

The loom is all set up, the 432 threads are inserted in the little openings in the heddles, poked through the reed in the proper places, and tied up into a smooth, flat mat. It is ready to use. The project underway is weaving kitchen towels, what nearly everyone referred to as “dish towels” until most households equipped themselves with dishwashers a generation ago. We do not have a dishwashing machine here in our cabin. I have never minded washing dishes. Having my hands in warm water, thinking whatever thoughts seem appropriate at the time—I can conceive of far worse tasks. Runo does not mind dishwashing, either, and we often vie for the job. So, weaving dish towels seems like a useful activity.

For sure, it is an interesting job and one that leads to all kinds of side benefits. In the beginning, whatever the weaving project, one has the pleasure of choosing what to weave, what kind of materials to use, which colors of thread to select, and what kind of pattern will be both appropriate and interesting.

Then, too, there is the mental exercises that go along with warping the loom. A little math is always involved as well as learning to balance the way a pattern will look on the finished material.

Weaving also makes me think about the past—not an unusual activity for a person whose whole education was centered around the study of history. It often brings to mind the extreme wastefulness and extravagance of our current lifestyle. If we had to spin, weave, and sew all the clothes we wear, I am quite sure we would have less extensive wardrobes and probably be more careful of what we have. Instead of throwing away a garment that was badly worn, we would probably recycle it into something else. People have been doing this for generations: the small pieces of leftover fabric from sewing clothes made quilts to keep the family warm; a worn out dress might make a child’s skirt; shirtsleeves could be shortened for summer wear; rugs could be woven of strips of all kinds of clothing; and dish rags were easy to come by as pieces of worn fabric became smaller. Flour was often sold in cloth bags, and when the bag was empty, the sacks became dresses, aprons, and dish towels.

Dish towels, in particular, were nearly always white cotton flour sacks. They are handy and useful, but they don’t stay dry very long! A big family with lots of dishes needed a good supply of dish towels to be sure of having some dry ones when the dish drying task was at hand. I read an account of North Dakota homesteading in which the a crew was spending days threshing wheat. The girls in the family were drying dishes after the meal, and, running out of dry dish towels since there had been such a gang to feed at each meal, their mother sent them out on the porch to wave the dish towels in the breeze to dry them.

I have a pretty good supply of handwoven dish towels, but they wear out, and a new batch always comes to good use. As long as one is going to make one’s own dish towels, choice of threads is one of the enjoyable part of the process. The warp that is on the loom now is blue and white. And, because I can use weft—the threads that cross the warp to make cloth—of any color, I can make any combination. This warp will probably make about twenty dish towels, and there may not be two that are exactly alike. That is part of the fun of making and using them.

Even if “dish towels” are a thing of the past for many people, “kitchen towels” are not. They have many uses beyond drying crockery and cutlery, and they still make good gifts. So, I need to get busy at the loom.