Featured: Kentucky Cloth Project

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Alpaca Fiber

Growing a domestic market

Kentucky Cloth Project

Hits the Trifecta of Textile Production

By Meyla Bianco Johnston

The Lexington, Kentucky *Herald-Leader*'s Janet Patton reported in March that a project called "Kentucky Cloth" is in the works. Designed by Rebecca Burgess' Fibershed in California, the project will bring three natural fiber materials together to create the cloth: wool, hemp and alpaca.

The Fibershed designed project will use wool from sheep from Kathy Meyer's Final Frontier Farm in Bourbon County. Hemp will be supplied by Mike Lewis' Healing Ground Farm in Mount Vernon. Suri alpaca from Alvina Maynard's River Hill Suri Ranch in Richmond will complete the triad of materials.

Sheep farmer Kathy Meyer looks forward to "providing another market for specifically Kentucky fiber by making a sustainable, higher return value-added product that could raise income for KY farmers." She enjoys the education she is getting about the other fibers and the other producers. "Just because we raise sheep and wool does not mean I knew the first thing about alpaca and hemp growers," she says. "Hopefully they are [also] learning about us."

The idea is to create "cachet" or prestige for the cloth, Burgess of Fibershed explains. "Kentucky was the preeminent state for growing hemp, its annual rainfall, rolling fertile hills and valleys and the agricultural wisdom passed down generation to generation creates prime condition for a hemp resurgence, and that's part of the cachet . . . there's a story to tell that is compelling in its environmental and cultural richness."

The results created by Final Frontier Farm, Healing Ground Farm and River Hill Suri Ranch will be tested by textile experts at Gaston College in Dallas, North Carolina to see which blends of each of the materials the fiber growers make is most effective for various applications. Designed to be marketed as an "authentic" product, the plan is to market Kentucky Cloth to textile designers.

Burgess hopes that the project will "bring people back to work for the regeneration of the land and soil, and that people who grow, wear, build, and create with Kentucky hemp (you can do all that with one crop), are able to bring their harvest together with the pastoralists who raise sheep, alpaca, and other fiber animals— it will be a weaving of agricultural practice . . . and the literal weaving of Kentucky cloth will create meaningful connections between wearer and grower that will bring forth a new place-based culture for our modern era."

Alvina Maynard of River Hill Ranch Suri Alpacas explains how she got involved. "As a Special Agent by trade, my job mainly consisted of forming relationships with folks from all walks of life to create an information network. This skill has aided me in my farm business by being able to readily reach out to related organizations and offer ways we can be mutually supportive. However, with how well all the players of The Kentucky Cloth Project have come together, I give more credit to fate and Rebecca [Burgess, Founder and Director of Fibershed]."

"Commissioner Comer invited us to an event last February when the official announcement was made in Eastern Kentucky. At that event, we were interviewed by an AP reporter from Frankfort. Rebecca saw the resulting article and called me. I put her in touch with Mike [Lewis, of Healing Ground Farm].

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"Rebecca has an excellent network in the textile industry that is trying to turn it back around to sustainable methods. Patagonia is one of those companies aligned with Fibershed's principles, so she solicited them to become sponsors/buyers of the resulting hemp fabric. The conversation grew (since no fiber is ideal on its own) to include other natural fibers to create various blends. It became The Kentucky Cloth Project: a Look Book which will include profiles of the fiber farmers, data on the fiber itself, information on the processing at the mill, and research by Gaston College on the resulting fabric performance. This book will be sent to potential buyers to hopefully get contracts and thereby fund future fiber production. More importantly, it will generate more momentum toward a sustainable textile industry."

The group plans to blend the fibers and discover what combination of the materials works best for various applications. Using alpaca's buttery soft handle, wool's breathability and hemp's long staple, they plan to produce a very durable, unique fabric.

Mike Lewis is the Executive Director of Growing Warriors, a non-profit group whose goal is to equip, assist, and train our military veterans with the skills they need to produce high quality organically grown produce for their families and communities. Lewis owns Healing Ground farm, is a Kentucky Proud Farmer and a veteran himself.

"Far too many consumers think of fiber as something they eat," Lewis says. "I am excited about helping open the minds of consumers to the world of sustainable textile fibers. One of the largest contributors to global air pollution is the production of synthetic textiles and cotton is one of the larger agricultural-based users of petroleum products. It is important that people understand the importance of their purchasing choices and how they impact the world in which we live."

Being involved with other fiber producers "has been fascinating for me. Not too long ago I was one of those people who thought about fiber as a something we ate. To be able to collaborate with other fiber producers has opened a world of possibilities for family farms. Diversity and sustainability is the new Holy Grail for the family farm and fiber plays a big role in moving farms in that direction," Lewis concludes.

Maynard explains how she and Lewis came to be involved in the Kentucky Cloth project. "A couple years ago, Mike Lewis founded Growing Warriors . . . He wanted to provide an opportunity for veterans to heal and return to society with a purpose and a job. Kentucky adopted a veteran farmer branding campaign called Homegrown by Heroes, which has since been adopted nationally under the Farmer Veteran Coalition."

"Mike happens to live 30 minutes from us, so I sought him out and have since been working with Growing Warriors as a blogger and overall supporter. Mike met Josh Hendrix and some other folks who have been trying to bring industrial hemp back to agriculture as Kentucky was once the leader in hemp production. Kentucky Agriculture Commissioner Comer got involved and together with a bunch of other folks coming together. The first hemp crop was harvested last year."

In the Lexington Herald-Leader's article, Maynard said that society needs to rethink its attitude toward clothing.

"The textile industry is coming back to the United States. To be in it right now as a fiber producer is so heartwarming. We're not going to let it fail, it is just a matter of how many hurdles we're going to have to not only jump over . . . *but push* over." ~ Alvina Maynard

"(Textile production) is the most polluting and environmentally damaging industry in the world," she said. "Society has come to look at clothing as a disposable item because our economy is consumer driven. Garments used to be heirloom items, cared for, treasured, handed down. We've got a good solid farm-to-table movement, where people recognize where food comes from. Now we need to get the public thinking more about where their clothes come from as well."

Maynard explained what she hopes for in terms of end uses for Kentucky Cloth. "The best applications for the resulting cloth will be determined in testing. Current hemp/alpaca blends available online are for upholstery and drapery fabrics. We are interested to learn more about how soft the hemp can get with different treatments, which would expand the application options. Current project ideas are an American Flag wall hanging and the U.S. Olympic Team Opening Ceremony Uniform."

The Kentucky Cloth Project will also gain more exposure by being documented by a film crew from the

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Fibers, from left to right: alpaca, hemp and sheep's wool.

PBS show *Food Forward*, produced by Greg Correll. A new show called *American Fiber* is now in the works.

Maynard describes Food Forward as "an entertaining, eye-opening documentary of our current food system and the Slow Food movement," and adds, "It seems all too fitting to have his next series be the same assessment of our clothing system and Slow Fashion."

"Anyone who wants to save money should assess their spending habits with clothing," Maynard continues. "Anyone who cares about the amount of waste going into our landfills should care about the persistent waste of our textiles. Anyone who drinks water should pay attention to where their clothes come from. Anyone who breathes air should take interest in Slow Fashion. The fashion industry has become driven by selling every season. They make more money if they can get you shopping more frequently. Therefore, if clothes are only meant to last a couple months, they can be made cheaper with lower quality construction and materials. This makes it seem to the consumer that they're spending less money."

"But what happens after that short life of the garment? It goes in the trash where it contributes to the growing amount of waste we create. Most garments are now made with a plastic/petroleum based material that won't decompose for centuries. More clothes also means more manufacturing, using more fuel and water. Water is also heavily polluted with toxic dyes containing heavy metals. More manufacturing might seem like a good thing for creating more jobs, but it is unskilled, low wage jobs in countries that are evading human rights regulators and don't have the same environmental protection laws in place. There are also higher carbon emissions from transport of goods. The result is systemic poverty and persistent polluting waste.

"Each generation does the best it can with the tools and information available at that point in history. What we are seeing now is by spending your money on quality over quantity, you are effectively saving yourself money in the long run by investing in longer lasting, higher performing clothes. This helps us all work toward a healthier textile industry and a more sustainable world."

Now there's something to look forward to! AC

Watch a five minute video about the Kentucky Cloth project on the AlpacaCulture.com video page.

See episodes of Food Forward at:
www.pbs.org/food/shows/food-forward

Fibershed's article "A Life of Alpaca Artistry" was reprinted with permission in *Alpaca Culture* December, 2014.

Slow Clothes were explored in the article "Slow Textiles and Alpaca Fiber: A Different Business Model" in *Alpaca Culture* December, 2013.

SOURCES:

- "Ky. Farmers Working toward Creating Kentucky Cloth, a Product with 'cachet'" Kentucky.com. Lexington-Herald Leader, 14 Mar. 2015. Web. 16 Mar. 2015. <http://www.kentucky.com/2015/03/14/3747525_ky-farmers-working-toward-creating.html?rh=1>.
- Personal interviews Alvina Maynard, Rebecca Burgess, Mike Lewis and Kathy Meyer.

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