

WOOL REPORT

A renewed love for handmade mittens (and socks and hats) is helping to keep knitting culture alive. By Jennifer Bain

BUNDLES OF RAW sheep's wool, still matted with dirt, twigs and hay, are neatly piled in a rural New Brunswick mill waiting to be transformed into soft knitting yarn. The wool will be fed through machines to be washed, dried, dusted, sorted, blended, carded and spun before it's hand-twisted into butterfly skeins. Most of it will be dyed colors called hunter orange, magenta, mulberry, evergreen, sea foam, brown heather, sheep's gray and rag.

Knitting culture is enjoying a resurgence in Atlantic Canada, and unassuming Briggs & Little Woolen Mills, in York Mills, New Brunswick, is the undisputed epicentre of East Coast knitting. Yarn is shipped to hundreds of retail locations across the country, where people buy it and lovingly transform it into mittens, socks and hats. Some of these creations, in turn, find their way to shops and then into the hands of locals and visitors.

Like baking sourdough bread, knitting is a hobby many people turned to during the pandemic when they were isolating at home. And then came January 2021, and the image of Vermont senator Bernie Sanders watching President Joe Biden's inauguration while wearing a face mask and oversized, patterned mittens. The photo went viral and sparked an internet meme and mitten craze.

A Knitting Revival

In Canada, much credit for the renewed interest in knitting is lavished on Newfoundlanders Christine LeGrow, of Spindrift Handknits, and Shirley A. Scott, authors of *Saltwater Mittens from the Island of Newfoundland: More than 20 Heritage Designs to Knit*. The 2018 book took off during the pandemic and launched a series that so far also includes *Saltwater Classics*, *Saltwater Gifts* and *Saltwater Socks*. (The word 'saltwater' in the titles is a nod to all those who work on – or by – the North Atlantic Ocean.) 'Good warm clothing has always been an essential barrier between us and extinction,' wrote the long-time friends, who studied and collected mittens for decades before recreating heritage patterns for today's knitters.

'Warm woollen mittens were the worker's friend, and the warmer the better,' they explain in their book. 'To hammer a nail, gut a fish, draw and haul water. To split birch for the stove. To hang clothes on a line. To shoot a seabird or snare a rabbit for the pot. Social life, too, required the finest mittens and gloves. For church, for ceremony, and for courting. For much of the year in our quirky climate of freeze, thaw, blow, and drizzle, good mittens made all tasks easier. This continues today. Our winter ensembles are serious business.'



LeGrow and Scott swear by Briggs & Little products because they resemble the homespun yarn used in Newfoundland for centuries and because they come in so many fabulous colors that keep spirits up during dreary weather. The women also admire the fact that the hard-working and hard-wearing yarn is affordable. Wool may be itchy, but it's touted as a planet-friendly and animal-friendly natural fiber. Since it does attract moths and mice, it should be stored in airtight containers and maybe even treated with a eucalyptus-scented wool wash.

Briggs & Little officially counts its start date as 1916, but it existed under two other names dating back to 1857. On a factory tour, Leah Little said the Saltwater books helped the family business reach beyond the knitting world into the fiber world - where people weave, felt, punch, hook, spin and crochet - and kept them so busy during the pandemic they had to temporarily stop accepting new customers.

'You don't have to be a grandmother to knit,' Little stressed. 'Most people that create are versatile in many different mediums.'

Making something well - even a humble mitten - has long been a badge of honor. For years, knitwear just circulated within families. But now mittens, socks and hats are popular and affordable souvenirs. Even so, they don't command the prices they deserve.

'The knitters have gotten a rotten deal over the years,' LeGrow mused in a coffeshop in St John's, Newfoundland. 'They don't realize their own value.' Woolen mittens typically fetch \$50 (less if they're acrylic), but they would cost at least \$150 if you paid minimum wage for the time that went into making them.

Rescuing the Trigger Mitt

For their books, LeGrow and Scott came up with colorful names for mittens. Fogo Island Nine Patch Classic Mittens speak to the wild and barren island that has captured international attention in recent years. Blowin' a Gale Trigger Mitts reference the province's legendary winds and choppy seas. Mummers Classic Mitts are a nod to the ancient custom still practiced in the province of putting on a disguise in December and wandering to neighboring

homes to swap a song and dance for food and drink.

The authors have also been credited with rescuing trigger mitts from oblivion. A combination mitten-glove, with a separate thumb and index finger, and a 'hand' for the other three fingers, trigger mitts were first favored by hunters, who needed their thumbs and index fingers free but wanted to keep their hand as warm as possible. The mitts were used for hunting, fishing, hanging laundry and berry picking, but you don't need to do any of those things now to just love and wear them.

A downtown St John's shop called NONIA (the Newfoundland Outport Nursing and Industrial Association) has long been the go-to spot to buy trigger mitts, calling them iconic Newfoundland and Labrador outdoor gear. NONIA was founded in 1920 and incorporated as a nonprofit business in 1924 to help outport communities access health services by selling hand-knitted garments to pay for public-health nurses. The government took over that task, but NONIA still employs about 175 knitters and weavers to make sweaters, socks, hats and mitts as well as woven items.

Woolen socks



Valuing Mittens as Folk Art

The Saltwater authors believe the lack of public recognition of knitting as a true folk art can be blamed, in part, on the fact that mittens tend to be 'worn to shreds' and therefore couldn't be donated to museums as quilts and hooked rugs have been.

There aren't any mitten museums in Canada, but the Double-Tree by Hilton St John's Harbourview does have a subtle mitten theme, with a mitten installation in its lobby and framed photos of mittens in some of its rooms.

You don't have to search for mittens in Newfoundland - they're in all the souvenir shops, but they also turn up for sale in gas stations, restaurants, craft shops, farmers markets and thrift shops. On a smaller scale, they're sold across Atlantic Canada, along with hats, socks, sweaters and scarves.

In Sydney, Nova Scotia, the Cape Breton Curiosity Shop sells colorful striped woolen socks hand-knitted in Chéticamp, and sometimes has a basket full of mittens knitted by a local woman for the scores of cruise-ship passengers who show up unprepared for the weather. A block away, the Cape Breton Centre for Craft & Design has a gallery-shop that showcases the work of 100-plus artists. At any time, the work of 10 knitters might be for sale.

In Bonavista, Newfoundland, the Matthew Legacy (a museum that houses a replica of the ship John Cabot sailed to the New World in 1497) has a gift shop filled with woolen mittens, some featuring puffins and mummers. Others, with hearts and swirls, are in a custom Briggs & Little color called bergy blue that's only sold to the Cast On! Cast Off! wool shop in Triton (which has a fun bakeapple-jam color

and another evocatively named RDF - local shorthand for rain, drizzle and fog).

Not to be left out, Prince Edward Island punches above its weight on the fiber-artist front. Linda Noble of Belfast Mini Mills started the PEI Fibre Trail years ago and has a pamphlet that now features 20 artisans and producers of local fibers and yarns.

Just down the road, Kim Doherty-Smith runs Fleece & Harmony on her sheep farm. The mill specializes in untreated or 'rustic' yarns that are hand-dyed. Doherty-Smith is also chair of the PEI Fibre Festival. She traces the current knitting boom to 2010, when she distinctly remembers people embracing 'sustainable everything' and starting to put how-to-knit videos on YouTube to reach a younger generation. Fleece & Harmony's YouTube channel now has more than 13,000 subscribers.

A New Generation of Knitters

Knitting seems to have skipped a generation, so many of today's older knitters learned from their grandmothers, while the younger ones learned from YouTube. But knitting remains a compelling pastime where you can make something that you can actually wear, and that something can be as complicated as a sweater or as simple as mittens.

On top of all that, people have now taken to praising the mental-health benefits of knitting. It's relaxing. It keeps you sharp because math and manual dexterity are involved. Doherty-Smith said it's definitely a stress reliever. 'You're doing something with your hands and your mind and it's creative - so it checks all the boxes.'



Cape Breton Centre for Craft & Design

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