

Our cabin here at Coe Creek looks more like a workshop than a dwelling these days. Two spinning wheels stand under the east windows. The loom is crowded in between a storage chest and the old sideboard on the west wall. The electric carding machine, standing on a card table, takes its space in front of the west window. And, next to the spinning wheels is a chair where I sit to complete the first couple of steps from washed wool to eventual rug.

I like sitting there by those windows. In a way, they comprise my “window on the world.” This time of year there isn’t much to see except the frozen white landscape and the north-south road about 200 meters away. Occasionally, a car might drive up that road.

So, it is a perfect place to work. I am not distracted by water birds, as I might be during the spring of the year, and the milk cows are in the barn, so I need not avoid my work by admiring Effie, Halvan, or Lily.

I have a big bag of washed wool next to my chair. On the other side is a large cardboard box. I didn’t know what I was going to use to store my “rough-carded” wool between my workplace and the next step at the carding machine. But yesterday, as I was getting ready to start picking apart the shiny curls of white wool, the dogs alerted me to the presence of a vehicle. We seldom have cars driving up to the cabin, and now during the Covid years, it is even more rarely the case. So, Blue and Kate become quite excited—and not really very happy—when a strange vehicle arrives.

This time it was a FedEx van. We have told delivery people that they can leave packages for us in the workshop closer to the road, but this was a heavy box, so the young woman driving the van was nice enough to bring it up anyway. I carried my fifty pounds of flour from the gate to the cabin, and in the process, gained a very large carton. That was immediately repurposed for my wool work.

I pull out bunches of the white wool, a handful at a time. I pull the clean wool apart and briefly comb it with my hand wool cards. Then, it goes into the big box. Periodically, I spritz the contents lightly with a mixture of fabric softener and water. This helps a great deal in reducing static that makes it hard to control the wool as I work.

When my box is full, I carry it—no longer a heavy load—to the other side of the cabin where the carding machine is waiting.

I turn on the machine and begin feeding the fluffy wool very slowly into the carding apparatus. Two wheels covered with “carding cloth” pull the wool into connection. with a large wheel that produces the smooth wool batt. “Carding cloth” is not really fabric; I don’t know what is underlying it, but it is most like a metal-toothed dog grooming tool. The turning wheels smooth the wool into a flat batt that can be spun into yarn or used for other purposes.

When I deem that there is enough wool on the big wheel for a good batt for my particular task, I stop the machine, and roll the batt gently from the teeth of the carding cloth. That gives me a fluffy, quite beautiful roll of wool.

When the batts have piled up sufficiently—or when I am tired of carding and want to work at another process—I stop the carding machine and take my pile of batts to the spinning wheel.

I usually spin ordinary yarn on the regular spinning wheel. But, now, I am trying to make a supply of heavy rug yarn for some eventual rug weaving. So, I use the big spinning wheel called The Country Spinner. Both of my spinning wheels were made by the Ashford Company and come from New Zealand.

The Country Spinner has a huge bobbin that will hold over a pound of yarn. And the orifice through which wool must pass on its way from fleece to yarn is very large. So, it doesn't take long to make a heavy, barely spun yarn from a wool batt.

Hand work is a process that can't be rushed. I don't have a timetable for finishing any one piece of the job. And, in many ways, it isn't even the result that is most valuable. It is the process itself—that slower pace of hand work that gets a job done at a reasonable speed also seems to be good for the person who is occupied with the task.

So, for the present, the cabin is littered with wool fuzz. The vacuum cleaner takes care of that when I finish for the day, but those fluffy bits of fleece will dominate my life for a few weeks this winter.