wrong, it was just different. And I did give him some wrong advice for a while there, but we
figured out what it was and fixed it.”
Cummins knits continental style herself, but she taught her mother throwing style. Many knitters can work in either style, but almost all have a preference of one over the other.

Much like many knitters, Cummins finds herself reaching for the needles in the evening when the television is on.

“I got to where I couldn’t watch TV unless I was knitting,” she says. “If I just sat there and watched TV, I felt like I should be doing something else. I would get knitting out and knit while I watched TV and I was like, ‘Okay, I can do this.’”

Many knitters find themselves unable to simply sit and watch television or perform any other low-energy activity without needles in their hands. Whether this restlessness is a product of being a knitter or knitting simply draws in people who need a little extra interest in their lives remains to be seen. Yet the fact remains that many knitters report feeling useless or as if they are wasting time when they sit around without working on a project.

For Cummins, this productivity is one of the benefits of knitting.

“It’s very relaxing,” she said. “And also, it’s really cool to be like ‘I made that.’ I love wearing the things I’ve made. Even when I first wore my scarf, people would say ‘Ooh, I love your scarf, where’d you get it?’ And I could say, ‘I made it!’ And I bet one person has said that, but just the fact that I’m wearing it and it’s keeping me warm and I think it looks cute. It’s just really cool to make something. You’re just tying knots and knots and knots, looping in and out and it makes something and I think it’s really cool.”

Cummins would also like for more people to see the benefits knitting can bring.
“I think more people should do it. I really do. My friends joke with me. They think it’s really awesome, but they joke with me that I’m a grandma because I just sit at home all day. But it’s relaxing and it’s really cool. You pride yourself on it. I’ve heard a lot of psychological [studies about] keeping your hands moving and those fine motor skills. I haven’t read a lot, but I’ve read a couple of articles and I just think it’s really beneficial all around.”
Denise Bell

Denise Bell of Lost City, Oklahoma has a lace collection that would boggle even the merchants of Burano, Venice. Her shawls, which tend to be worked in stunning Estonian and Shetland styles, carry an air of elegance which seems to speak to a lifetime of mastery. Yet Bell learned to knit a handful of years ago at age 46.

“My friend Danny is an engaging person and has many creative pursuits,” Bell says of her learning experience. “He learned the knit stitch from his sister over Thanksgiving weekend. When he showed me, I knew immediately that I wanted to knit. I had never been around anyone who knit. The following weekend we went to a small knit café in downtown Tulsa. Stephanie, the shop owner, taught me to cast on, how to knit and purl, and a great many other stitches over the following two years that her shop was open. She never said ‘that’s too hard for your skill level.’ There was no fear or dumbing down when Stephanie taught a class, or a technique. She made me want to learn and she made me feel confident.”

That confidence quickly bloomed into a lifestyle of art.
“I began knitting lace at the end of my first year of knitting. That same year I learned the rudimentary basics of colorwork, carrying two colors of yarn at once, for an argyle swatch.”

Colorwork is a knitting technique which is fairly self-explanatory. The knitter alternates between using two yarns of different colors to create patterns which may range in complexity from stripes to the elaborate Fair Isle sweaters. Much like texture patterns, nearly any pattern which may be created on a grid is possible to do in colorwork. There are two primary methods by which one may create colorwork: stranding and intarsia. Stranding is a method in which the color not currently being knitted with is carried across the back of the work, forming long strands of unknitted yarn. This is typically used for stitch patterns which have a relatively high color change rate; for instance, if one is switching colors every three stitches, stranding is probably the best option. Intarsia, generally used for colorwork where color is worked in large blocks, such as in argyle patterns, is a method by which each individual block of color has its own ball of yarn. Typically, rather than working with up to 12 full size balls of yarn, the knitter will choose to employ bobbins, or small bundles of yarn. This technique results in a clean, flat appearance on the wrong side, as opposed to the thicker, loopy look of stranding.

Lace is a technique fairly different from any of the others mentioned thus far. It utilizes a stitch called a yarn over, which forms small holes in the work. These may be used to create all manner of openwork patterns, from relatively dense fabrics embellished with decorative holes to shawls which may only be described as “cobweb.” As yarn overs result in an added stitch, they are frequently paired with decreases, which may be used to consolidate two or more stitches together into one stitch. In the case of lace, this keeps the
stitch count constant; the yarn over adds a stitch, the decrease takes away a stitch. However, decreases may be used to shape knitting as well, forming the crowns of hats, the curve of mittens, and the toes of socks. Their counterpart, of course, is increases, of which yarn overs are one type. They add a stitch to the work and can be used to expand blankets and shawls, shape thumb gussets on mittens and gloves, and shape shoulders of top-down sweaters.

Now Bell is the owner of a company called Lost City Knits, a small business based out of her Oklahoma farmhouse which offers hand-dyed yarns and patterns she designs.

Bell specializes in lace shawls, particularly those styles which originate in Estonia and the Shetland Islands. Using her yarns, Bell creates stunning lace shawls which can stretch up to six feet or more in diameter. The pieces are elaborate to say the least, but Bell enjoys the challenge.

“Both lace and colorwork, actually all knitting, uses a variety of skills. Knitting combines math, geometry, texture, color and physical movement to create something individual. It engages the mind on so many levels!” Bell says.

However, she does believe these techniques are accessible to anyone. Asked what her biggest struggle with lace and colorwork is, Bell replied, “The attitude from other people that both … are ‘hard.’”
Many of the lace and colorwork techniques which Bell works with have developed within a relatively small geographic area: the Shetland Islands.

The Shetland Islands in the North Sea have been a shockingly prolific site of knitting history for such a small place. This tiny chain of islands situated between England and Norway have turned out at least two distinct styles of knitting which are renowned for their complexity. It may seem surprising that such a small place would be the center of so much knitting history, but these islands are the eye of the perfect storm which leads to knitting innovation. First, they are cold. Their location in the North Sea means the average temperature for the Islands is in the 40s Fahrenheit with an average 80 percent cloud cover. This kind of weather demands protection against the elements. Then, there is the consideration of the primary economic industry – fishing. The Islands’ geographic properties best suit it to a fishing culture, meaning that men in particular were exposed to the harsh weather even more than on the islands. This also meant that there was a lot of rope lying around and a lot of time with nothing to do but wait. Given the combination of cold, string, and boredom, it makes sense that advanced knitting techniques would evolve. Then, of course, there is the factor of sheep.

Sheep were native on the Islands and over time, a specific breed of sheep, Shetland sheep, were domesticated from two other breeds known as Villsau and Soay. The Shetland sheep was a sort of middle ground of the other two breeds and its fleece contains both fine and coarse fibers. This combination of climate, industry, and native fauna have led to some of the most well-known knitting innovations in existence today.

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The first of these is Shetland lace knitting. While it is hard to say exactly when this knitting technique was developed due to the challenges of knitting preservation, as discussed above, the oldest surviving fine lace piece dates to 1837. These large lace shawls are made with very thin thread that can pass through a wedding ring. They are made from finely spun wool and are comprised of astonishingly intricate stitch patterns formed by placing a series of strategic holes and matching decreases. This creates a fine, openwork piece which is then stretched on a wooden frame in a process called “blocking” or “dressing.” These frames can be as large as eight feet. Professional dressers would take on the task of whitening and dressing the shawls, which were then bartered or sold for other goods or services. In some cases, women were able to sell their shawls to merchants or customers directly for cash. Lace knitting became a massive cottage industry, aimed primarily at royalty and nobility. While the target audience for these shawls has changed, the beauty of the shawls has not and they are still produced in the Shetland Islands today.¹⁴

The other major development to come off of the Shetland Islands is Fair Isle knitting. This style is more familiar to American culture than one might at first realize; nearly all of the brightly colored “ugly Christmas sweaters” which have so recently come in vogue can trace their origins back to Fair Isle knitting. Fair Isle is brightly colored patterned knitting created in the round (in other words, knitted around and around in a continuous loop, as opposed to back and forth on a flat piece of fabric) with repeating patterns. These patterns tend to be radially symmetrical, meaning they could be worked horizontally as easily as they could be worked vertically. They tend to be worked over an odd number of rows

with the central row being brightly colored, and the motifs used tend to be contained within closed spaces, as opposed to Norwegian color knitting, which tends to be more open.

As is the case with most of these techniques, women were the ones to create them and there is a theory that it was a woman who first developed the technique of Fair Isle knitting. While there is a romantic story of a Spanish shipwreck just off the islands bringing them the beautiful patterns which would become their legacy, the more likely scenario is quite pedestrian. Historians speculate that a man brought home a woven scarf for his wife and she tried (with great success) to replicate the colors and patterns of the scarf in knitting. The first recorded instance of Fair Isle knitting occurs in 1856. Over 150 years later, it is still widely practiced, both on and off of the Shetland Islands.15

Although Bell loves the elegance of the Shetland and Estonian shawls, she does not limit her knitting endeavors. Sweaters are another favorite of hers and she has a secret to how she creates them.

“I am a huge fan of knitting sweaters in the round using the Elizabeth Zimmermann Percentage System. I can knit [cardigans, pullovers, ganseys, raglans, and more] using this simple mathematical formula. If I want a cardigan, I steek it. If I want a pullover, I don’t.”

Zimmermann was a highly prolific and influential knitting writer who lived and wrote in the 1960s and afterwards. She revolutionized hand knitting, advocating methods which made knitting easier or more efficient. Among these was her “Percentage System,” which allowed the knitter to use proportion standards for sweaters to easily design or customize their work. A part of this technique was steeking.

Steeking is a particularly nerve-wracking technique by which a knitter may create armholes, open fronts, or any other sort of opening in knitting without having to knit them in or interrupt their pattern. For example, in the case of Bell’s steeked cardigan. Rather than knitting two front pieces (left and right) and a back and sewing them together, the knitter simply knits a tube all the way around, possibly leaving holes for the armholes depending on if those are steeked too. Once the pullover is completed, the knitter determines where she wants her cardigan to open, sews a firm line down either side of the will-be opening, takes a nice sharp pair of scissors, and slices the knitting straight up the middle. Any knitter reading this may have just clutched her heart in fear. The idea of taking scissors to a piece which she has put so much time into is rather horrifying. However, it is a quick, simple way to create openings in knitted pieces and while it is not for the faint of heart, it is a wonderfully efficient way to create those openings.

For Bell, knitting is an activity to be shared. Both in her business and in her personal life, Bell finds ways to engage with other knitters around her.

“I knit both in public and alone,” Bell says. “In public I choose more simple projects so interruptions as I engage in conversations, eat or drink do not disrupt my knitting … [I knit] anywhere – but I do require decent lighting … My knitting group meets in bars and pubs. Any project that requires more concentration is kept for private knitting time or for travel knitting.”

In her business, Bell loves to share her craft.

“Years ago, at small fiber and art festivals I would show customers buying my hand-dyed yarns how to execute a specific technique or stitch. This was easy enough since I always had a project in my hands. That’s teaching on the fly and it felt great. I learned how
to phrase things that would allow the student to grasp the motion I wanted them to execute, and to go slow and not rush. Then I was asked to teach in a classroom at a small event. The experience went well and I began to apply to teach at almost any festival we attended,” she says.

When it comes to learning new techniques herself, Bell prefers a traditional approach – books.

“‘I’m a big fan of books,” she says, “and my knitting library is a decent size. I’m always adding new books. Among the most treasured are books by Elizabeth Zimmerman and the stitch dictionaries by Barbara G. Walker. If you have these two authors in your collection – the rest is just gravy.’”

Bell also believes in “swatching” as a method to learn new techniques. Swatching is the act of creating a small piece of knitted fabric, typically four or five inches square, in which the technique or stitch being learned is tested and repeated. This allows the knitter the freedom to practice and perfect the stitch without the pressure and additional complications of a full project to contend with.

Swatching is also a common way to determine gauge, or a knitter’s particular tension. As every knitter creates the stitches slightly differently, every knitter’s fabric is going to be different, either tighter or looser. A gauge swatch allows the knitter to, through adjustment of needle diameter, or size, match the approximate size of their stitches to that of a pattern designer’s, thus ensuring that garments will fit properly. Imagine, for example, that a knitter who formed her stitches tightly wrote a pattern in which a sweater sleeve contained 46 stitches worked on size 10 needles. For this knitter, those 46 stitches might equal eight inches. However, when a looser knitter worked 46 stitches on those size 10 needles, he
might get a sleeve which was 10 inches in diameter. A gauge swatch would allow him to figure out that his knitting was looser and required a size 8 needle to achieve the same results before he ever created the unfortunate sleeve.

Although Bell’s knowledge of knitting techniques is wide-ranging, she does have a few preferences. While she can knit both continental and English styles, she prefers English, or throwing, style.

“It gives me a more even gauge and solid fabric and is easier on my hands,” Bell explains. As far as needles, she is still working to improve her range of knowledge.

“I knit socks on double pointed needles and almost everything else on circulars. Additionally, I own a Shetland knitting belt and would like to improve my skills with it. Neither Magic Loop or two circulars appeal to me, although I have tried both. So when knitting small projects, I use either DPNs or small circulars.”

Knitting is done on two needles and is worked back and forth, or knitted flat, or in a spiral, or knitted in the round. There are also a variety of options for needles. The most basic variety, straight needles, are what one might think of when imagining the classic knitting needle. They are effectively two long sticks with a knob or disk at the end to prevent the stitches sliding off. These are useful for scarves, shawls, sweaters, and other items which may be worked flat and assembled later.
However, a knitter may also choose to work with circular needles. These are structured such that tips, similar to those of straight needles, are attached to a flexible cable which is usually made of plastic, thus allowing the knitter to bend her work in order to work in the round. This technique is useful for sweaters which are not worked in pieces, socks, hats, cowls, and many other items. It is in fact possible to knit anything on circular needles, flat or round, as one has the option of simply turning the work and beginning on the other side rather than continuing in the round. However, this is not the only option for working in the round.

A knitter may also choose to use double pointed needles. These needles look much like short straight needles, except that instead of a knob at one end, both ends are pointed. They usually come in sets of either four or five and by using all but one of the needles to form a triangle or a square, they allow the knitter to work in the round. The last needle is held aside and acts as the second needle as the knitter works the stitches from each double pointed needle in sequence. For example, if a knitter had a set of four double pointed needles, she might divide a sock out onto three of them, needles A, B, and C. The knitter would knit the stitches from needle A onto her free needle, which would then become needle A. The now-free needle would be used to work the stitches from needle B, and so on and so forth. There are also a number of methods which utilize circular needles to work small items in the round. While it is not necessary to go into detail here about the
particulars of these techniques, it should be noted that the foremost among these techniques are called magic loop and two circulars.

Bell prefers to go back to the source for her fiber – no surprise given her status as a fiber artist.

“My preference leans toward natural fibers – wool and silk primarily. I rarely use superwash wool (wool that has gone through extra chemical processing to remove the scales of the natural fiber so it won’t felt or shrink) other than for socks. Both lace and fingering weight yarns are my go-to weight of yarns. I can create anything I want with those. Thicker yarns make my hands ache.”

Bell prefers to locally source her yarn as much as possible. With a career which takes her to fiber festivals and yarn shops around the country, Bell is in a good position to interact with a wide variety of artisan yarns.

“I shop online, at festivals and at shops,” she says. “I love a warm, inviting yarn shop, and I like to purchase fiber for spinning yarn direct from a farmer or shepherd.

“I try to never shop big box retailers for any knitting supplies,” Bell continues. “I do, however, enjoy stopping at LYSs when I travel. I’ve had great experiences by stopping at a yarn shop that we spotted as we drive through a small town.”

But at the end of the day, the wonder of knitting comes back to the creativity for Bell.

“I’ve done some type of hand sewing since the age of six and I can’t imagine a life where I didn’t create with my hands,” Bell says. “Knitting is a portable method that allows me to be creative wherever I go. Knitting is rhythmic and soothing in a most basic Zen
manner. I enjoy being able to wear finished garments whether they are simple socks, a silk shawl, or a warm sweater. They provide a sense of pride and comfort as well.

“The times in my life that I have dreamed of flying, I was wearing a hand-knit silk shawl of my own design. Therapists write that dreams of flying have to do with freedom and confidence,” Bell says. “Knitting provides those things for me.”
Conclusion

This thesis began as a record of the history of knitting. It soon became apparent that this was a more daunting task than it originally appeared. Knitting history is woefully unrecorded and even the best scholars can only speculate about the origins. There is not a record of the first knitted piece to contain a yarn over, nor is there a biography of the woman or man who invented the double pointed needle. Whereas so many other arts were so carefully recorded, knitting was left rather by the wayside and over time, its genesis was lost.

What developed instead was a plan to tell the history of knitting through the stories of modern knitters. This thesis would demonstrate how it is a uniquely living art and would use the interviews as a means to approach the history that could be found of this craft. As it turned out, that plan was more apt than it at first seemed. This is what this thesis has uncovered:

Whether it is similar types of people who come to knitting or knitting simply engenders similar reactions in its practitioners, most knitters have some fundamentally similar traits. Foremost among these is the inability to sit still. Everyone interviewed said that they knit while the television is on, while they are commuting, or at other times of relative inactivity in their lives. Almost all said directly that they cannot stand being idle. Knitters, whether because of inherent personality characteristics or because they cannot stand the idea of wasting potential knitting time, cannot bear time unoccupied.
Knitters also have a strong sense of community. Something about the craft of working with yarn ties together those who do so. Many of the women interviewed expressed the wonderful sense of connection they felt with other knitters and an interesting sort of ability to identify fellow practitioners. It is certain that were a knitter to find herself at a fiber festival or other knitting convention in need of a double pointed needle or a stitch marker, she would need only to ask the room at large for one and would immediately find herself with an abundance. Knitters share without reserve (the exception, of course, being any particularly luscious yarn). Perhaps it stems in the fact that the nature of the craft results in giving its products away. Whatever the cause, knitters are unfailingly generous and the sense of companionship is astounding.

For most, the saying “once a knitter, always a knitter” holds true. A fair number of the women interviewed said they got away from knitting for a long time at certain points in their lives. But all of them found their way back to it in one way or another. Knitting seems to take a certain hold over those who knit and, like riding a bike, it is never really forgotten.

Knitting grants to those who do it an incredible satisfaction of creative urges. Nearly everyone interviewed, when asked why they knit, said one of two things: it is relaxing and it is incredibly creative. It is certainly true that few things are as directly creative, in the archaic sense of the word, as knitting is. Beginning with a ball of string and ending with a garment is a sort of magic and is quite nearly creating something out of nothing. As for the second reason, knitting is quite soothing. In fact, a number of health professionals cite knitting as having the same sorts of health benefits as yoga or meditation. The repetition of the stitches serves to keep the brain and muscles active, as well as allowing the knitter to enter a sort of meditative state.
In a truly rare way, knitting has remained singularly archaic in the ways it is passed on to a new generation. All of the interview subjects were, by one means or another, taught to knit by a person sitting down, putting needles into their hands, and showing them how to form the stitches. In a world of increasingly digital education, knitting has remained an oral tradition.

Yet in spite of all their similarities, this thesis also uncovered something rather wonderful about knitters: no two are the same. Selecting interview subjects became rather a matter of limiting to a reasonable number, as opposed to searching for interesting perspectives. Every knitter interviewed had a different perspective worth recording and it quickly became a matter of having to refrain from allowing the numbers to get wildly out of hand. Essentially, there is not a boring knitter. Every one has a wonderfully different story to tell.

This thesis opened with the statement that the history of knitting is very elusive. While it is true that the lives of knitters hundreds or thousands of years ago remain shrouded in mystery, the history of knitting is easily seen. In the stories of these nine women, and in the many millions of stories like theirs, the story of knitting is preserved. The stitches and the techniques which knitters generations ago developed are still alive today, engaged with on a level which few artistic media can rival. Far from being closed off in sterile museums, knitting is in warm hands, accessible to anyone with two sticks and a bit of string. Cables and toe up socks and one row buttonholes and top down sweaters are kept alive each day on the needles of millions of knitters around the globe. Each comes to knitting for different reasons, in different ways, and at different times, but it is unquestionable that knitters share a common heart. That same heart has been present “since the beginning of sheep.” The
memory in the fingers is not lost; rather, it is expressed again and again with every knitter who takes up her needles and begins.
Appendix A

**Bind off** – a method by which a knitter removes her work from the needles and creates a finished edge; typically involves knitting two stitches, then passing one over the other. The next stitch is knitted, the previous stitch passed over, and the process repeated until all stitches have been bound off.

**Cables** – a stitch technique which involves the crossing over of two or more stitches such that they are knitted out of order and form a twist in the fabric. These may be used to create motifs such as ropes, braids, waves, lattices, and more. This technique results in a double-thickness fabric.

**Cast on** – the method by which a knitter places stitches on her needles to begin her work. There are a variety of techniques by which a knitter might cast on, which include long tail, knitted, cable, provisional, and more.

**Circular needles** – a variety of knitting needle which consists of two very short knitting needles joined together by a cord which is typically made out of plastic, thus forming a flexible needle. This allows knitters to work projects in the round without having to use double pointed needles.

*Photo credit: Sinclair Rishel*
**Colorwork** – a stitch technique in which a knitter works two or more colors in the same piece to create decorative patterns and motifs. This may range in complexity from simple stripes to the complex motifs of the Fair Isle sweaters.

**Continental knitting** – a technique for forming stitches in which the knitter holds the yarn in her left hand and uses the tip of her right needle to “grab” the working yarn and pull it through the loop, forming the next stitch. Also called “picking”.

**Decrease** – a technique by which a knitter removes a stitch from her work by consolidating it with another stitch. This includes knit two together (k2tog), slip slip knit (ssk), slip one knit one pass slipped stitch over (s1k1psso), and more.

**Double pointed needles (DPN)** – a variety of knitting needle which consists of four or more short knitting needles which have points at either end. These are used to knit in the round and are useful as they allow the knitter to work a circle of any circumference smaller than that of the circle formed by the needles. The needles are arranged such that they form a triangle or square, depending on the number of needles in the set, and leaving one needle out. The last needle acts as the second needle as the knitter works the stitches from each double pointed needle in sequence. For example, if a knitter had a set of four double pointed needles, she might divide a sock out onto three of them, needles A, B, and C. The knitter would knit the stitches from needle A onto her free needle, which would then become needle A. The now-free needle would be used to work the stitches from needle B, and so forth.
**English knitting** – a technique for forming stitches in which the knitter holds the yarn in her right hand and wraps the yarn around her needle with that hand. Also called “throwing”.

**Flat** – a method by which a knitter produces flat pieces, such as scarves, etc. At the end of the row, the knitter turns her needle, places it in her other hand, and begins anew, thus working back and forth on the fabric.

**Garter stitch** – one of two basic knitting stitch patterns in which the knitter alternates working the knit stitch on the right side and on the wrong side. For pieces which are worked flat, this means the knitter needs only to knit every row. For pieces which are worked in the round, or in a circular fashion such that the knitter is always knitting on the right side, it is necessary to alternate knit and purl rows such that the knit rows continue to alternate being on the right and wrong sides.

**Gauge** – a swatch which a knitter creates to determine if she has the same number of stitches and rows per inch as a pattern designer. This allows her to ensure that garments will fit. If her gauge swatch is too small, the knitter must use a larger needle size and thus increase the size of each stitch. If her gauge swatch is too large, the knitter must use a smaller needle. This can also refer simply to the number of stitches and rows per inch in a knitter’s work. I.e. “6 sts/4 rows per inch”

**Hank** – a long loop of yarn which may be twisted into a skein or wound into a ball.
**In the round** – a method by which a knitter produces circular pieces, such as socks, hats, sleeves, etc. At the end of the row, the knitter does not turn her work, but instead continues on to the next stitch, thus forming a loop. The knitter only ever works on the right side of the fabric in this method. This may only be worked on circular or double pointed needles.

**Increase** – a technique by which a knitter may add one or more stitches to her work. This includes lifted increases, knit through the front and back loop (ktfbl), and yarn overs.

**Knitting** – a manner of fabric production which uses two needles and features yarn being looped through itself to form complex shapes and patterns; also one of two stitches used to form all of knitting. This is the exact opposite of the purl stitch. The knitter inserts her needle into one leg of the stitch, from front to back such that her needles are crossed, wraps her yarn around the back needle, and pulls the loop back through her stitch, thus forming the next stitch. The knit stitch is typically shown on the right side of the fabric and appears as a small “v”.

**Knitting pattern** – the template or instructions which a knitter follows to allow her to create the same object as another knitter.

**Lace** – a stitch technique which utilizes a stitch called a yarn over, forming small holes in the work. These may be used to create all manner of openwork patterns, from relatively dense fabrics embellished with decorative holes to shawls which may only be described as “cobweb”. As yarn overs result in an added stitch, they are frequently paired with decreases, which may be used to consolidate two or more stitches together into one stitch. In the case
of lace, this keeps the stitch count constant; the yarn over adds a stitch, the decrease takes away a stitch.

**LYS** – a common knitting community acronym which stands for “local yarn shop”, typically a small, privately-owned shop which specializes in artisan yarns and offers pattern support, lessons, community, and tools for knitters and other fiber artists.

**Magic loop** – a method by which a knitter may knit a tube of any size on a single, long circular needle. The needle is arranged such that there is a loop of cable at either end of the work and the knitting is gathered in the middle, with half of it being on the needles, and the other half on the cable.

**Purling** – one of two stitches used to form all of knitting. This is the exact opposite of the knit stitch. The knitter inserts her needle into one leg of the stitch, from back to front such that her needles are crossed, wraps her yarn around the front needle, and pulls the loop back through her stitch, thus forming the purl stitch. The purl stitch is typically shown on the wrong side of the fabric and appears as a small horizontal line.

**Skein** – a hank which has been twisted in on itself such that it forms a tight braid, allowing the knitter to keep her yarn portable and untangled.

**Stitch pattern** – a combination of knits, purls, increases, decreases, cables, and more which forms a certain pattern or motif in the work.
**Stockinette stitch** – one of two basic knitting stitch patterns in which the knitter always works the knit stitch on the right side and the purl stitch on the wrong side. If the piece is worked flat, the knitter must alternate knit and purl rows such that each stitch stays on its respective side. If the piece is worked in the round, the knitter must only knit, as the right side is always worked when knitting in the round.

**Straight needles** – a variety of knitting needle which is the simplest and most well-known. This consists of two long needles of varying diameters with a point at one end and a disk or knob at the other end to prevent stitches sliding off the end. These are used only to knit flat pieces.

**Swatch** – a small piece of knitting done before beginning a project which allows the knitter to align her particular knitting style and tension with that of the designer. It is typically a small, square piece, frequently 4” across, which is worked in the stitch pattern which will be used in the piece she is making. For example, some people knit very loosely and some people knit very tightly. A designer may cast on 44 stitches on size US 5 needles in ribbing to achieve a mitten cuff which is 8” around. However, another knitter may cast on 44 stitches on size 5 needles in ribbing only to discover she has a cuff which is 10” around.

Working a swatch allows the knitter to determine if her knitting tension is the same as that of the designer and adjust her needle size accordingly (if the swatch is too large, she uses smaller needles, and vice versa) before ever beginning the project. Swatching also allows knitters to learn new techniques or figure out stitch patterns outside of the complications which a pattern presents.
**Texture patterns** – a stitch technique which utilizes various combinations of knit stitches and purl stitches to form textures or motifs in the work. Among these is ribbing, an alternation of one or more knits and purls to form vertical ridges in the fabric. This is commonly found on the sleeves and hems of sweaters and the edges of hats.

**Two circulars** – a method of circular knitting which allows the knitter to create tubes of any size by pairing two circular needles together. One half of the stitches are placed on one needle, the other half on the other, and the needles are arranged such that they are parallel to each other. The knitter works the stitches on one needle regularly and then turns her work and works the next half of the row the same way. In this way, she works in a circle and may create any circumference piece without having to worry about the constraints of needle length.

**Weight** – in knitting, refers to the diameter of yarn being used. There are seven standard yarn weights, listed here from thinnest to thickest: lace, fingering, sport, DK (double knitting), worsted, aran, and bulky. Please note that yarn weights may be called by different names; i.e., fingering as fine, worsted as medium, etc, but that the ones listed above are the most commonly used.
Appendix B

The history of knitting is an immense and complex one. For as long as there have been sheep, people have been using wool to create fabric and although true knitting emerged somewhat later in the history than other techniques, it still stretches back hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

One of the early predecessors of knitting was a technique known as nalbinding, a method of making loops with short lengths of yarn and a single eyed needle. This was used to decorate hems of clothing from China to Peru.\(^{16}\) It differs from knitting in that it does not use one continuous ball of yarn, but rather a series of these relatively short strands. However, the fact remains that no one knows when, where, or how true open loop knitting began.

Unfortunately, the origins of knitting are not the only pieces of history which are lost. Lack of recording and decay of artifacts has left several gaps in history which may only be filled with speculation and educated guesses. However, historians continue to uncover hints which someday may help us flesh out this rich history. Very recently, in fact, a dig site in South America uncovered a large repository of potentially knitted artifacts.\(^{17}\) These will take years to analyze, but one may hope that in time, these will provide a little more insight into the story of knitting.

Origins or no, however, there is an excellent connection to knitting history available today. In a way, knitting history is the same story over and over again. Men and women create the same patterns, pieces, and stitches today as the knitters of hundreds of years ago did. Although we may not examine the work of those ancient knitters and we may not speak to them, we can see their work echoed in the work of the millions of knitters alive today.

The interviews in this thesis are an effort to record that story and seek that history where it lives today.

The traditions of knitting live on in the men and women who continue this wonderful craft and in the stories which this thesis records.
Bibliography


